

*Anything*

TO BE WITH

*You*

Amanda Glaeser

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## Content Warning

There is talk of teen pregnancy, coming out, negative body image, cheating, hospital stays, self harm, and domestic violence. There are also scenes of domestic violence.



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## Dedication

To everyone who has helped me to get this book published. This one's for you.





## I Can Do This

Dani

I hate job hunting. Next to folding laundry and washing dishes, looking for work is something I loathe. However, my temp job finished over a month ago, and funds are stretched so tight; you could floss your teeth with them. And if my son would stop eating everything in sight, I wouldn't have to go grocery shopping twice a week either.

I'm sitting in front of my laptop, scrolling through page after page of job listings and going crossed-eyed from it that the ringing of my cell causes me to jump. I reach around the laptop and grab it.

"Hey Erin."

"Hey girl," my best friend sings. "What are you doing right now?"

Why the fuck is she so cheerful at—I look at the clock—one in the afternoon. I've been up since ten and I'm not cheerful at all.

"Job hunting. Why? Do you need an alibi?" I ask jokingly.

Erin laughs. "Not at the moment, but you'll be the first I call when I do."

"Over Jakey? I'm flattered. So, what's up?" I ask.

"I have a job for you." Erin states.

I look at my phone and put it back up to my ear. "I'm sorry, did you just say you have a job for me?" I ask her.

She laughs again. "Sure did. I just got a call from a woman named Carrie; she is the receptionist for Luke Archer."

The name seems so familiar. Did I date him in high school? I'm pretty sure I dated someone with an L name. Although, that was almost twenty years ago, and my memory hasn't been the same since I had Mason.

"Um, okay. Do I know him?" I ask cautiously.

Erin sighs. "Seriously?"

You would think after being best friends for twenty-eight years, she would know that I never fully pay attention.

"Luke Archer. The owner of Archer law firm," she says.

It clicks then; he's always in the papers for the number of personal assistants he goes through in a month. I think his record is eight.

"Oh. Yeah, I know who he is. What about him?" I question as I keep scrolling through the online job postings, not seeing any that snag my attention and the ones that do, are not paying what they should for the position.

"Carrie is desperate and heard that I have the toughest personal assistants around. Unfortunately, none of my staff want the job." Erin grumbles. "*Apparently*, he's a hard ass, likes things done his way and anyone who's fired by him can never find another job."

I roll my eyes at that last comment.

That's not possible.

Right?

"And you thought of me." I remark, rubbing my forehead.

I do need a job, but working for a law firm, I don't know. I know nothing about being a personal assistant.

“Yep, sure did. I don’t know anyone stronger than you. You raised Mason by yourself, worked two jobs and finished high school. Plus, he pays thirty an hour.” Erin sings.

I drop the phone, wiggling a finger in my ear. Now I know I did not hear that right. “I think we have a bad connection. What did you say?”

Erin giggles. “Thirty an hour, full benefits after three months, life insurance policy and a college fund for up to three children.”

I whistle. “Damn.”

“Come on, Dani, it’s good pay, amazing benefits and he’s not bad to look at either,” Erin replies and makes a clicking noise.

I shake my head, smiling.

Erin has been happily married to Jake for almost seven years, but she likes to live vicariously through me and my single ass. Which has been going on...six years now.

I run a hand down my face. “Oh, all right. Set up the interview.” I sigh.

She screams into the phone. “Oh, I knew you would! I’ll text you with the time and date, talk soon, love you.” She makes kissing noises into the phone and hangs up.

I close my laptop and drag my ass upstairs to go through my closet to see if I have any half decent, office appropriate, clothes. I might have to go shopping; I can hear my credit card crying already. Digging through the closet, I find five pairs of slacks, a dress, and three skirts. I only own one pair of heels and a pair of flats. I need dress shirts and shoes.

I change out of my pajamas, and into a pair of leggings and an old plaid shirt of Mason’s, putting my honey blonde hair in a ponytail. I hate trying on clothes, but with my breast and hip size, I need to. Shirts don’t sit right when you’re top heavy, and pants, if they fit my waist, they’re too big on the legs and vice versa.

I head down the stairs, swiping my purse off the end of the banister and walk out the door. I get into my incredibly old, held-together-with-duct-tape Honda Accord and say a little prayer. If I get this job, my first cheque is going towards a new-to-me car. I turn the key and after a few choice curses and a punch on the dashboard, it sputters to life.

My phone buzzes on the passenger seat.

**Erin: Tomorrow at nine am.**

The address comes next.

I let out a breath.

*I can do this; I can do this.*

I head over to the Eaton Centre, much to the displeasure of my credit card.

## Very Nicely

Dani

Two hours and seven hundred dollars later, I have enough shirts, three more pairs of shoes, and another two dresses to keep me clothed for a month. I toss the bags from Kate Spade New York and Nordstrom's on my bed and flop down face first, groaning.

Shopping zaps all my energy.

Propping myself up on my elbows, I open my phone and Google Luke Archer. I should learn a few things about the man that could very well be my boss as of tomorrow. My eyes nearly pop out of my head when his picture comes on the screen. This man is breathtakingly beautiful.

Not a word used to describe men much, but hot diggity damn. Tall, muscular, dirty blond hair. Eye's the colour of a glacier and just as cold. I feel anxious just looking at his picture.

I scan the articles about him. He's an asshole when it comes to dealing with his cases and apparently his staff. He only has one original staff member and that's his receptionist.

In every picture I've seen, he has not smiled once. I guess after years of dealing with bitter divorces, you lose your reason to smile. I keep reading about him, looking at pictures of him and his woman, Sarah Hart. The last picture was from four years ago at a banquet. She is tall and slender, with jet black hair cut into a straight blunt bob that ends at her chin and has a look about her that screams entitled bitch.

I keep scrolling and the more I read, the more I realize that he's a complete dick. The way he acts towards other people, the way he carries himself and the high opinion he has of himself. He comes from an extensive line of lawyers, his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etcetera.

He has a younger brother, Gabriel, who is in the hospitality and tourism business, working for a few hotels in the city and managing another on Front Street. He is the complete opposite of his older brother. His hair is longer, more golden than dirty blond, his smile is charming, and he has one dimple in his left cheek. Makes me wonder if Luke has dimples too. I will say this, they both fill out a suit very nicely.

I find story after story about Luke Archer, and I come across a message board about working for Archer law firm. I open it and gasp. Over fifty pages of people complaining about Luke. I can't see him being that bad. I scan through the posts when one catches my attention.

*"Archer law firm is the absolute worst place to work. Luke is like an attack dog; you make one mistake and he's on you like flies on shit. I was there for two hours and had my ass chewed out for an hour and a half all because I didn't know how he took his coffee. How was I supposed to know he took it black with one sugar? No one fucking told me. There are only two good things about the company, the pay, and his receptionist Carrie."*

I read the rest of the comments, trying to learn as much about him as I can. The more I read, the more I'm starting to debate whether I truly want this job. I haven't read one nice thing about Luke. I'm starting to second guess going to this interview.

I call Erin. If anyone can talk me into doing this, it's her.

"Heeeelllllooooo." She sings.

"I'm getting cold feet."

Erin sighs loudly into the phone. "You'll be fine, Dani. This isn't your first rodeo."

"I know that but read up on him. He's a huge asshole with an attitude." I state.

"Point?"

"I'm tired of dealing with assholes." I mutter. After years of working with the public, I'm sick of dealing with people. Especially the ones who act like dicks.

"Help me. Talk me into going." I pled.

"Alrighty," Erin chirps, "here's my sage advice. If he gives you attitude, you give it right back."

I roll onto my back. "That's not advice."

"Shush and let me finish." Erin scolds.

I mock her under my breath.

"I heard that. Anyways, attitude, give it right back, that's what men like him need." Erin says.

"Men like him?" I question.

"Yes. Stunningly handsome with a '*my shit don't stink*' ego. He needs a personal assistant, not a '*yes man*.' Treat him like you treat Mason," she states simply.

"I can't ground the guy, Erin. He's a grown man."

Erin snorts. "So not *exactly* like how you would treat Mason."

"Then how should I treat him?" I inquire, genuinely curious. I'll take any advice I can get right now.

"Luke needs someone to put him in his place. You are that person. According to Carrie, none of his past personal assistants would, they were all too scared to."

I huff. "I doubt that."

Erin tsks. "Trust me, I spoke with Carrie this afternoon. She wants someone who can put up with his attitude and knock him down a peg."

I've been raising a teenager for the past five years; I'm confident I can handle attitude. However, teenage attitude and grown man attitude are two hugely different things. One is scary and the other is annoying. Guess which one is scary. It's not the one you think.

"So, I just have to be myself," I say sarcastically.

"Yep, and he'll be putty in your hands."

## I Like Her, She's Fun

Dani

I stand outside the doors of Archer law firm. I take a deep breath and yawn. I really shouldn't have stayed up until three in the morning reading, but I'm a sucker for punishment. I give myself a shake and walk in, surprised that there are people waiting already.

*Am I late?*

"You must be Ms. Carter, I'm Carrie. Thank you for being early."

I turn towards the raspy Janis Joplin-sounding voice, and I'm greeted by a very cute brunette, with a pert nose and hazel eyes. She smiles at me and stands up. Good lord, she's tall. I glance down at her feet. She's wearing flats. Super jealous right now. I just reach five three.

Thrusting her hand towards me, she shakes mine firmly. "Nice to meet you, Carrie. I thought I was late," I say, waving a hand at the five people sitting on chairs opposite Carrie's desk.

"Oh. Ha. I can see how you would think that. No, you're early. These are clients of the other two men that work here," she motions to the small couch next to her desk. "Have a seat, we're just waiting for the other interviewees to show up."

I raise a brow as I sit down. "Why's that?"

"Luke wants to do a group interview first." Carrie complains with an eye roll.

"He what!"

"Did Erin not inform you? I spoke with her yesterday." Carrie says with a small frown.

"Erin never mentioned it when I talked to her. I'm revoking her best friend card. Pain in my ass redhead," I grumble with a pout as I glance Carrie's way.

She giggles and I smile.

Carrie continues. "Luke wants to see how you interact with other people. Then he will conduct a one-on-one interview."

I purse my lips. The last time I was part of a group interview, it was for a retail job back in high school. Before I got pregnant.

"Would you like a coffee or water?" she asks, smiling at me sweetly.

"You don't happen to have Rum here by chance?" I question jokingly.

Kind of.

Carrie laughs. "Unfortunately, no. Although, it would make the day more entertaining for me."

I like her, she's fun.

"Water is fine," I answer with a smile.

Carrie hurries off towards what I'm assuming is the staff room, although I don't see much staff. Just Carrie and two other men. I look around the office as I wait for the interview.

It's a cold-looking office. Open concept waiting area with light gray walls and dark hardwood flooring. The odd painting and plant scattered about the space and a couple of large windows along the back walls.

Off to the right of the waiting area, is a short hallway with a large office at the end, and a desk that sits just outside of it. Blinds cover the windows that face into the primary office.

Two smaller offices line the left side of the hallway with a door between them, and a large meeting room takes up the right side. Carrie's desk sits at the center of the primary office, near the door.

I glance over at the large meeting room; one side of the double doors is open and there's Luke Archer, the man who could be my future boss. Holy motherfucking shitballs, he's even better looking in person than in all the pictures I found of him online.

Golden skin complements his dirty blond hair, cut short on the sides, a bit longer on the top. Along with a strong jaw, angular cheekbones, and kissable lips. His suit jacket is open, exposing wide shoulders and a thick chest underneath a gray button-down shirt.

My pulse races, my hands become clammy and my body flushes.

*Dear God, this is so not good.*

I fire Erin a quick text.

**Me: Just saw Luke. I need a change of panties**

He glances up and our eyes meet. I suck in a shallow breath and begin playing with a strand of my honey-blond hair. His eyes are questioning as he looks me over, then raises an eyebrow and I return it. His lips tense into a thin line before he looks back down at his papers.

My phone dings in my hand.

**Erin: Ahhhhhhhhhhh! You horny bitch**

"Here you are, Ms. Carter," Carrie says, snagging my attention and handing me a bottle of water.

"Thank you and call me Dani." I answer. I open the bottle and take a long drink. My throat's feeling like the Sahara Desert suddenly.

I chance another peek and meet his eyes again. However, this time when his eyes look me over, there's heat in them. As if he finds me...beautiful. I must be seeing things. A man like him would never find me attractive. I look away quickly before I do something to humiliate myself.

**Me: I'm not gonna lie, he gets me all worked up**

I glance back towards the room, finding him still watching me.

**Me: Sweet baby Jesus and Mother Mary, he is spectacular**

The door opens and two tall, young women swagger in, talking, and laughing. I'm guessing they are the other interviewees. Carrie turns to them and before her mouth even opens, they both say, "Mocha latte, with soy milk." They sit next to me, giving me some nasty side eye.

"Ladies, don't you think it was a little rude to assume Carrie was going to ask you what you wanted to drink?" I ask.

They look at each other and cackle. "That's her job sweetie," one of them says, flipping her long extensions over her shoulder.

"No, *sweetie*, her job is to greet you, take appointments and answer any questions people may have," I respond. "She can *offer* to get you something to drink but after the way you walked in here, demanding she get you a *mocha latte*, I wouldn't say a damn thing if she shoved her shoes up your asses."

They gasp and turn away, while Carrie chuckles and fires me a wink. Her desk phone rings and as she rushes over to answer it, I check my phone. One text from my son Mason and one from Erin.

I check Mason's first.

**Bubba: Good luck Ma. Oh btw Axe went through ur underwear drawer**

**Me: Thank you, Bubba and tell Axe I'm going to cut his hands off if he does it again**

That little shit is definitely being buried in the backyard. Axe is nothing but trouble. He's a charmer and a sweet talker and has one major crush on yours truly. I guess it comes with the territory of being a young mom. Mason was bound to have one friend who would develop a crush.

I open the text from Erin next.

**Erin: Be the best applicant he has ever had...**

**Erin: With your vagina**

I snort out a laugh as I text back.

**Me: Oh, my fuck, Erin!**

The two women next to me give me a look as Carrie raises her brows at me.

"The interview will begin shortly," Carrie says as she walks past with a bunch of papers in her arms.

I let out a slow breath and stand. "Carrie, washroom?" I inquire.

"Down the hall, second door on the left." Carrie answers with a nod of her head and walks inside the meeting room.

I amble in that direction, finding it between the two smaller offices. I lock the door behind me and use the toilet.

I look at myself in the mirror as I wash my hands. I'm thirty-three with a seventeen-year-old. I'm competing with women in their twenties who have experience as a PA.

While I, on the other hand, have zero experience and on top of that, I have multiple scars and burn marks that are visible no matter what I do to try and hide them. Who wants to hire someone that looks like they have been dragged through hell. I pull myself away from the mirror, blowing a piece of my hair off my face as I sigh.

The only thing that will get me this job is the fact that I have years of experience dealing with boys who have temper tantrums and that's exactly what Luke Archer is.

A boy in a man's body.

I exit the washroom and head back towards the waiting area. I sit with my purse on my lap and take a few deep breaths.

I can do this; I must do this.



## She's The One

Luke

It's my job to read people. That's how I win my cases. I can tell instantly what a person's intentions are by the way they stand, carry themselves and treat other people.

The two blonde women with the dark roots are here only to be attached to my name. How do I know? The way they are dressed and the way they treated Carrie when they first walked in the office. They use their bodies to get whatever they want and have never been told 'no' once in their lives.

Now, that honey blonde is a hard read.

When our eyes met, she didn't look away—like most people tend to do—instead, she mimicked my brow raise. She's going to be a very big problem.

Reason: she's the most stunning creature I have ever laid eyes on.

The moment my eyes met hers, my blood raced, my dick hardened, and I began to sweat. A reaction that has not happened in a very long time upon seeing a woman, and it's pissing me off. I like control. I crave it. However, this tiny woman walked in and almost crashed through it.

A beautiful woman is a dangerous creature. She lures you in with her stunning features and sweet voice. Makes you feel needed, wanted, and adored. However, once you let down your guard and hand over your control, she strikes.

And you become her prisoner.

I know this from experience.

I glance back at her as she talks to Carrie. Her eyes meet mine once more and I run them down the short length of her body but when I look back at her, her eyes are full of insecurity. As if she doesn't deserve to be glanced upon.

*She's going to hurt you*, a voice that has laid dormant for years chimes in.

I steel myself. I need to keep a level head or I'm a goner.

Her eyes leave mine and she heads down the hall as Carrie walks in, shutting the door behind her. "Everyone's here," she says dropping the stack of papers I asked for in front of me.

"I see that. Tell me about them." I demand.

"They're the most qualified, came with high reviews and amazing references." Carrie explains.

"I don't care about that; I have seen their resumes. What are their names?"

Carrie turns slightly towards the windows. "Addison Marshall, twenty-two, she finished her temp job as personal assistant to the mayor's aid a month ago." Carrie points to the woman in the cherry dress.

"The woman next to her is Tessa Wright, also twenty-two, she finished her temp job as secretary at the mayor's office two weeks ago." Carrie moves her finger over to the woman in the taupe dress.

"The other woman is Daniella Carter. Thirty-three, never been a personal assistant," Carrie says.

"Why is she here if she has no experience." I snarl.

My cousin turns to me. "If you didn't want Daniella to interview, you shouldn't have asked me to call her."

I cross my arms over my chest and exhale out my nose. Hard.

"Don't give me that look, Luke. As you said, you've seen her resume. You knew she didn't have the experience and yet, you asked me to call her. You must have seen something that caught your interest." She says plainly.

I take a deep breath to calm my temper. Carrie enjoys pointing out when I put my foot in my mouth.

"What's your opinion on them?" I bite out.

Carrie is the first person everyone meets when they walk into this office. In my experience, people treat the receptionist like absolute trash.

"I'm not a fan of Addison and Tessa. I think they will be like all your other PA's."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, their noses will be so far up your ass, you'll get annoyed within the first week." Carrie states.

She's right. I cannot stand suck ups.

"Dani, however," Carrie looks over at me, a wicked smile growing on her face. "She'll put you in your place faster than you can whip it out to piss. I like her."

I catch sight of Daniella sitting back down, clutching her purse in her small hands. She's nervous.

I rub my face and stretch. "Send them in."

Carrie crosses her arms and narrows her eyes at me. "Do you really plan to do a group interview? Isn't that a little immature?"

"No." I answer without explanation. "However, I do need you to interrupt the interview about ten minutes in."

"What for?" Carrie asks.

"Just do it." I tell her.

I chance another look at Daniella, she's talking on the phone, hand waving wildly, mouth moving a mile a minute. I know those gestures. Someone is getting in shit.

"Carrie, open the door a crack. I want to hear what Ms. Carter is saying."

"That's creepy Luke," she says as she reaches over and does as I ask, all while smiling like an idiot.

"Mason, you tell Axe I'm going to cut his damn hands off if he keeps going into my pantie drawer. Tell him to put them all back and lock my door," Daniella orders.

Carrie shoots me a look of 'I told you so.'

"No. No—n—put him on the phone...I don't give two shits, Mason, put him on the phone. I'll deal with you when I get home." Daniella taps her foot on the floor.

"Axe. Axe! Listen here you little shit, you put every single one of my panties back in that drawer or so help me, I will bury you in the backyard along with Mason and adopt Clay as my new son. You feel me?" Daniella yells.

The other two women are watching with disgusted looks on their faces. I, on the other hand, have never been so attracted to a woman before. I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm that's raging inside me.

"No, you can't keep one! And I'm not telling you why I have matching sets of black and red lace panties and bras...Axton Charles, I am sixty seconds away from saying fuck this job and coming home to beat you...oh my God! You little pervert. Put Mason back on the phone!" Daniella orders.

"Mason! You two better be home when I get there, I'm going to rip a strip off both of you...good, now hopefully Mr. Archer hasn't heard any of this and I still get the chance to interview for this job," her tone becomes affectionate. "I love you; I'll be home soon." She hangs up the phone and drops it back in her purse like nothing happened.

Carrie opens the door wider and walks out. "Luke will see you now," she calls.

The younger women jump up and rush the door, fighting to get in and sit as close to me as possible. Daniella takes her time, stopping to say something to Carrie, causing her to cackle, before walking inside and shutting the door behind her.

She sits to the right of me, next to Tessa. Daniella puts her purse down, pulling her chair in and resting her forearms on the table. While the other two sit up straight, tits pushed out, smiling brightly, all while eye fucking me.

"Ladies, thank you for coming in this morning—"

"Thank *you* for taking time out from your busy schedule to see *me*," Addison purrs.

My eyes snap to hers, her smile falters, and she looks away. "As I was saying, thank you for coming in this morning. We are going to start with a group interview then move onto one on one. Let us start with your experience," I say.

I keep looking over at Daniella. Even this close, I can't get a read on her. However, I do notice a scar running from her temple to her chin. Although it doesn't detract from her beauty.

"I'll start," Tessa announces. "My name is Tessa. I've worked as a receptionist for the mayor, mayor's aid, and city hall." She flashes a huge smile and way more cleavage than is necessary.

Addison introduces herself next. "My name is Addison. I was a personal assistant to the mayor's aid and for the city planner." Another huge smile and more cleavage.

I don't know how my brother does this every few months. I'm annoyed already.

I take a chance and glance at Daniella. She's picking at her nails, her eyes downcast. There's a slight tremor in her hands and under the table her foot taps out a rapid beat as if she's ready to run.

I clear my throat, causing her to jump.

"Oh," Daniella straightens in her chair. "I'm Daniella, but I go by Dani. I have no experience as a personal assistant, but I have a seventeen-year-old son who can't do anything for himself." She says.

There's a sharp knock on the door before it opens. "Sorry to interrupt, but there's a situation that needs your attention." Carrie says. I stand, excusing myself and walk out. Leaving the door open a tad.

"I think this is a stupid idea." Carrie whispers, turning on her heel and striding away.

I lean against the other closed door, listening in.

"Then why are you here if you have no experience?" Addison asks.

"I have a son to take care of, plus bills and rent to pay." Dani answers plainly.

"You should've thought of that before you opened your legs and got knocked up." Addison replies with ridicule in her tone.

"And you should've been the load your mother swallowed, but here you are." Dani says without missing a beat.

My eyebrows go up at that comment but I have to agree.

"And if you weren't such a slut, that friend of your kid would know he doesn't have a chance." Addison snaps, her voice shaking.

"You're like the end pieces of a loaf of bread. Everybody touches you but nobody wants you," Dani snaps back.

I've heard enough. I stride back in, closing the door and taking my seat at the head of the table.

"I heard what was said while I was out of the room," I say, looking each woman in the eye. "It is no business of yours why Daniella is here." I place my forearms on the table. "Her resume impressed me. Her experience in dealing with the public played a huge factor in my reason for her being here."

I meet Addison's eyes, seeing embarrassment. "Apologise."

Addison mutters one under her breath.

"Louder," I snarl, "and mean it."

"Sorry." Addison says, looking away from me.

I glance at Dani; her cheeks are painted a pretty pink colour, and there's a look of shock in her beautiful turquoise eyes.

"I'm sorry." Dani whispers.

"There is no need for you to apologise, Daniella. Addison was out of line." I inform her. Dani opens her mouth to reply, but I hold up a hand to stop her. "Now, let's continue with this interview."

Dani blinks in confusion before she stands quickly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Archer, but I don't think I can work for you." Dani states, picking up her purse and heads for the door.

"Ms. Carter," I call, grabbing her attention. She turns slightly but not enough to see those amazing turquoise eyes. "Care to explain why?"

Dani plays with her purse strap. "I'm not good with people."

I lean forward, watching her strangle the shit out of that skinny piece of leather. “And why is that?”

Dani’s eyes dart to mine briefly before focusing on the floor. “I don’t have the patience for stupidity, and I have a tendency to blurt out whatever comes to mind.” She shrugs, turning her head away from me.

“You start tomorrow.” I say, sitting back in the chair and crossing my arms over my chest. She turns fully then, skeptical eyes wide.

*Shit, those eyes are out of this world.*

“Are you high?” Dani blurts out then slaps a hand over her mouth.

Tessa and Addison inhale sharply.

I shake my head, keeping eye contact with her. “I like you, Ms. Carter, and I don’t like many people.” I state.

Dani’s brows fly up her forehead. I straighten, closing my suit jacket. I walk past her and open the door, catching a trace of her perfume. She smells like heaven. Coconut and vanilla.

“If you will follow me to my office, I have some papers I need you to fill out. Basic information and such.” I step out, waiting for her to follow. “Carrie, can you show the other two ladies out?”

I look back at Dani; she’s staring up at me with turmoil flashing in her eyes.

“Shall we?” I motion for her to follow as I head towards my office.

I hear her curse under her breath in disbelief. Opening the door for her, she turns to walk past me. Our bodies only a breath apart, and damn if I don’t take another deep breath. She’s a tiny woman. Short, curvy in all the right places with perfect bow lips. The bottom one a tad bigger than the top and don’t get me started on those legs.

Dani’s breathtaking.

Looking around, Dani sits in the chair across from the desk. The sun is shining through the windows that line the wall behind my desk and coat Dani in an elegant light.

“Snazzy office,” she comments, crossing one leg over the other.

“Thank you.” I close the door and take a seat behind my antique mahogany desk, a treat I got myself when I opened the firm. Gabe and I nearly killed ourselves moving it in here, but it was totally worth it.

She looks over at the door and then back at me. “What’s your deal?” Dani asks.

I grab the paperwork from my desk drawer and slide them over to her along with a pen. “As you can see, it’s all basic information. Bank account information, emergency contact, etcetera. Your benefits will start after three months—”

Dani leans over the desk, interrupting me and touching my hand to catch my attention, sending a shock through my body.

“What’s your deal, Archer? Why hire—”

“Mr. Archer.” I correct, undoing my jacket again.

Dani sucks her bottom lip into her mouth as that pretty pink colour covers her cheeks again. “Sorry, Mr. Archer.”

“You were saying?” I inquire and tap the papers.

Dani looks away. “Why hire someone who has no idea what she’s doing? An—and why is there a couch in your office? You filming porn for extra money?” she blurts out, slapping her hand over her mouth again. “Sorry.”

I don’t acknowledge her apology, it’s not needed. I reach over and tap the papers again. “If you could fill those out, Carrie can get started on entering your information,” I hand over a pen. “And the couch is extra seating. Some of my clients like to bring family or friends with them for emotional support.”

“Huh.” Dani mutters.

My eyes find their way back to hers. "What?"

Dani leans forward. "You're nothing like what I read about online. Although, I haven't started working for you yet." She starts filling out the paperwork.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I ask.

Dani looks up at me from under her lashes and my dick twitches behind my zipper. I need to shut this down and take back the control she is trying to shatter.

"I read up on you yesterday. People did not have pleasant things to say about you. No sir, they did not." Dani states.

I notice a burn mark on her collarbone as I look her over for the third time and when she catches me staring, she pulls the shirt closed.

"I'm not the most liked man in this city. This comes as no surprise to me." I shrug, sitting back.

"Well, don't you think highly of yourself," she says dryly, seeming to recover from her bout of shyness.

A phone rings before I have a chance to reply. Dani reaches into her purse with one hand and answers. "Hello?"

A scream comes through the phone causing Dani to drop it on the desk.

Dani wiggles a finger in her ear. "Good God, Erin, way to bust my eardrum," she says when she picks the phone back up.

I can't make out what the woman on the other end of the phone is saying but she sounds excited.

"I'm with him right now. Come over after work and we'll chat...I guess you can order a stripper; I promise not to tell Jake." Dani laughs and my control slips a tad.

"As long as they have blue eyes, I don't care what they look like. You know I'm a sucker for men with blue eyes," Dani states, looking up at me.

Dear Christ, this woman is going to be the death of me.

## Not Tonight Satan

Luke

A knock comes on my door around six o'clock. I have been working on a weird divorce case and lost track of time. They bought furniture together and now expect me to sort out who gets what. It's furniture, sell it and divide the money.

"I'm heading out," Carrie says.

I look away from my computer and over at my cousin. "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow," I reply and go back to work, but Carrie has other ideas.

She saunters in and sits in the chair across from my desk. "You like Dani, don't you, Lucas Michael." Carrie states matter-of-factly.

She used my full name, meaning she expects me to answer. "Ms. Carter is a very nice woman and a perfect match for this company."

Carrie tilts her head back and looks down her nose at me giving herself a double chin. "Dani is very nice and perfect for *you*," she says with a nod of her head.

I close my eyes. I'm not going to have this conversation.

Carrie leans over the desk and takes my hands in hers. "Look. I know you're unsure about relationships after what bitchface did to you."

I grunt my agreement.

"However, I saw how you reacted to Dani. You're attracted to her." Carrie states.

I exhale through my nose. "Carrie, drop it."

"I'm not going to drop it. I want you to be happy, Luke. I want my dorky older cousin back. The one who used to make shadow puppets with his body on the garage door at family get togethers. The one who used to sing and play guitar," she grins. "I believe that Dani can bring that Luke back." She jiggles our connected hands. "And if she helps you defrost your heart, even better!"

"CeCe, I'm not in the mood to do this right now. I'm in the middle of a divorce case with some of the stupidest requests. I'll talk to you tomorrow," I say, brushing her off.

Carrie squeezes my hands and let's go. "Alright," she says, standing. "Dani will be here at eight." Carrie heads for the door, hand on the doorknob. "Wear something blue, it really makes your eyes sparkle." Carrie smiles and walks out.

I close the case and open Google. I usually have a friend of mine do a background check on every new hire, however he is currently on his honeymoon, so I'll have to do a simple check until he gets home. I enter her name, and a Facebook and Instagram account pops up. I click on the Facebook link and her page comes right up. I don't have Facebook myself, so I'm limited in what I can see.

My finger hovers over the left mouse key, I shouldn't be doing this. It might be made accessible to the public but that doesn't mean I have the right to look through her life.

I debate with myself for a few more moments before I click on a picture. I jerk back when I see a picture of her with her son. Fucking hell, that kid is huge. He might be bigger than Gabe and Gabe stands at six-four.

I find videos and pictures Dani's been tagged in and click through them. There are ones of her with family, and friends. Pictures of her son and another man, fishing, riding bikes, learning to shave. I click on one of the pictures, reading the caption. *Fishing with Uncle Jake.* However, there are no pictures of the father.

Is he not in their lives anymore? Even if that's true, you'd think there'd be a few pictures of him. Unless they ended on bad terms. I give my head a shake, it is none of my business where the father is.

I stare at the monitor; pictures of Dani take over the screen. I keep scrolling, finding some concert pictures and videos. I zoom in on the one with Dani and *The Black Crowes*. She looks so happy standing between Chris Robinson the lead singer and Rich Robinson the guitarist. I even find one of a very pregnant Dani. A huge smile on her laughing face as a red-headed girl puts a hat covered in tissue paper on her head.

I exit out of everything and stretch; the office has been quiet for hours now. The sound of the vacuum a dull hum coming from outside the primary office. It's almost nine when I finally leave the office and head to my condo building on Hayden Street.

It's a quiet ride up to my sub-penthouse, until Mrs. Johnson joins me for a few floors and talks my ear off. Stepping out of the elevator, I unlock my door and walk in, dropping my keys on the table by the door and turning on the kitchen light.

It's an open concept layout, kitchen to the right of the main door, living room/dining room in the center of the sub-penthouse complete with floor-to-ceiling windows and the door to the balcony. My bedroom is off the living room, complete with an ensuite and another door to the balcony. The second bedroom is down a short hallway. I converted it into an office.

Opening the fridge and grabbing a beer, I flop down on the couch in front of the TV that I never turn on. I open the bottle and chug half of it. I can't get Dani out of my head. I have never been so affected by a woman before. Her laugh, her smile. Hell, the way she called me Archer did something to me.

I hate feeling out of control, and Dani is making me feel this way. She makes me want to give her everything with just one look.

*You can't deny a beautiful woman. They pouts, using their sweet voice and tantalizing scent to break you, and you want to make them happy. You are driven to do and say things you never did before. Because pleasing them is your number one goal,* that nagging voice in the back of my mind decides to speak up again.

And this time, I'm going to listen.

I need to keep my interactions with Dani to a minimum. I need her to think I'm not interested. I can't afford to lose my control and my heart to another beautiful woman.

Because this beautiful woman would absolutely destroy me.

My phone rings in my jacket pocket. "Not tonight, Satan." I mutter when I see my ex's number on screen and let it go to voicemail. Dropping the phone on the coffee table, I stand and stretch before heading into my bedroom.

Stripping down, I walk into the bathroom and get into the shower, beer, and all. I plant a hand on the cool tile and let the water run down my neck and back. Tilting my head, I down the rest of the beer, putting the empty bottle in the shower caddy next to the shampoo and finish up.

Stepping out of the shower, I catch a glimpse of my reflection and cringe. Dark circles have formed under my eyes, my five o'clock shadow is all patchy and my eyes are exhausted. Sweet Jesus, I look older than thirty-six.

I dry off and walk into my room, throw on a pair of boxer briefs and venture to find something to eat. The fridge is full, but I don't feel like cooking. Shutting the door and leaning against the counter, I run a hand across my jaw. Usually when I get home I go straight to my office and work, but tonight, my head isn't in it. All I can think about is Dani.

Thinking back on it now, I should have interviewed all three of them to be fair. However, I wanted someone with integrity, someone with balls. Someone like Dani. I scrub my face. What Carrie said to me earlier comes back.

"Fucking hell," I mutter.

Dani is perfect for me.





## It's Beginning

Luke

My phone rings again. Should I answer it? Should I order food? Should I jerk off? I drag my ass over to the coffee table and answer it. It won't stop ringing until I do.

"Yeah?" I growl.

"Well, hello to you too, sunshine." Gabe laughs.

He's my younger brother. The happy one, the funny one, the *nice* one. He didn't become a lawyer like our father wanted him to. He doesn't have the personality to do a job like that. Instead, he went into the hospitality and tourism business working for three hotels in the city and managing another fulltime.

"Sorry, long ass day. Had interviews for a new personal assistant." I tell him.

Gabe laughs. "Must've been so hard looking at all those young, beautiful women all day."

If he only knew the half of it.

"Did you find someone?"

"I did," I hum.

"And?"

"She has no experience being a PA, but she has a sharp tongue and no bullshit attitude." I answer.

Gabe whistles. "She's perfect. Is she a beauty?"

I sigh. "I don't hire my staff the same way *you* do."

That's how Gabe hires his staff, if he's attracted to them, they have the job. He's kind of an asshole. However, people overlook that part because of his optimistic disposition.

"So, is she?" Gabe pushes.

"Yes, she is attractive." I reply. I'm not going into detail. Gabe will show up soon enough to sniff around. "Is that why you called?"

He laughs again. "Nah, I called because Sarah called me. Said she couldn't get a hold of you and that she was, and I quote '*extremely worried*,'" Gabe says doing his best Sarah impression.

I let out a groan as Gabe chuckles. I should have known she would call Gabe. I have no clue what she thinks Gabe can do, but she cries to him when I don't bow to her.

"I was in the shower. And she's not worried about me, she's worried that I might have found someone." I bite out.

Sarah left me four years ago. Said I didn't give her the attention she deserved. Emptied our joint bank account, cleared out our apartment and moved in with the guy she was seeing. He left once they blew through all the money. Now, she calls every few days to inform me that she 'made a huge mistake and she misses me terribly.'

"You're not wrong there. You know she also calls me once a week to tell me how much she misses you," Gabe states while making kissy noises.

Now it's my turn to laugh. "She's hoping she can catch me when I'm down and out so she can claw her way back into my life by feeding me bullshit."

"If she calls me again, I'll tell her you found your way into a cute blonde's bed," Gabe says with laughter in his voice.

"Then you'll be an only child because she'll kill me." I say.

"True enough. What are you doing for lunch tomorrow? I'm going to be in your neck of the woods around noon. Wanna grab a bite?" Gabe asks.

I shrug one shoulder. "Sure, why not. I have meetings in the morning, should be free by one."

Gabe bangs his hand on something hard. "It's a date! I'll bring flowers. Wear something that shows a little skin. I'm a leg man you know."

I shake my head, grinning to myself. "You're an idiot."

"Don't care. What I do care about is checking out this new assistant of yours," Gabe says.

The last thing I need is Gabe sniffing around Dani, laying on the charm. The ladies love him, with his sky-blue eyes and long blond hair.

"The fuck you are. You can wait with CeCe; you are not going anywhere near Dani."

*Fuck.*

I don't like this feeling of possessiveness I have with her already.

*It's beginning*, that voice whispers.

"Dani huh? Short for Danielle or Daniella. Cute name. Might have to call CeCe and get the run down on *Dani*."

"Don't you fucking dare."

"Too late, see you tomorrow." He hangs up before I have a chance to say anything else.

I call Carrie, but she doesn't answer. "Shit." I rub my face and look at the notification indicating a voicemail is waiting. Hitting the button, I listen to the message.

**"Lucas, please call me back. I really need to talk to you. It's important, I think...I think I made a mistake leaving you. Please, call me."**

Deleting the voicemail, I head to my office, sit down in front of my computer, and get to work on the Miller divorce.

## Ma! Shoe!

Dani

Hey Ma! Where's my other shoe?"

*For the love of all things holy.*

I love my son, I really do, but this whole, 'hey ma' thing needs to stop. He's giving me a headache. He's seventeen, he should know where his shit is.

"Ma! Shoe!" Mason yells.

He comes barrelling down the stairs like a freight train, all six-foot-six, and two hundred and forty-seven pounds of him. He stands in the doorway of the kitchen, hunched at the shoulders to avoid hitting his head on the frame.

My son is huge. He's built like his father. A man who hasn't seen Mason—thank God—since he was just over a year old.

"Ma? Are you listening?"

Fuuuuuck, his voice is so deep. I miss his little high-pitched, squeaky voice. "Honey, I have no idea where your other shoe is. I wasn't the one who put them away," I answer as I make breakfast before my first day of work.

Mason huffs as he walks into the kitchen and throws himself onto a chair, the thing creaking under his weight. If he breaks another one, he'll be sitting on the floor from now on.

"Can you help me look? Axe and Clay will be here soon," Mason groans.

"Bubba, I am trying to get ready for work. This is my first job in a month and the last thing I need is to be late," I say as I face him.

"How am I supposed to go out with them with only one shoe?" he replies.

This kid's getting on my last. Damn. Nerve. "Mason, you have six other pairs of shoes. Wear one of them." I answer, turning to grab my bagel as it pops from the toaster.

The noise that comes out of his mouth makes it sound like I just killed him and believe me when I say the thought has crossed my mind.

"Mmmmaa!" he whines, and I smack his arm. I am not in the mood to deal with his bloody whining.

"Knock it off, Mason. I need to eat and get going. I don't have time to deal with your whining," I scold, biting into my buttered bagel.

The front door opens, and Mason's two best friends saunter in like they live here. Which they kind of do. They say they like my house better. Maybe because it's full of junk food, I have no clue. But they're here almost every day.

"Good morning, my boys," I greet, surprised that they are all up this early on a Tuesday morning.

Most of the time I can't get Mason out of bed until the afternoon. They slap Mason on his shoulder as they enter the kitchen. Axe makes his way to the fridge and Clay stands next to the table.

"Looking stunning today, Ms. C," Axe comments as he pulls out the jug of orange juice and starts drinking straight from it.

I reach into the cupboard and grab him a cup, thrusting it into his hand. "Cup, Axe. And thank you."

He winks and pours himself a glass.

Axton AKA Axe is a heartbreaker. He was such a cute kid, with his brown curly hair and moss-green eyes. As he got older though, he really grew into his looks, and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't noticed.

"Dude, where's your other shoe? We've gotta go or we'll miss the launch." Clay mumbles as he looks over and gives a shy smile.

Clay was a very shy kid, to the point where I thought Mason had made him up. I didn't see Clay until they all started kindergarten, his little blond head and big chocolate brown eyes peeking out from behind his mother's leg on the first day.

"Can't find it." Mason shrugs.

"Just wear another pair," Axe suggests, and Mason shoots up from the chair like his ass is on fire and races upstairs.

I throw up my hands. "Did I *not* just tell you that!" I yell after Mason. I put my dish in the sink and wash the melted butter off my fingers. "Where you guys off to today? Nothing's open yet." I ask, turning to face my *'other'* son's.

"New game launches today and we want to be the first in line," Axe says. He throws his arm around my shoulders. Another tall boy.

"You're all up at the crack of dawn for a new video game?" I ask.

"You bet your sweet ass," Axe says and smiles down at me, his thumb brushing the burn mark on my collarbone. I smack his hand and move his arm.

"Axe, stop hitting on Ms. Carter," Clay says.

"Thank you, Clay," I say with a smile. His cheeks flush a bright pink, and he looks down at the floor.

"Aw, come on Ms. C, I'll be eighteen at the end of the month, and I've always had a thing for older women." Axe winks and blows me a kiss. He's going to join Mason buried in the backyard.

"*Mason!* Hurry your ass up, Axe is hitting on me again and I have got to head to work!" I yell.

I can hear Mason stomping down the hall and towards the stairs.

"Not cool, Ms. C, not cool." Axe mutters.

Mason takes the stairs, two at a time and grabs Axe by the front of his shirt.

"We've talked about this Axe," Mason says, hauling Axe closer to his face. "We don't hit on, check out, make sexual comments to, or make kissy faces at Ma. You feel me?"

Mason is very protective of his mama. It's been me and him—with the help of my parents and Erin—since I had him at sixteen. I give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Behave, boys and don't spend all day in front of the TV." I swipe my purse off the end of the banister and walk out the door.

"And your curfew is ten-thirty, Bubba."

## Yes, You Did

Luke

I get to the office at a quarter to eight, finding Dani waiting outside the door. She's wearing a black dress that cinches at the waist and flares out at her hips, fluttering around her perfect thighs. With lace sleeves and lace going across the top of her chest, showing off a tattoo I can't fully make out and hiding that burn slightly.

A pair of black heels display her legs like they're the crown jewels of England, also giving her some height but not much. She's quietly humming a song, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

I take the opportunity to take her in while she's not paying attention. I have never seen anything so perfect. She is a Goddess brought to life. I give my head a shake and take a few deep breaths as my control slips further.

I clear my throat a few times, but she doesn't acknowledge it. "Daniella," I call.

Dani jumps and her hand flies to her chest. "Jesus fucking Christ!" she swats at my arm. "You scared the shit out of me, I didn't even hear you walk up."

Dani looks stunning this morning, with her hair pulled up in a French twist and very natural makeup. She fiddles with her skirt, brushing her hands over her wide hips.

The thought of another man looking at her the way I am, has me seeing red and wanting to cover her with my jacket. I take a deep breath to steady the possessiveness I'm developing.

It doesn't work.

"Why are you wearing that?"

Dani's head snaps up and those showstopping eyes meet mine. "Excuse me?" she looks up at me wide eyed, blinking innocently with lips parted in invitation. One I can't accept but I fucking want to.

"That dress shows too much skin," I lie. "This is a law office, not some sleazy nightclub." I suppress a wince. That was a shitty thing to say to her. I never went over the dress code and to be honest, there's nothing wrong with what she's wearing. It's my reaction to her that's the problem.

Dani crosses her arms, the click, click, click of her foot tapping on the floor signals how pissed she is. "Oh, I didn't realize that my body repulsed you so much. I'll go home and change into the potato sack I usually save for special occasions."

"Too late for that. Remember for tomorrow," I deadpan then kick myself for saying that. Fuck, I'm being a real asshole this morning.

Dani huffs out a breath and turns away from me. Her shoulders drooping a little. "Yeah," she whispers.

I didn't mean for that to come out the way it did. However, it's better that she hates me. It will keep her away from me because I sure as fuck won't be able to stay away from her. She calls to me in ways no other woman has and I can't afford to lose my heart again.

"Why are you here early, you weren't supposed to start until eight," I bark.

"Fine," Dani seethes. "I'll go for a walk and come back for eight."

"Don't bother. You're already here," I grumble. I unlock the door and hold it open for her, but she doesn't move.

"What are you waiting for? A formal invitation?" I demand, nodding towards the door.

"Asshole," Dani mutters and brushes past me, heading inside.

*Goddamn!*

That dress hugs her ass like it's holding on for dear life. Dani waits for me by Carrie's desk, and I can't help but stare at those legs of hers. They go on for miles. I harden myself against Dani's allure.

Tamping down the rising feelings she seems to bring out in me and tighten the hold on the wall around my heart.

"When Carrie arrives, she will get you all set and up to speed with what I have on the go," I state, walking past her. "This will be your desk. Don't personalize it."

Dani fires me a look.

"Carrie will show you how to use the phone system, fax machine and photo copier. Printer is self explanatory," I state.

Dani raises a hand. "Don't personalize it. You mean I can't put pictures or flowers on it?"

"I don't like clutter, and I don't like when my assistant's desk is cluttered."

Dani jerks back. "Wait. How would *my* cluttered desk bother you?" she asks, dropping her tiny hands on her wide hips.

"Because I would have to look at it whenever I leave my office," I say bluntly.

"Dick." Dani mutters.

I continue. "My door is always closed, knock before entering."

Dani drops her purse on the desk. A look of mischief crosses her beautiful face. "You ever open those." She wiggles a finger at the blinds covering the windows that face into the primary office.

"I like my privacy."

Dani walks around me, brushing my arm with her chest—which I'm sure was on purpose—and heads into my office, opening the one blind that is right beside her desk. She saunters back out and sits in her chair.

"Why did you do that?" I demand.

She crosses her leg over her knee and swings it. My gaze moves from the tip of her toes, up her beautifully sculpted calves and along those thick thighs. A rumble of lust and frustration works its way up my throat. I hate the way my control slips with just a glance in her direction. Dani cocks her head at the sound. I look my fill, noticing another blemish poking out from under her skirt, stopping just before her knee.

Is that a burn mark?

*You have been burned in the past by a beautiful woman. One who had an ugly heart and dark soul,* that voice is making very solid points.

I take a deep breath, pulling my control back.

"That way I can just spin to the right and look in to see if you're busy or not," Dani says and beams at me. Her smile like a smirk, with the left side lifting higher than the right, due to the scar tightening her skin. She's a gorgeous woman but when she smiles, she's ethereal.

"We're not doing that. If you want to know if I'm busy, you call into my office," I reply.

The main door opens, Carrie and the other two men that work here, Jim and Mark, walk in. "Morning, Luke. Hey Dani!" Carrie yells from the front and rushes back to where we are.

"Hey, Carrie. You look cute," Dani compliments.

*Oh God, these two are going to become friends.*

"Thanks. I found this at a second-hand store, four bucks. Can you believe that?" Carrie sings and does a spin to show off her vintage pencil dress. "I'm pretty sure this sells for over a hundred dollars new."

I clear my throat and they look at me like I'm interrupting some super important conversation. "Discuss your clothing at lunch. Carrie, get Daniella set up and show her the phone system, fax machine and photocopier."

I walk to my door. "I've got four meetings today and Gabe will be by around one." I say, looking at Carrie. "Don't let him hit on Daniella," I mutter low enough for only Carrie to hear.

Carrie nods and flashes me a cat-like grin. "Come on Dani, I'll introduce you to Mark and Jim and get you all set and up to speed on Luke's schedule," Carrie says with a smile.

Dani stands and follows Carrie over to Mark's office.

I watch them leave; those drool-worthy hips of Dani's swaying in a way that has me grunting like a fucking deviant.

*Reel it in dumbass or she will own you by the end of the day*, that voice cautions.

I head into my office before I make an ass of myself even more, shutting the door, and closing the blind. Letting out a long breath, I sit behind my desk and turn on the computer. Today's going to be a long day. Between Gabe stopping by and Dani just outside the door, I'm not going to get any work done because I won't be able to stop thinking about her in that dress.

I need to put more distance between us. I spent years building my walls up and Dani bulldozed through them her first day. The phone on my desk rings. "Lucas Archer."

A cackle comes from the other end. "Ha ha! Figured it out," Dani laughs.

"Yes, you did."

"Don't sound too excited for me or anything Archer," she barks.

I like how she calls me by my last name. However, she can never know that. "Mr. Archer, Daniella. I shouldn't have to tell you twice."

A mocking whisper comes through the phone.

"Is there a reason you called?" I snap into the phone.

She huffs into the receiver. "Carrie is teaching me the phone system. Wanted me to try calling into your office."

"Well, good for you then. Is there anything else?"

She curses me under her breath. "No, your Majesty," Dani mumbles and slams the receiver down.

If Dani keeps this up, she'll have my walls in a pile of dust by the end of the day. She's chaos and wild. I'm order and control.

*She'll burn you to the ground*, that voice says.

I close my eyes and exhale. I'm starting to agree with the voice. The fax machine in my office whirs. Reaching over, I grab what came through and laugh.

*Don't be a dick today.*

—Carrie.

Did she really have Dani fax me this?

Of course, she did.

Carrie's an idiot.

I throw it out and get back to work on the Miller case. A knock comes on my door. "It's open," I call. Carrie walks in, shutting the door behind her.

"It's her first day, go easy on her. And stop being a dick," Carrie says.

I sigh and rub my face. "I know."

Carrie taps her high-heeled foot on the floor. "Then why are you?"

"I have to remain in control."

Carrie snorts in disbelief. "That's a load of shit."

"You know what happened last time I lost control with a woman." I seethe. "I'm not going through another Sarah situation."

"Dani is not Sarah. Not every woman is like Sarah," Carrie bites out. "Do you want to know what Dani said about you?"

I know it's not going to be anything pleasant. "What?"

Carrie grins. "She said you wouldn't be such a dick if you played with yours more often."

"I'll remember that," I mumble.

Carrie throws up her hands and walks out, slamming the door behind her. I get back to work, preparing the divorce papers for when the Millers come in. The phone on my desk rings again. "Lucas Archer."

"Your nine o'clock is here. Shall I show them in?" Dani says, sounding like a totally different person.

"Please." I hang up and watch at the door.

A knock comes and the door opens. "The Millers, Mr. Archer." Dani smiles sweetly but her eyes are throwing daggers at me. She opens the door wider inviting Pierre and Annette inside.

"Would you like any coffee, tea, water?" Dani asks, standing in the doorway, as the Millers sit down.

"Nothing for us. We had breakfast before we came here," Pierre says.

"And you, Mr. Archer?" Dani says, rolling the last R in my name, and my control slips a tad.

"Coffee. One sugar."

Dani smiles again and shuts the door. I watch the door for a moment before turning to the Millers. "Shall we get started?" I pull their casefile from the drawer in my file cabinet. Opening it, I ask, "have you figured out what you're doing with the furniture?"

Pierre looks at Annette. "We're selling it," he answers.

I nod and scribble it in their casefile. This divorce isn't going to court, it's a mutual separation. I'm just here to make sure that their assets are divided up equally.

Pierre leans forward in his chair. "New assistant I see."

I glance up at him. "Yes. She started this morning."

Pierre hums and wipes his mouth. "She's older than your past assistants."

I stop writing and drop my arms on the desk. "She is."

"Amazing legs," he whistles. "She single?"

"Are you fucking serious?" Annette pipes up. "We are here to finalize our divorce and you're asking if his assistant is single." Her face screws up in disgust.

"So? She's hot."

"And young enough to be our daughter."

"Oh. I see. Only *you* are allowed to date someone younger," he says.

Annette flips him off and begins to yell at him in French.

I grind my teeth. The way Pierre was looking at Dani, talking about her. I wanted to rip his fucking head off. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I'm not going to be able to get through this meeting if my temper is in control.

"While I have no problem with you fighting in my office during billable hours, that is my assistant you are talking about." I clasp my hands on the desk. "Daniella is a lovely woman and I do not appreciate the way you are speaking about her."

They mumble an apology under their breath, and I go back to finishing their case. A quick knock on the door before it opens reveals my stunning assistant. Dani places a mug of coffee on my desk.

I allow my eyes to wander over her body. Which is an unbelievably bad idea because now all I can think of is what it would feel like to have her body wrapped around mine. To have everything soft about her pressed against everything hard about me. And right now, I have something painfully hard pressing against the fly of my slacks.

*She has you wrapped around her finger already*, that voice chimes in.

I shouldn't be thinking about Dani like that, I am her boss. I harden my walls. I need to keep her out.

"Anything else, Mr. Archer?" Dani asks, standing by the door.

Sweetheart, you have no idea.





## Eye Fucked

Dani

This is the third time in half an hour I'm getting Archer coffee. No one drinks that much coffee. The first one had too much sugar, the second, not enough. They both have one teaspoon of sugar. Either he can't tell, or he can and he's just being an asshole.

I knock and march into his office, putting his mug in front of him. Archer's eyes flick to my chest for the fifth time this morning before snapping up to mine. And I know what he's looking at. This dress does not fully cover the burn mark Josh so 'lovingly' gave me when I found out I was pregnant.

"Anything else?" I ask.

Archer's arm swings out, a folder in his hand. "I need this proofread, typed, and printed. Three copies of each, and I need you to add these dates to my schedule," he adds a sticky note on top of the folder.

I take them from him, our fingers brushing, and a jolt of electricity runs up my arm. I shiver, meeting his ice blue eyes. Vulnerability flashes in his eyes before a hard mask moves into place. Tucking the folders under my arm, I walk towards the door.

"Daniella," Archer calls. "Finish those by noon."

I nod and say, "as you wish Mr. Archer." Before turning around and shutting the door behind me.

I slump behind my desk and draw in a calming breath before opening the file. "Oh. Wow." I whisper.

I read through the file, seeing where Archer has scratched out one thing and added something else. I don't know how Archer deals with this. Some of it is stupid.

My desk phone rings, scaring the bejesus out of me. I reach over and tear the receiver off the base. "Lucas Archer's office," I answer.

"Office." Is all he says and hangs up.

I walk my ass into his office, not even bothering to knock. He waves more papers at me. "Three copies of each."

I take them from him. "Will that be all?"

He slides his mug over to me. "One sugar this time."

I swipe the mug off his desk. "Anything else?"

"Always knock Daniella," he barks.

"Of course," I answer in a sugary sweet tone.

I'll knock all right.

Knock him into next week.

I smile and walk out.

*One sugar* I mock in my head. I'll give him one fucking sugar; I'll spit in his damn coffee. I walk back into his office and put his mug on his desk.

"Where are my copies?" he demands, taking a sip of his coffee.

Those ice blue eyes roam over my body slowly, like a soft caress. I've heard of people getting eye fucked, but I have never experienced it. Until now.

Areas of my body I thought were long dead are waking up. My temperature rises to an unbearable level. My mouth dries and a bead of sweat rolls down my back. A man has never looked at me this way. However, it doesn't last long, and a shield slides back into place, turning them from lust filled to ice cold. Maybe I'm mistaken. Maybe it's just first day jitters.

"Getting on that n—now," I stammer over my words and rush out.

I grab the papers and start making copies for his royal Majesty. I'm almost finished when the copier starts blinking at me.

*Son of a bitch.*

Out of ink.

I grab my chair and wheel it over to where the supplies are kept. Standing on it and praying it doesn't slide out from under me, I stretch up to grab the ink cartage.

Fuck, too short.

"Thanks for the short genes, Mom." I mutter.

"Need help?" I turn to find Mark standing next to me.

"Please. I'm too short to reach the ink cartage," I answer.

He helps me off the chair and grabs the cartage. Even changes it for me too.

"Thanks. I take it not many short people have worked here."

Mark laughs as he hit the start button. "You are the first. How's your first day going?" he asks.

I met Mark this morning. He's a child support and custody lawyer.

"Archer is a demanding asshole," I answer.

Mark chuckles, placing a hand on my shoulder. "He is. But if you're ever in a bind, he's got your back," he says.

I don't care about that; I just care about not being treated like a piece of shit.

Mark's hand slides down my back and he shoots me a wink as he heads back to his office which I now realize faces the copier. Nice guy, but handsy. I haven't decided if it's creepy yet but it's definitely not warranted.

I grab the copies and head in to give them to his royal dickweed.

"Why aren't they stapled?" Archer demands.

"I didn't know they needed to be." I reply honestly.

"That is something you should automatically do when you make copies or print something out. Use your head, Daniella." He says condescendingly.

My temper rises to the surface. It takes a lot to get under my skin, however, that did it. I staple the papers together with trembling fingers and hand them back. But before letting go, I lean in and say, "I don't appreciate being talked to as if I'm a child. Do it again and I'll staple your dick to your leg." I look at him and jerk back.

Fury lines his face.

Fury that's directed at me.

My stomach drops to my feet while a chill runs down my spine as his cold eyes look through me. I swallow thickly as he exhales hard through his nose.

"Daniella," Archer snarls.

"I'm sorry." I breathe and walk out, shutting the door behind me.

Sitting back behind my desk, I lean my head back and close my eyes. I need to get it together. I can't speak to my boss like he's some random guy who cut me off in traffic. I'll lose my job before the day is over.

I take a calming breath, putting myself back together and continue reading the file he gave me, fixing the mistakes and typing them up. It takes me longer than I want it to, but his handwriting is like chicken scratch. I did manage to print the last one right at noon.

"For fuck sakes," I grumble. Now the printer's flashing at me.

Out of paper.

Back on the chair I go.

A muscular forearm catches my eye as it reaches past me to grab the paper. I turn and meet the most beautiful blue eyes. It's like looking into a cloudless summer sky. He smiles and I almost fall off the chair.

Next to Archer, this guy is the most handsome man I have ever been this close to. Sky blue eyes, long golden blond hair that sits just above the widest shoulders I have ever seen, not including Mason's. And he smells good enough to eat.

"Thought you could use some help," he says.

*Shit, his voice is deep.*

He holds his hand out to me, and I take it, helping me off the chair. I'm wearing heels and I stand just below his very large pecks. Pecks that look like they're going to bust out of his dress shirt if he moves his arms too much.

"Thanks. I'm too short to work here," I state.

His eyes run the length of my body. "I'd say you're the perfect height," he winks, and I flush.

He breaks the package of paper over his muscular thigh and loads the printer for me. It whirls back to life, spitting out what I sent. The desk phone rings, and I reach over to answer it, feeling the mystery man's eyes on me. "Lucas Archer's Office."

"Files finished?" Archer demands.

"Finishing now. The printer ran out of pap—"

"I don't care," he hangs up and I flip off the window to his office, hoping he sees it.

Tall, blond and pantie dropping handsome laughs, handing me the papers. I staple them and walk into his office.

"Knock, Daniella," Archer growls.

I knock on his desk intensely and slap the papers in front of him. "Anything else?"

"No."

I walk out, finding the mystery man perched on the edge of my desk. I sit and open Archer's schedule to update it. "Did you need something, or are you here just to look at me?" I question, not taking my eyes off the screen.

He stretches over and takes my hand in his, kissing it. "Looking at you is a bonus. I'm Gabe, Luke's brother," he introduces himself.

I really look at him then, seeing the similarities between them. From eye colour to body size. Gabe is larger but not by much.

"Dani. Your brother's assistant. He's a douche nozzle," I say pulling my hand back and buzz his office.

"Lucas Archer."

"Gabe's here," I say.

He slams the receiver down in my ear, making me jump.

What in the hell is his problem? He's been an asshole all morning. I understand it is hard when you have a new employee and you both need to get used to each other but he doesn't need to be a fucking dick towards me.

His office door opens, and Archer steps out. "I told you to wait at CeCe's desk," Archer says, arms crossed over that impressive chest of his.

I'd bet my whole paycheck he's built like a God under that expensive suit. All hard muscle and rough skin. I shudder at the thought of those calloused hands running over my heated skin.

Gabe smiles at me and takes my hand in his again, turning it over and kissing my palm. Right over the scar that's there.

"I was just introducing myself to your stunning assistant, Dani," he says with a wink.

Oh, this guy is smooth. I yank my hand from his grip and Gabe smiles, popping out one single dimple in his left cheek. Giving him a boyish quality.

"Get inside," Archer orders, thumbing over his shoulder towards his office. Gabe smiles at me again and swaggers his fine ass into the office.

Archer turns to me; arms still crossed. "You called him over, didn't you?"

I flinch at his tone. A man accusing me of something I didn't do triggers my fight or flight response. I'm not that scared teenager anymore, flight is no longer my go to.

"Why in the hell would I call him over? I didn't even know who he was until a few seconds ago," I bark back at him.

Archer inclines his body, placing his fists on the desk. I meet his eye. If he thinks he's going to intimidate me, he thought wrong. I'm not going to back down.

"Why do I find that hard to believe." He says in a deep voice.

"I don't care what you believe. I didn't call him over." I snap.

"So he took it upon himself to walk over," Archer snarls.

This man is getting on my fucking nerves. "Yes. He's a grown ass man who can think for himself."

"I beg to differ on that." Archer states.

I stand and lean in, inches from his face. "I don't give a shit."

"Daniella."

"Archer."

"Mr. Archer. Don't make me tell you again," he growls.

I shiver at the tone of his voice and my stomach flutter anxiously. Taking a deep, calming breath, I reach out, grabbing his tie and pull it out of his jacket. Running my fingers along the silky material.

"How much do you like this tie?" I ask, snagging his gaze with mine.

"Daniella," his voice takes on a guttural tone and a chill races down my spine. Why does his voice cause such a reaction within me?

I yank on the tie, putting him off balance and causing him to stumble over the desk. I lower myself back into my chair, keeping my death grip on the silky material.

"Keep treating me like shit, Archer, and I will strangle you with this beautiful tie. You feel me?" I threaten.

Archer grips the edge of the desk and drags himself across, knocking everything onto the floor, and leaving only hairs width between us. I can feel his warm breath dancing along my lips.

"You strangle me with this tie, Sweetheart, and you'll be out on your fantastic ass," Archer says as he straightens, taking his tie with him. "You feel me?"

*Goddamn!*

He pivots and swaggers back into his office, shutting the door behind him and leaving me there with soaking panties.

"He likes you," Carrie sings.

I jump, barking out a yelp. I didn't even hear her walk up behind me. "Who?" I question; skin flushed. His cologne still lingering in the air.

"Luke. He likes you."

I glare at Carrie, who is smiling like Pennywise and beginning to freak me out. "No, he doesn't. He has been treating me like shit all morning."

Carrie laughs and twists to where all the supplies are kept, moving them down a shelf so I can reach without having to stand on a chair.

"He's not used to women talking back or challenging him in anyway," she shivers. "They watch him like they're in a trance. It's creepy. Like *Children Of The Corn* creepy," Carrie arranges everything one shelf lower. "You don't. He needs that."

*This day is getting weirder by the second.*

"I seen you threatened to strangle him with his three-hundred-dollar tie. Good on ya girl, he loves that tie." Carrie says and turns to face me, smiling.

"Three hundred dollars!" I cry. "That's more than the dress I'm currently wearing."

Carrie giggles as she props her hip on the side of my desk. "My girlfriend, Elle, and I have a bet going on with you two," Carrie says, "she says you two will fuck in two months, make-out in one. I say you two will fuck in one month, make-out in two weeks."

I start laughing, slapping a hand over my mouth when I start snorting. I can't believe this. "Yeah, that's not going to happen."

"And why not?"

"I have a mirror; I know what I look like. I'm not the type to catch his attention. And besides, I would rather smack him in the face with my shoe than make-out with him." I say.

"What the fuck are you talking about!" Carrie sputters. "You're beautiful, Dani."

I duck my head, embarrassed. I don't take compliments well.

Carrie grips my shoulders. "Why don't you think you're beautiful?" she whispers.

I turn my head, blowing my hair off my face when I exhale. "That's a long story, and not one I'm comfortable sharing."

Carrie drops her hands. "Understood. I'm sorry I pushed. We've just met, I shouldn't expect you to give me your life story on your first day," Carrie gives me a smile of apology.

I squeeze her arm. "Thank you for understanding," I breathe. "Maybe one day I'll tell you why."

Gabe's laugh cuts through our private moment. We both smile at the sound. He has a nice, deep, belly laugh. It's comforting, like a hug from an old friend.

"Well, Gabe's *always* down for a roll—or fifty—in the sack," Carrie says, firing me the finger guns and heads back to her desk.

The desk phone rings, causing me to jump. "Lucas Archer's office."

"Office." Archer barks, hanging up on me. He needs to knock that off or I'm going to rip the receiver from the phone.

I walk into his office and stand next to the chair Gabe's sitting in.

"Daniella, we talked about this," Archer says.

I drop my head back and groan. I walk out of the office, knock, and walk back in, throwing my arms in the air.

"Happy?" I question.

"Mostly," Archer mutters.

"Moron," I mumble.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I cross my arms over my chest. "What do you want, Archer."

"Mr. Archer. This is your last warning." He snarls.

Gabe chuckles from his seat. "Don't listen to him, Dani girl, he secretly loves you calling him Archer."

Archer mutters something under his breath. He hands me a piece of paper and a credit card. "Lunch order."

"You know they have this thing now called delivery, where you can get people to bring the food to you."

"Yeah, they're called PA's," Archer states.

I reach over and snatch the items from his hand, mocking him under my breath.

"Make sure it's still hot when it gets here."

I roll my eyes. "And what if it's not?" I argue.

Those ice blue eyes slowly raise to meet mine. "Do you want to chance it?" Archer questions, raising his brow in challenge.

I consider the fact that he probably would fire my ass over something as stupid as cold food.

Gabe's fingers brush along the burn mark behind my knee, catching me off guard. The nerve of that guy. Looking down into his sky-blue eyes, I say, "hands to yourself big boy."

Removing his large hand and walking out, I hear Gabe laugh and Archer mumble something. I grab my purse and head to Carrie's desk.

"Carrie, lunch? Archer's buying," I wiggle the card in front of her face.

*That'll teach him for being an asshole.*

She taps her chin with one long finger. "Sure, grab me a chicken teriyaki sub and a coke."

I give her a little shimmy. "Can do."

I walk out and wait for the elevator. I hate elevators. I have an irrational fear of getting stuck in one and then getting cut in half when I'm rescued because the thing starts moving while I'm climbing out. I know the likelihood of it *actually* happening is slim to nil but it still scares me.

I place myself between two large men and ride the packed car to the parking garage with my eyes closed. The minute the doors ding open, I book it across the garage and climb into my piece of shit, held-together-with-duct tape Honda Accord. I check the paper Archer gave me.

"Ooh la la, Mr. fancy pants." Of course, he would order from one of the more expensive restaurants in the city.

Dropping my purse on the passenger seat, I call Mr. fancy's order in. The order comes to a hundred and fifteen dollars. Sweet baby Hades in a tuxedo, do all men eat like they're heading to the electric chair. Good God.

Tossing my phone on the seat, I head out of the underground parking and towards The Esplanade, hitting up Subway on Yonge first. As I wait in line to order mine and Carrie's lunch, I think about what she said.

I have no problem admitting I am attracted to Archer; however, I find it hard to believe he's attracted to me. If there is an attraction there on his end, it's because he doesn't play with his dick enough and it's starting to decompose.

I place our order at the same time a text comes in from Carrie, asking if I picked up Archer's lunch order. Apparently, Gabe is *starving* and starting to wither away.

Drama queen.

I'm pulling into the underground when another text comes in. This time from Archer.

Rushing back up to the office, I drop mine and Carrie's food at her desk. I don't even bother knocking, I walk into his office and place the food and six pack on the desk, along with the credit card. Gabe snatches one of the bags and pulls out a burger, digging right in.

"Anything else your royal dickness?" I pant, hands on my hips.

"No." Archer mutters

"Good." I spin on my heels, snagging a bite of Gabe's burger, and march out. Slamming his door behind me.

"You know you just gave him a boner, right?" Carrie calls from her desk.

"Don't be gross Carrie," I mutter around a mouthful of amazing burger as I grab a chair from along the wall.

"It's the truth. Luke likes order," Carrie says as she bites into her sub, dropping mayo and teriyaki sauce all over the wrapper. "You're a tornado, and he's loving every minute of it." She says with her mouth full. "Even if he has a funny way of showing it."

I can only shake my head as I bite into my sub. The sound of his office door opening has me rolling my eyes. "I swear to God, if he's going to complain about the temperature of his food, I'm going to shove it down his pants," I threaten.

Carrie chokes on her pop. "Jesus, Dani." She coughs out a laugh.

"Dani girl, can you come here for a minute?" Gabe calls.

“Looks like Gabe is already taken with you,” Carrie says. “He only gives nicknames to women he likes.”

I fire Carrie a look as I stand. “Don’t be weird,” I mutter.

She smiles around a mouthful of food.

“If I don’t come back,” I fix the skirt on my dress. “It’s because I’ve killed him and am now trying to put his body in the shredder.”

Carrie’s laughter follows me into Archer’s office.



## Carrie Is Mistaken

Luke

She's wild. And she took a bite of my burger," Gabe says as he takes a bite, dropping an onion on his pants.

"She's insane. Threatened to staple my dick to my leg."

Gabe chokes on the chunk of burger he's chewing. "She *what?!*" he croaks.

I nod, digging into my fish and chips that are still hot, to my surprise.

Gabe leans back in his chair and opens the door. "Dani girl, can you come here for a minute?" he calls.

Dani's annoyed groan enters my office before she does. "Yes?" she stands in the doorway; hip cocked out.

*Dangerous. She is fucking dangerous*, that voice informs me.

"Did you tell Luke you were going to staple his dick to his leg?" Gabe questions.

She smiles as she steps into the room and her whole face transforms into something even more exquisite.

"I did," she purrs.

Gabe looks over at me, then back at Dani. He opens his mouth, snaps it shut, then opens it again. "Really?"

Dani bites on her plump bottom lip. Lips that make you want to see if they're as soft as they look.

"Even told him I was going to strangle him with his fancy tie if he kept treating me like shit." Dani answers.

She finds my gaze and holds it, all while smiling. I strengthen myself against her siren call. I will not fall victim to it. It happened with Sarah, and I will not allow it to happen again.

"Damn girl, remind me not to piss you off," Gabe says, taking her hand and kissing it.

"You're the charmer of the family, aren't you?" Dani says and pulls her hand back as Gabe grins at her. My gut twists with anger at the way Gabe touches Dani. I press my teeth together to stop from staking claim on her.

"I learned from the best," he says, thumbing in my direction.

Dani snorts and starts laughing. "Archer has as much charm as a wet rag," she barks out. "Now, if you boys will excuse me, I have a lunch date with a cute brunette."

Dani turns with one last glance my way and walks out. Gabe shuts the door and turns to me; brows raised. I shove another fork full of fish in my mouth.

"What?" I ask.

"She is not a fan of you at all," Gabe says, finishing his burger and starting in on his poutine.

"She is not." I reply.

A wicked grin crosses Gabe's lips as he cracks open a craft beer. "You've got a hard on for her." Gabe says in a matter-of-fact tone, taking a healthy swallow of his beer.

I roll my neck, cracking it to avoid Gabe's question but there's no denying it. I put my fork down and wipe my mouth with one of the many Subway napkins Dani had shoved into the bag.

"There is something about her I can't put my finger on. She has burrowed under my skin and made camp there. I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since the interview yesterday," I lift one shoulder as I grab a beer of my own.

"Nothing to be ashamed about. Dani is a stunning creature, all those curves. Those legs were built to be wrapped around a man's waist. Or his head." Gabe whistles as he finishes off his beer and grabs another.

"And that cute little tummy she tries to hide," Gabe growls. "Fucking sexy as fuck."

I raise a brow at my brother.

"What?" Gabe asks.

"You're not going to ask her out?" I question.

"Oh, I'm going to ask. But I won't push if she says no," he answers.

I look at my brother suspiciously. Gabe doesn't give up after the first no. He'll never force himself on a woman, but he'll keep asking until he gets a yes.

"What do you know?" I ask, leaning forward.

He holds his hands up in front of his chest. "Nothing. Other than Carrie saying she's pretty damn sure that Dani has the hots for you."

I start laughing. "Carrie is mistaken."

Gabe points his beer at me. "There's a tension between you two that even I can feel," he says. "Go for it."

I wave him off. "No. I'm not going to let what Sarah did to me happen again."

"I don't think Dani is capable of doing something that fucking shitty."

"I didn't think Sarah was capable of it either and neither did you. Drop it." I growl.

"Fine. I'll drop it." Gabe snarls. He finishes off his food and stands, stretching and changing the subject. "Drinks Saturday? We can invite the girls." Gabe nods in the direction of Carrie's desk.

"Sure. But leave the girls out of it."

Gabe pouts around a smile. "Oh fine. I'll meet you at the usual spot," he swings open the door and swaggers his way over to Dani. "Dani, my love. It was a pleasure," Gabe says, taking her hand again.

"I'm sure you say that to all the ladies," Dani replies.

He kisses her hand again. "But I mean it with you."

\*\*\*\*\*

Nine-thirty on a Tuesday night, and I'm still working. Along with Dani, who is not very happy about it and has been telling me as much for the last four and a half hours.

I'm working on the Dobson case, it's petty and bitter. She wants the divorce, he doesn't. Doug has been fighting me the whole way, saying that Joni was sleeping with his brother throughout their whole marriage, blah blah blah. His brother says it's hard for that to happen when he lives three Provinces away. Come to find out it's Doug who has been cheating but he refuses to let Joni go.

I rub my face and loosen my tie. People like this is what's keeping me from wanting to get into another relationship. If you're not happy in your relationship, end it. Don't cheat.

Hell, even my parents had a shit relationship. Dad jumped into bed with any woman that would let him. I remember when Mom found out. The spark she had dwindled. Her smile stopped reaching her eyes. She had stopped accompanying Dad to banquets and functions. When I had asked her why she stayed, she said it was for us. That she didn't want us to grow up in a broken home. Dad broke our home the moment he cheated.

The faint sound of music bleeds through the closed door of my office. I stand from my desk and walk out, finding Dani with her heels off, singing and dancing. She's mesmerizing. The way her hips sway perfectly to the beat of the song.

She spins around and screams, hand flying to her chest. "For fuck sakes, Archer. You've really got to stop doing that!" she pants. "I've got a mom bladder; I could've pissed myself." Dani says swatting her hand in my direction. If I were closer, I would have gotten hit.

"Is there a reason you're acting like this is a bar on King?" I bark.

"I've got to do something to entertain myself while making fucking copies for his royal dickweed," she says jabbing a finger into my chest. "That's you. You're the dickweed."

I take a step forward, but she doesn't budge. "Is that right?"

Dani pulls out her chair and stands on it, making us almost eye to eye. "Yes. This is something I could be doing tomorrow, but *nooo*, you needed me to do it right this second." She pokes me in the chest again, her tone harder than before. "And on top of this shit show, I've got Mason calling saying he's *starving*," Dani gives a humorless laugh. "The fridge and cupboards are full but there's '*nothing to eat*.'"

She goes to poke me a third time, but I grab her wrist, pulling her closer. Dani looks at my hand wrapped around her wrist then up at me. "Um, personal space Archer."

I lower my head, so we're eye to eye. "Do. Not. Poke. Me."

The corner of her lip lifts in a smirk. "Or what?" she pokes me with her other hand.

I pull her flush to my chest, gripping her hip to steady her and look into her remarkable eyes. Her heart pounds against my chest as her body melts into mine. I affect her as much as she affects me. Her lush lip's part, camouflaging a welt above her upper lip that I never noticed before and it takes everything I have not to lean in and taste them.

"Archer," Dani's voice is breathy as a flush works its way up her throat.

Her warm, minty breath dances across my lips. I squeeze her hip, making her gasp and wiggle closer.

*Fuck. Me.*

I free her wrist slowly, allowing my fingers to graze over her skin, slipping over a raised scar along her wrist and drop my hand from her hip, backing up a step. "Go home Daniella," I growl.

I walk into my office, shutting the door behind me. "Fucking control yourself Luke." I whisper in the now quiet space.

As soon as the main door shuts, I head out of my office, shutting lights off as I go, just to find Dani waiting for the elevator.

She sighs upon seeing me. "You could take the stairs you know."

"Why can't you?" I bark.

Giving me a quarter turn, she taps her foot on the floor, drawing my attention down those gorgeous legs of hers towards her feet. "You didn't wear Kate Spade pumps all day," Dani states.

The doors open with a ding and we enter the elevator. Dani pressed her back against the wall of the elevator, clutching her purse against her chest and squeezing her eyes closed.

"Daniella? Are you all right?" I question, concerned.

She nods quickly. "Uh-huh," Dani squeaks as sweat breaks out across her forehead.

The minute the doors open, she runs from the car and towards an old Honda Accord, climbing in. After a few curses that would make a trucker blush, the car starts, and she speeds off.

I wait until she's gone before getting in my C10 Chevy and head home. I open the door and walk in, grabbing a beer from the fridge as I pass, and head into my home office. I sit down and get to work.

\*\*\*\*

I finish everything up around two. Checking over my schedule, I notice that Dani forgot to add a couple of meetings and important court dates. I grab my phone and dial.

"Archer, you want to explain to me why you're calling in the middle of the night?" she yawns. "What if I was getting plowed?"

The sting of jealousy and anger goes through me at the thought of another man getting between those thighs and a growl escapes.

*Focus Luke.*

"You missed some meetings and dates on my schedule. I need those added. Now." I order.

Light snoring comes through the phone.

"Daniella," I call.

"Jesus. What?" she whines.

"Luke is fine. No need to be formal," I say.

Dani snorts out a laugh and my chest tightens in a way it hasn't done in years.

*Don't fall for her wiles. It's a fake laugh*, that voice chimes in.

"I need those meetings and dates added," I repeat.

"I'm putting you on speaker so I can do this." Dani yawns again and mutters something that sounds an awful lot like fucking asshole.

I watch on my end as she adds everything I asked her to.

"Anything else you need me to d—"

A loud bang comes from Dani's end of the phone, cutting her off mid-sentence.

"What in the hell? Hold on Archer, I'm slipping you in my panties."

My stubble scratches my palms as I rub my face. She sleeps in her panties. I really wish she didn't tell me that. The sound of fabric rubbing against the phone brings my attention back.

*"Mason! What the fuck do you think you're doing?"* Dani yells at her monster of a son.

"I forgot my key."

"Did you also forget how to tell time. I told you home by ten-thirty, it's two in the morning. Where the fuck were you?"

"I lost track of time. I was hangin' with Axe and Mack—"

"What have I told you about hanging with that Mack kid?" Dani demands.

"I know."

"Well obviously you don't if I have to tell you again. His parents are too busy taking expensive vacations without him to care about what he's doing. Axe I can understand, there is something wrong with that boy," Dani grumbles. "But you, I raised you better than that. Give me your phone, you've lost it for the week, and you'll be going to work with Auntie Erin tomorrow."

"You can't do that." He argues.

"I can do whatever I want, I'm your mother."

"I have plans tomorrow," he groans so loud I can feel the vibration through the phone.

"Not anymore."

*"Ma!"*

"Don't you *Ma* me or I will bring you to work with me. Archer won't mind. Ain't that right Archer."

"That's not appropriate, Daniella."

"I don't wan—wait. Are you on the phone with your boss?" Mason asks.

"Yes, I am. Because, like you, he also can't tell time. Bed."

A door slams and there's movement of fabric.

"The only good thing about you calling me this late is the fact that I caught my son sneaking into the house. Do you need anything else?" Dani yawns for a third time.

"No."

"Wonderful. If you think of anything else, do it yourself. I need sleep to be able to deal with you." She hangs up on me.

## Hello Gorgeous

Luke

I get to the office at quarter to eight, unlocking the door and turn on the lights. I walk into my office, placing my messenger bag on my desk when the main door open.

"Lucas?" a voice like razor blades calls.

A voice I used to find sweet.

I step out of my office. "Why are you here?" I demand.

She rushes over to me. "When you weren't answering or returning my calls, I started getting worried. I thought something horrible happened to you," Sarah says, putting her hands on my chest.

Her touch doesn't give me the same thrill as it once did. Instead, it makes my skin crawl as if it's covered with thousands of ants.

"Did it ever occur to you that I don't want to talk to you?" I say, removing her hands and backing up.

The main door opens, and Dani storms in, heading straight for me. She squeezes between Sarah and me.

"I have a bone to pick with you," she pokes my chest. "I spent the whole evening with you, only to have you wake me up in the middle of the night because you *needed* something that could've waited until I got in today."

She pokes me again, harder this time. "But *oh no*, when Luke Archer wants it, you must give it to him right away. Well, don't get pissed off at me if I fall asleep at my desk. I am exhausted. You're exhausting." Dani gives my chest one last poke before heading towards the break room.

Rage contorts Sarah's face. "*You and her!* Is she the reason you're not returning my calls? Because you're with *her!*" she shrieks.

Dani walks out with my mug and shoves it into my hand. "I hope you choke on it." Dani seethes and brushes past me, sitting at her desk.

Sarah looks between us, the sharp sting of flesh connecting with flesh takes me by surprise. "*How could you Lucas! Don't I mean anything to you!*" she cries, stomping out and slamming the door behind her.

I turn to find Dani checking her nails. "Looks like I'm not the only woman who's pissed at you," she deadpans. Dani opens her email and shoots a nasty look over the monitor. I might have sent her seven emails last night for her to work on today.

I raise my mug in salute and head into my office, shutting the door behind me. I sit behind my desk and place my cell in front of me.

"5...4...3...2...1..." my cell rings. "Gabe."

"*Duuuuuuuuude!*" he roars. "You and Dani?"

"There's nothing going on between Daniella and myself," I inform him.

"Then why did Sarah call me in tears saying you were screwing your assistant?"

"Because when Daniella was chewing me out, she made it sound like we fucked last night."

Gabe starts laughing. "I'm in love."

Dani walks in and drops a pile of papers in front of me. "Sign." She demands and holds out a pen. I hold the phone between my ear and shoulder.

"Is she there?" Gabe asks.

"Yes." I hum.

"Let me talk to her."

"Goodbye, Gabe."

"Wait!" Gabe yells. "I want to hear what she said to Sarah."

I drop the phone on the desk and hit the end button. I finish signing the last paper and push it all over to her.

"Anything else, Mr. Archer?" Dani asks picking up the pile of papers.

I stare up at her. Dani's hair is in a high ponytail, and her face is clear of makeup. Dani has a natural beauty that could never be replicated. Sweat gathers under my collar and my dick perks up when her beautiful eyes meet mine.

*Pump the breaks or she will run you over*, that voice speaks up.

I clear my throat and say, "I see you dressed down today." I grimace at my words; however, they are needed to put distance between us.

Dani slams the papers back on the desk and leans forward. "You're joking right?"

I make a show of giving her a once over. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

Exhaling loudly through her nose, she straightens. Her cheeks flush and not from embarrassment.

"Well, excuse me, Mr. Archer. I slept in this morning and had no time to get ready. I didn't even get the chance to shower. So, my greasy hair is pulled back into a ponytail, showing off scars that you have probably already seen, and I grabbed the first thing out of my closet which just happened to be this," she gestures to her white dress shirt and black slacks.

"So, this is what you get for today. I look like I'm heading to a funeral. Enjoy." She swipes the pile of paper back off the desk. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No."

"Good." Dani hisses, spins on her heels and sways that marvelous ass of hers out of my office.

## Gabe

I am not one to poach women from anyone, but fuck me into next week, that Dani is amazing. She's utterly stunning, and her curves should be illegal. I was floored when I saw her standing on that chair yesterday. Those legs of hers go on for miles and they are as soft as they look. She makes me want to have a relationship that's longer than one night.

I should really stop staring at her, but I can't. She's wearing a simple white dress shirt and black slacks with her hair pulled back. She's sitting six tables away from me, scrolling through her phone. She must be on lunch, but she has been here for over forty-five minutes.

I wave my server over and tell her to bring my food to Dani's table. I stand and swagger over. Dani doesn't notice me walk up and I use it to my advantage. I lean over her shoulder and say, "hello gorgeous."

Dani shrieks, her hand flies to her chest. "Damnit, Gabe. You almost made me piss myself. I have a mom bladder," she barks out.

I straighten and smile down at her. "May I join you?"

Dani blinks at me before nodding to the other chair. I sit just as our food arrives. "So, tell me Daniella, what is a fine-looking woman like yourself doing eating alone?" I inquire, digging into my Western wrap.

"Carrie was supposed to join, but Elle was in the neighbourhood for an appointment," she says and stabs at her fries. "They invited me, but I declined. Third wheel and all that."

"And what does my brother think about you being on a long lunch?"

She glances up at me from under her lashes. "One: how do you know I'm on a long lunch and two: are you going to tattle on me?"

I smile. "I would never do such a thing. And I got here just before you."

Her beautiful eyes narrow. "I don't care what he thinks. He pissed me off this morning," Dani shoves the fork full of fries in her mouth.

"How so?" I question.

She leans back in her chair. "He had something to say about what I'm wearing."

I give her a once over. "I think you look amazing."

She snorts and takes a bite of her burger. "I look like a hot mess."

I point a fry at her. "My point. You look hot."

Her lip tips up as she chews. "Charmer."

I can't tear my eyes away from her. She's everything I want in a woman. Sassy, beautiful, funny. Before my brain decides to stop me, I blurt out, "are you free for dinner tonight?"

Dani chokes on her food. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me," I lean on the table, "but I'll ask again. Are you free for dinner tonight?"

Dani sits back and gawks at me. "Um..." she scrubs her face. "Look Gabe, it's sweet of you to ask but..." she trails off, looking anywhere but my face.

"Is it because of Luke?" I question.

Her eyes snap to mine. "What I do is none of his business."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it." I state.

Dani blows a couple of stray hairs off her face with a sigh. "Is it that obvious?"

I take her hand and turn it over. "To everyone but him," I kiss over the scar there.

Panic takes over Dani's features as she pulls her hand back. "Please don't say anything. I really need this job."

I smile wide at her. "He will not fire you because you have a crush."

"And how do you know that?" Dani asks.

"Because he feels the same."

Her eyes widen. "Does not."

I wink at her. "Does too."

"You lie," Dani challenges.

"There are two things I don't do. Relationships and lying." I take a huge bite out of my wrap and try not to laugh at the look on Dani's face.

"He treats me like shit. He's not interested."

"I'm going to fill you in on something," I say, waiting for her eyes to meet mine. "Luke has a huge heart, and he loves hard. Harder than anyone I know. Including myself." I take her hand in mine again. "But he was burned badly four years ago, and he's scared that it'll happen again if he opens himself up."

"I would never hurt him." Dani whispers.

I kiss her hand. "I know you wouldn't. However, after what his ex did, he has a tough time trusting women. And because of that, he's keeping you at arms length. Even though he would rather hold you close."

Dani blinks at me for a moment, before shoving a forkful of fries into her mouth. Her cheeks flush and a small smile forms on her lips.

We finish lunch in silence. When our bills come, I pay both and walk her out to her car.

"You really didn't need to pay for my lunch but thank you." Dani says. She stretches up on her tip toes then huffs. "Bend."

I smirk and bend my knees so she can kiss my cheek. "Anytime, Dani girl."

She smiles brightly at me and my heart skids to a stop. I've never had a woman smile at me the way Dani is without wanting something more.

I open her car door and she slides in. Closing the door, I hold my hand out. "Phone."

Dani pulls it from her purse, and I enter my number, texting myself so I would have hers. "If you ever need anything, I'm only a call or text away."

Dani takes her phone back and smiles up at me. "Thanks Gabe."

I knock on the roof of her car. "Bye gorgeous."

"Bye handsome."

I stand on the sidewalk as she drives away.



## Five More Times

Dani

I kick my heels off as soon as I open the door, my feet screaming from being locked up in those heels all day. The house is quiet, thanks to Mom taking Mason for the night. That little shit thought he could pull one over on me, sneaking into the house at two in the morning. The kid's as big as a mountain and thinks he can *sneak* in.

Ha!

My calf muscle twitches and I decide a soak in the tub will sooth my aching body. I may work in an office, but sitting on my ass for hours does a number on my muscles.

Getting everything ready for my much-needed soak, I fill the tub with hot water and add one of the bath bombs that Erin gave me last year for my birthday. I slowly lower myself into the amazing grapefruit scented—and hot as fuck—water and lean back, dunking my head under the water.

It has been years since I've been able to do this, and with Mason at my parents, I don't have to worry about having someone barging through the door at any given moment. I just pop up from under the water when my cell goes off.

"For the love." I growl. Half ass drying my hands, I grab it off the toilet lid. "Hello?"

"Hello my love."

"Hi Mom. How's it going?"

Mom sighs happily. "Things are going great. My baby is here, helping around the house."

My brows creep up my forehead. "He's helping around the house?" I ask dumbfounded. "How'd you manage that?"

Mom huffs. "Oh, your father promised to teach him how to drive if he cleans the house."

*Of course, he did.*

"How've you been, darling? Mason said that boss of yours calls at all hours of the night," Mom says.

"I've been good. This job is definitely more demanding than the others. But the pay is great, the benefits are better and working there gets Mason a college fund supplied by Archer law firm."

"Oh honey!" I smile at the joy in Mom's voice. "That is amazing. Maybe now you can get yourself a newer car."

I laugh. "The pay is good, Mom, but you get killed after taxes."

She huffs again. "Just take some of it out of the money you already have aside for Mason. If the firm is going to give you a college fund, treat yourself honey."

"I don't want to risk it right now. Archer is hard to work for and is getting on my damn nerves."

Mom laughs. "It's only your second day, it'll get better."

"I doubt it," I snort.

"Oh Daniella," Mom tsks, "what have I told you about making that noise?" she scolds. "You'll never land a man sounding like a piglet."

I roll my eyes. "Mom, I highly doubt the man I land is going to care if I snort or not."

She tsks again. "Honey, when was the last time you had a date?"

That's a very good question. Antoni and I broke up six years ago, but as for date wise...

"I can't remember."

"I know the perfect guy for you."

"Mom, no," I whine, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Last time you set me up, the guy 'forgot' his wallet after ordering over eighty dollars worth of food for himself. Then thought he was going to, and I quote 'tap that ass' at the end of the night."

The sigh that comes through the phone sounds identical to Mason's. "How many times do I have to apologise for that, Daniella?"

"Five more times."

"That's enough of your smart mouth," Mom warns.

I go for eye roll number two.

"This guy is different. He works with your father but in the offices. I have met him a handful of times, he's a nice boy."

"Boy?"

"You know what I mean, Daniella."

The only way to get her off my back is to agree to this *date*. "Fine. Give him my number."

Mom squeals with delight. "I already did. He's going to call you tonight."

I sink deeper in the water with a sigh. "Lovely."

"His name is Malakai. He's thirty-eight, recently divorced and no kids."

"Great. I can't wait." I comment wryly.

My phone beeps in my ear. "My other line is beeping in Mom; I'll talk to you later." I switch lines before Mom can get another word in. "Hello?" there's a hesitation before a very deep voice comes over the line.

"Daniella?" the baritone of his voice vibrates through the speaker.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Malakai. Your mother gave me your number."

This is going to be a very awkward conversation. "Yes, she just told me. Let me ask you something."

There's another hesitation. "Um, okay."

"What did she tell you about me?"

He chuckles. "That you were single, have a seventeen-year-old son and in your early thirties."

*Huh.*

I figured Mom would've played me up more like she has done in the past.

"She ah, she showed me your picture."

Annnnnnnnnnnnnnd there it is.

"You're a very beautiful woman," Malakai says.

I flush at the compliment. "Th—thank you."

As the awkward silence descends on us once more, my other line beeps in again. I glance at the screen and cringe.

"Malakai, I'm sorry to cut this short, however my boss is on the other line, and I have a feeling it's going to be a *loooooong* conversation."

He chuckles again, making me smile. "Completely understand. Before you go, are you free for dinner tomorrow?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"I'd love to."

"Wonderful. How does eight o'clock sound at *Pearls*?"

Holy shit. I have always wanted to try that place but never had the time.

"Sounds great. I'll see you then." I switch lines. "Yes, Archer."

"Took you long enough, Daniella." He barks.

I drop my head back. "I do have a life outside of *you*." I slide down the tub, submersing myself deeper in the water.

"Daniella,"

"What?"

"Are you in the bath?"

A sinful smile grows on my lips. "Why yes, Archer. I *am* in the bath." I move my hand in the water, receiving a grunt.

"Get out of the tub, Daniella." He growls.

"Why? Are you picturing me naked?" I tease.

"Yes."

*What the fuck!*

"Get out of the bath, Daniella." Archer demands.

"Why should I? I am off the clock; I don't have to listen to you." I bite out.

"If you don't get out of that tub in the next ten seconds, I'm coming over and removing you myself." Archer snarls.

"I dare you." I challenge.

A deep rumble comes over the phone and my body responds. Heat pools low in my belly and a moan slips out between my lips. Fuck, why did that turn me on?

"I'm coming for you, Daniella," Archer growls.

Panic over Archer actually showing up, has me jumping out of the tub, slipping on the bathmat, and slamming my shin into the side of the tub. I hiss as I throw on my robe and stroll into my room.

"I'm out of the tub," I tell him.

"Good." He answers.

"And I smashed my fucking shin on the tub."

"You should watch what you're doing."

I scrunch up my face in annoyance. "You're the reason it happened."

"I'm not even there, you can't blame me for your clumsiness."

"You threatened to come over and drag me out!" I shout.

"And by the sound of the moan you gave me, I believe you liked that idea." Archer replies.

I choose to ignore that comment, even if he's right. "What do you want?" I flop onto my back on the bed.

"The Dobson case just took a nasty turn. I am going to need you in earlier tomorrow." He says.

I brush my wet hair off my forehead. "How early are we talkin' Archer."

"Six."

I blow out a breath. "Okay, but I'm giving you fair warning, I'm not a morning person."

"Noted."

"And I don't drink coffee," I add.

"Okay."

"And I'm coming in my pjs." I state.

"Absolutely not." He argues.

"Then I'm not coming in." I smirk.

Archer mutters a curse under his breath. "Fine, but you have to change by eight."

"Deal, and I need to leave by seven." I add.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you hard of hearing? I need to leave by seven."

"Why?" he asks.

I pull the phone away from my ear and look at it. "That is none of your business, Archer."

"I beg to differ. Unless it's of grave importance, you leave when I say you leave." He snarls.

"You can't stop me from leaving." I hiss.

"Can and will." He seethes.

I close my eyes and count to ten, only making it to three. "How? Physically keep me in the office? Hold me against my will?"

“You leave, you’re fired.”

“You can’t do that!” I shriek.

“The fuck I can’t. You’re still on probation. I could fire you over nothing if I wanted to.”

I run a hand down my face and groan. “I’ll make you a deal.”

Archer grunts. “What might that be?”

I roll onto my stomach. “If I finish everything of importance by seven, you let me leave.”

“And if you don’t?”

“I’ll stay.” I say, disappointment filling my voice.

“We’ll see.” Archer hangs up on me.

## Make It Happen Matthews

Dani

After Archer hangs up on me, I fire Erin a text.

**Me:** You free to help me pick out an outfit for tomorrow?

My phone dings in my hand.

**Erin:** Have you forgotten how to dress yourself?

**Me:** No, you dork. I have a date.

**Erin:** Ahhhhhhhhh! Please tell me it's with that hot piece of ass boss of yours.

**Me:** What? No. It's a blind date.

**Erin:** Even better. I'll be over around eight for the fashion show. And I'll bring booze.

I roll my eyes with a smile.

**Me:** Why so late?

**Erin:** Jake wants to slip me the sausage.

**Me:** You two are like a couple of horny teenagers.

**Erin:** I'm not sorry about that.

Erin is my best friend, my partner in crime. We met in grade school when we wore the same dress one day. We have been inseparable ever since. Erin has been my rock. She has helped me when I needed it, and never asked for anything in return. She's my sista from another mista and I love her to death.

I climb off the bed and head into my closet. I lay out my entire wardrobe, old and new, on my bed. Mulling over if I should wear pants or a skirt. I guess I could try to put an outfit together by myself.

Nah.

I would rather get Erin to do it. She has always had an eye for fashion.

The sound of a key in a lock grabs my attention. "*Fashion show!*" Erin yells.

I run to the top of the stairs. "Is Jake slowing down in his old age. Can't go two rounds anymore." I tease.

"Had to postpone the sausage slipping," Erin states, walking up the stairs. "My body thought this was a good time to start my period."

"Guess you'll be eating sausage for the next week," I laugh.

"I loooooove Jake's sausage. It's more than a mouthful." She says, kissing my cheek and walking into my room.

Erin inspects what I have laying on my bed. "I don't like any of these," she states and scoops everything back up. "You need to show off that bangin' body."

I follow her into the closet. "Bangin' body? Whose body have you been looking at?" I ask.

Erin sticks her tongue out at me and dumps the clothes from her arms into mine. "Your bangin' body, you dummy. I would kill to have tits like yours."

"I'll trade you," I say, hanging up the clothes.

Erin cackles. "Jake would cum all over himself if I showed up with tits like yours. He wouldn't know what to do with them," she snorts. "Hell, I wouldn't know what to do with them. I still don't know how you manage to stand upright."

"I'm like a Weeble. I Weeble and I wobble but I don't fall down." I reply.

Erin is my exact opposite; she's tall and slender with a personality that draws everyone to her. Where I am short, on the chubby side, with the personality of a bridge troll.

Erin shoves a dress at me. "Go change in the bathroom."

I raise a brow. "Why? You've seen me naked before."

"I want to be surprised." Erin states.

"Surprised by what? I still look the same."

"Not by you naked, you ding dong. I mean the outfit," Erin says and shoos me into the bathroom.

I change into the form fitting dress that Erin somehow found in the back of my closet. I had bought it for a wedding but ended up chickening out after seeing myself in the mirror.

I wiggle it over my head and down my body. It hugs my chest, hips, and has a huge slit up the side. I feel dumpy wearing it. My chest and hips are too big for my short torso and my butt sticks out.

"Let me see!" Erin demands.

I take a deep breath to steady my nerves and walk out. Erin's sitting on the bench at the end of my bed, pouring the drinks.

"Oh, Daniella," she whispers, "you're fucking stunning." Erin hands over a glass of Rum and Coke.

"I'm too big to wear this, Erin." I poke my soft belly.

"You are not. Stop talking like that," Erin says. She circles her finger. "Turn around. Let me see the back."

My face catches fire as I spin around. "See. Dumpy."

"You're not dumpy, Dani." Erin states, taking a sip of her drink. She pulls out her phone and snaps a picture.

"Why did you do that?" I ask.

"If you don't get some action from this date, I'm making you a '*fuck me*' profile." Erin informs me.

"They have those? Why am I just hearing about this now?" This information would have come in handy after my breakup with Antoni.

Erin laughs. "Yeah, they're called dating sites."

I snort. "Dummy."

Erin shrugs. "Meh, say what you will, but I am hilarious."

I shake my head. "I'm going to change. I feel too...exposed." I rush into the bathroom and tear the dress over my head. My body relaxes as I throw my robe back on.

"Explain to me why you think you're too dumpy to wear a dress like that?" Erin questions as I sit next to her on my bed.

"I just am." I answer, taking a huge gulp. There's more Rum than Coke in the glass and it burns my throat. Erin opens her mouth to argue but I shut that down quick by changing the subject.

"How's Jakey?" I ask, propping myself up on my elbows.

"We're not done talking about your negative body image issues, miss missy. But I'll let it slide. This time." Erin warns. She grunts as she rolls onto her side. "He's good," she answers. "He wants to start trying for kids."

"That's exciting!" I squeal.

She shrugs one slender shoulder, her long, naturally red hair bouncing with the movement. "I guess. I mean, my business is booming but I would like to wait another year or two. Make sure Jessa can manage everything. She's smart but not totally ready to take full control. She's too soft when it comes to dealing with assholes."

Erin opened a Concierge service two years ago, specializing in personal assistants. Jessa is her PA, she's very sweet but hates confrontations. There isn't a mean bone in her body.

"Did you tell him that?" I ask.

"Duh, but you know Jake. Once he sets his mind on something, there's no changing it." Erin rolls her eyes. "I mean, look how serious he took his job as Mason's father figure when you asked him."

Jake stepped into the role of Mason's 'father' without question. I had asked him after he and Erin got engaged. He was so honored that he nearly choked me to death when he hugged me.

"And I'll be forever grateful for it," I reply. "You two will be incredible parents. You were amazing with Mason when he was younger."

“To be fair, Jake did most of the work. He is the youngest of six children, so he had practice with his nieces and nephews.” Erin finishes her drink.

“Either way, I think you should revisit this conversation soon,” I say.

Erin cackles. “You just want to be an auntie.”

“You’re fucking right I do! Make it happens Matthews.”

## I Suggest You Learn

Luke

Dani wasn't bullshitting when she said she wasn't a morning person. She has yelled at the copier six times in the last twenty minutes, smashed her fists off the printer a handful of times and has threatened to end my existence more than once.

Plus, I think she might be hungover.

"*Archer!*" she bellows from her desk.

I have been letting the whole Archer thing slide. I'm starting to enjoy her calling me by my last name, so long as she continues to call me Mr. Archer around clients. Standing, I grab more papers for her to type up and take my time walking over to her desk.

"Yes, Daniella." I answer. I try to keep eye contact with her but God, it's hard to do with her wearing a tank top that's way too thin to wear in public.

*That's how she gets her claws in you*, that voice pops up to add its two cents.

"What in the Christ does this say?" she questions and jabs a finger onto the paper in front of her.

Stepping around the desk, I lean over her shoulder to glance at the paper, and in turn, get the full brunt of that nasty burn mark. The scar is a bit darker than her pale skin; it's raised and smooth and in a strange shape.

"Alimony is to be paid monthly by cheque or electronic money transfer. If alimony payments are halted, regardless of the reason, civil or criminal charges for contempt of court will be pushed through." I answer.

She scratches out my writing and adds hers. "Did doctors teach you how to write. Good God Archer, I can't read half of this," Dani complains.

"If you are going to continue working here, I suggest you learn."

Her head turns slowly towards me. "Archer," she starts, "I'm giving you thirty seconds to get out of my face before I chop you into pieces and shove you through the shredder." Dani grabs my tie and yanks me close to her face. Close enough that I can feel her breath on my lips. Close enough that I could kiss those lips if I leaned in an inch. "You feel me?" her eyes narrow as she releases my tie.

"Noted." Is all I say as I place the papers in front of her and make my way into my office.

"*God fucking damnit!*" Dani yells and it fills me with satisfaction.

\*\*\*\*

"*Finished!*" Dani yells, throwing her hands in the air.

I glance at the clock. Six-fifty-eight. She stands and rushes out of my office, grabbing her purse as she flies by her desk. "See you tomorrow, Archer."

Disappointment floods my chest and I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. It might be selfish but I was truly hoping she wouldn't finish so I could spend more time with her.

Guess it wasn't in the cards. I finish up before heading home myself. I lock up and push the button for the elevator when my phone goes off.

"Gabe," I answer.

"Guess who I just ran into."

I step in the elevator. "With you, it could be anyone."

"True," Gabe chuckles. "It was Malakai."

"Seriously? Shit. I haven't seen him in years. What's he doing now?" I ask, stepping off the elevator.

"Dani girl apparently. They're on a date at *Pearls*, and she is looking mighty fine." Gabe answers.



I hang up and run to my truck. Peeling out of the underground parking, I speed towards *Pearls*. Dani focused on her work without complaining just so she could go on a date. Fucking bullshit.

I have no right to be mad about this, Dani can do whatever she pleases but...well, I'm fucking pissed.

*Turn around. Let her go,* that voice speaks up. *You do not need this trouble.*

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, twisting the leather in my fists. My heart is bouncing around in my chest like a fucking marching band. I have never felt this before. It's as if I'm obsessed with her. The thought of her with another man has my temper simmering under my skin. Makes me want to hide her away from everyone but me.

I find Gabe at the bar, his gaze is on the table across the room, the one where Dani's sitting.

"How long have they been here?" I snarl.

Gabe jumps at the sound of my voice. "What are you doing here?" he hisses as he turns in his chair.

"I'm hungry." I throw a glance his way.

Gabe eyes me for a moment before a smile breaks out on his face. "I bet you're hungry," he elbows me, "but not for food."

I do not take the bait. I cannot tear my eyes away from Dani. Her hair is down and curled, her dress is formfitting but shows little skin. However, the skirt has a slit up the thigh. The urge to cover her up so no other man looks at her comes out of left field.

*Turn around and walk away before it's too late,* that voice warns.

The way she is laughing at whatever Malakai is saying sends a tidal wave of possessiveness through me. A growl comes from deep inside my chest, "mine."

Gabe blinks up at me. "Whoa dude."

"What?"

"You're turning into a caveman," Gabe states.

I brush his comment off and head towards their table.

"*Archer!*" Dani startles.

"Daniella." I dip my chin.

Dani looks in the direction of the washrooms. I hadn't even noticed that Malakai was absent. Dani does that to me. Whenever she is around, everything else fades into the background and she is all I see.

"What are you doing here?" she hisses through clenched teeth.

"Meeting Gabe."

"Bullshit! He called you, didn't he?" she leans around me. "*Gabriel!*" Dani yells across the restaurant. Heads turn in our direction.

"*Daniella!*" Gabe yells back as he waves and blows her a kiss.

"He did, but he never mentioned that he seen you."

"Bull. Shit." She seethes. "We ran into Gabe when we got here. There is no way in hell he did not mention it."

I shrug. A slap on my shoulder draws my attention away from Dani.

"Trying to steal my date Archer," Malakai says as he steps around me.

"Hey Kai. Been a long time." I clasp his shoulder.

"It has," he eyes me, "and it looks like nothing has changed. You, dressed to the nines and flirting with my date."

"Actually, Daniella is my assistant." I state.

Malakai's eyes pop out of his head. "She told me her boss was a...what did you call him again?" Kai asks as he slides into his chair.

Dani looks over and smiles that cat like grin. "A douche nozzle," she says, taking a sip of her wine.

"I thought I was his royal dickness."

"You can be both." Dani smiles again and downs her wine before pouring herself another full glass.

"I'll let you two get back to your date. It was good seeing you again Kai," I shake his hand.  
"Daniella, I will see you tomorrow," I say and with every ounce of strength I have, I tear myself away and head back to the bar.

"How'd it go with Dani girl and Kai?" Gabe asks with a grin.

"She told him that I was a douche nozzle," I say, ordering a Scotch on the rocks.

Gabe chokes on his liquor. "That's what she called you when I first met her." He burst out in a fit of laughter. "God, I love that woman," Gabe says as he wipes under his eyes but turns serious quickly. "What happens if the date goes well, and Kai wants another?"

I finish my drink and stand, slapping a twenty on the bar top. "Why are you asking that?"

Gabe raises a brow. "Really, Luke? Do I need to spell it out for you?" Gabe orders another drink. "You've got the biggest hard on for that tiny badass woman."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I state but he's right.

Gabe gives me a look that says fucking liar. "Pretend all you want but I know the truth. So, I'll ask again. What are you going to do if things go well between them."

I rub my forehead with a sigh. "I can't stop them from seeing each other."

But I won't be happy about it.

## I'm A Mom

Dani

I know it sounds cliché but thank fuck it's Friday. It's almost ten at night and I'm still filtering through the emails, figuring out which ones he needs now, and which ones can wait.

The desk phone rings, and I debate on whether to answer it. By the fifth ring, I cave. "What you want?"

"Office." Archer says.

I groan, dropping my head back before dragging my tired ass into his office. I just want to finish and go home. I half ass knock as I walk in.

"Close the door."

I blink at him. "Why? It's just us in here."

"Cleaning staff will be here shortly," he says.

"So?"

"They don't need to hear this."

I do as he asks. When I turn back around, I get a really good look at him. His hair's all dishevelled, his suit jacket is off, sleeves rolled up displaying powerful forearms. Tie loosened, and the top two buttons undone, showing some blond chest hair. Not a lot, but enough.

I squint at him. Is that...is that a tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve? No, not stick-up-my-ass Archer. I wave a hand at him. "What's all this you've got going on?" I question.

He runs a hand through his hair.

*Sweet chubby cheeked baby Jesus!*

He looks up at me and I take a step back. Stress is written in the lines of his face, in the hard set of his jaw and the thinning of his lips.

Still hot though.

"I need your opinion on something," Archer states.

My hand flies to my chest and I gasp. "You need my help?" I start fanning my face and batting my lashes. "Why, Mr. Archer. I am nothing if not flattered."

He grunts. "Daniella, I'm in no mood for your smart mouth."

I drop my hand and walk around the desk. "What do you need?"

I lean over his shoulder and can't help but smell him. God, he smells delicious. I take a deep breath, not ashamed one bit.

"The Dobson case. Joni had emailed all of Doug's text messages between him and the multiple women he had been sleeping with throughout their marriage. Doug is saying that Joni hacked his phone and changed those messages. I need to know if that's possible." Archer mutters.

I read over the messages. "It's quite possible that she could've hack his phone, but I'm not the greatest with this kind of thing. You'd have to speak with the women that received the messages to verify whether or not they were in fact sleeping with him."

He drags his hand through his hair again and a whimper escaped from me.

*What is wrong with me?*

"I'll get started on that now," Archer says.

I look at the clock. "It's almost ten-thirty. Call them Monday." He needs to back away from this case and start fresh.

I leave his office with Archer behind me, but instead of going home, he heads into the breakroom and back out with his mug. His shoulders slumped, dragging his feet. I step in front of him.

"Daniella, let me pass," he says.

I take his mug and place it on my desk. "Grab your shit, time to go home."

Archer shakes his head. "I have too much to do." He goes to grab his mug again, but I slap his hand.

"Daniella." He says shocked.

"Do it Monday." I order.

He crosses his arms over his remarkably broad chest, widening his shirt where the buttons are undone and glares down at me. Placing my hands on my hips and taking my mom stance—the one where Mason knows he is in major shit—I clear my throat and look at him. He cocks an eyebrow but doesn't back down.

"Luke, grab your shit and let's go."

Heat flashes in his eyes and he takes a step forward. It feels like he's going to argue with me, but instead, he reaches out and moves a piece of hair behind my ear. My skin tingles where his fingers brushed and my body flushes.

I glance up into Archer's ice blue eyes. All the stress that was there earlier has been replaced with something akin to interest. "Okay." He heads into his office without another word.

I grab my purse and wait for him by the elevators. When he locks up, I hit the button.

"You alright?" I ask stepping onto the elevator, hitting the button for the parking garage.

"Yeah." Is all the response I get.

The doors close and the elevator jerks then stops. The lights shut off and the emergency ones kick on.

"You've got to be shitting me." I mumble to myself.

Archer reaches over and hits the emergency button, but nothing happens.

My heart kicks against my ribs and I start to sweat. Stuck in an elevator. My fear has come true. I begin humming my favourite song to calm myself and text Mason to tell him what's happening.

**Me: I'm stuck in an elevator with Archer**

**Bubba: bahahahahahahahahaha!**

**Me: shut it**

**Bubba: that's ur favourite thing in the whole wide world. I know how much you love elevators**

**Me: if I get cut in half when I'm rescued, I'm coming back and haunting your ass**

**Bubba: okay but if the hydro bill goes up cause ur flickering the lights I'm going to salt and burn ur bones \*carry on my wayward son\***

**Me: ha!**

My heart slowly returns to its normal pace. Leave it up to Mason to take my mind off of what's happening and get a song stuck in my head.

"We're going to have to wait. Big accident on the Don Valley Parkway. No available first responders at the moment." Archer states, putting his phone away.

"Of course," I say sarcastically as I sit down on the floor, kicking off my heels and stretching my legs out. I wiggle my toes. I love my buckle dress boots, but my God, do they ever pinch my toes after a while.

To take my mind off the fact that I am stuck in an elevator, I pull my purse onto my lap and dig through it until I find my baggie of goodies. Last thing I need is to go into a full-blown panic attack in front of my boss.

"Hungry?" I ask.

Archer looks down at me. "No."

"You sure? I've got candy." I shake the bag at him.

Archer glances at the bag, then back at me.

"It's the good candy too. Not the shit you find in your grandma's purse," I say, shaking the bag again.

When he says nothing, I open it and dump everything out on the floor like its Halloween night and you're looking for the good stuff in your kids candy bag.

"I've got some Tootsie Rolls, Rockets, Jolly Ranchers, War Heads—don't touch those," I pick them out of the pile and keep going. "Mini Mars, Snickers and Kit Kat bars, Caramels." I tilt my head back to look at him. "Pick your poison, but not the War Heads. Those are Mason's favourite."

Archer looks at me like I have three heads. "No. Thank you."

I shrug. "Suit yourself." I grab five Rockets, Tootsie Rolls and Jolly Ranchers before stuffing everything back in the bag. Archer sits next to me against the wall.

"Why do you have a baggie of candy in your purse?" he asks.

I unwrap a Jolly Rancher and pop it in my mouth. "I'm a mom."

"And?"

"And I need to keep snacks on me. Always. For when Mason gets hungry."

"Isn't your son seventeen?" he questions.

I nod, crunching down on the cherry candy. "Yes, and he is *always* hungry. That ass hat didn't get as big as he is by not eating."

I hold out a Tootsie Roll and to my surprise, Archer takes it. Unwrapping the chocolate goodness and popping it in his mouth. Using some serious side eye, I watch him.

His head's resting against the wall, eyes closed. His jaw, covered in five o'clock shadow, is working on that Tootsie Roll and my mind goes to what that jaw would feel like against the skin of my inner thighs.

*Why is it so hot in this elevator suddenly?*

I start singing the alphabet in my head, trying to get rid of the picture of Archer between my thighs. When that doesn't work, I pinch my arm. But all that does is add a red mark. I need to spend more time with my vibrator because stubble on a man's face should not make me all hot and bothered.

I stare over at Archer. His face is tight with stress or annoyance. Or both. It's hard to tell with him sometimes. Reaching over and lifting his rolled-up sleeve to get a better look at the tattoo. I can see half a moon and what looks like a bird but that's all before Archer yanks his sleeve back down.

"Daniella," he warns.

I exhale and throw up my hands. "Just trying to lighten the mood in here." I say, laying down on the tile floor and using my purse for a pillow. Maybe if I have a nap, by the time I wake up, we'll be rescued. Or I won't wake up at all because the cable snapped and we plummeted to our deaths.

"Why are you laying on the floor?" Archer asks after a moment.

I roll my eyes, lifting my head to look at him. "Because." I snap back.

Archer's sigh blows stray hairs off his forehead. I smile sweetly at him and drop my head back down.

"Daniella," he calls.

I smack my hands over my face. "I'm freaking out, Archer. I'm freaking out, and I'm trying to take my mind off it." I say from behind my hands.

"Why are you freaking out?"

"Because I have an irrational fear of getting stuck in an elevator and when I'm being rescued getting sliced in half because they didn't turn the power off." I admit, feeling my face burn with mortification.

"That would never happen," Archer states.

"You don't know that. What if when it starts back up, the cable snaps and we plummet to our deaths." I voice one of my biggest fears.

"The chance of that happening is very slim." Archer reassures and lays down on the floor with me. It makes this feel more intimate than it should be.

"But it could." I utter.

Archer stretches one arm over his head and rests the other on his stomach. He looks more relaxed than he did a few minutes ago. "I'm not going to lie and say it won't, but it's highly unlikely."

The car drops suddenly, I scream as my stomach plummets to the floor and slam my eyes shut. Large hands cradle my face.

"Daniella, look at me."

I keep my eyes shut tight and attempt to shake my head. The car jerks to a stop again and the emergency lights flicker.

"Sweetheart, look at me," Archer's voice is soft, but the tone is one of authority.

Slowly, I open my eyes, finding him on his side, watching me with concern. "You're okay. The car has stopped again." His thumb brushes over the scar on the side of my face.

I swallow thickly. "Keep me talking, o-okay? Help me keep my mind off what's happening."

Archer's ice blue eyes roam over my face. "What would you like to talk about?"

He's being so comforting and sweet. This is not the Luke Archer I know. This must be a case of body snatchers, why else would he be acting so...caring.

I exhale and ask, "why is this case stressing you out?"

Archer drops his hands and scratches his forehead. "I can't talk about the case."

"Why not?"

"Client confidentiality."

"You do realize that one: you asked me to read over part of the case not long ago and two: I'm the one who types everything up," I give him a pointed look. "Do you really think I'm *not* reading every. Single. Word." I raise my brows.

Archer closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, rolling onto his back. "It's a giant game of he said/she said and neither one of them are letting up." Archer says and rubs a hand along his jaw, the scratching of his stubble sends a shiver down my spine.

"She caught him cheating, he says she was the cheater. She has proof, he says she hacked his phone. It's just a lot of back and forth."

"Now you have the numbers for all the women, you can get the correct story from them," I yawn. This floor is starting to become way too comfortable.

"Yeah." Is all he says.

Lifting myself onto my elbows, I glance over at him. His eyes are closed, long thick lashes fan his cheekbones. His body's relaxed, he looks...peaceful.

*God, he's beautiful.*

"Stop staring at me, Daniella." He opens one pale blue eye.

"I wasn't staring. I was trying to figure out if I could suffocate you with your jacket," I say with a smile.

Archer shakes his head and closes his eye. "You do that and you're out of a job."

I snort. "Nah. I'll just Weekend at Bernie's ya. No one would be the wiser."

Archer chuckles and my stomach drops. Who would ever think a sound could do that.

"Until my body starts to decompose, and the smell becomes too much for you to handle," he replies.

I slap him on the arm and laugh. My fear slowly fading away. Archer's kind of funny. "Well, looks like Mr. hard ass has a sense of humor."

"I always did."

"Could've fooled me."

He shrugs one shoulder like it's no big thing, however, that small grin on his lips tells me otherwise.

"Tell me about that praying mantis woman that slapped you the other day," I say.

His eyes fly open, and his head turns slowly towards me. "No."

I sit up fully. "C'mon Archer. Tell me about her. It's obvious that you two have some sort of history."

He scratches his stubble and looks up to the ceiling.

"I'll tell you about Mason's sperm donor." I offer. I wait to see if he's going to take the bait but after a few minutes I give up and lay back down next to him.

"Her name is Sarah," he finally says. "We dated for four years, and on the night I was going to propose, she showed up with the guy she had been cheating on me with and told me she was leaving."

My jaw drops.

"Closed our joint bank account and cleaned out our apartment while I was at work."

*Oh. Oh wow.*

"He left once the money was gone, and now she calls me every few days in an attempt to wear me down, so I'll take her back."

Anger and sadness fight inside me at the thought of him going back to his ex.

"What a bitchface."

He chuckles. "Yeah."

I exhale slowly. "Mason's sperm donor was a horrible guy, who dropped me the minute his daddy told him to, and I haven't seen or heard from him since. Which is a good thing," I blurt out.

Archer hisses under his breath. "Sorry."

I wave him off. "Don't be. I had help from my parents and my best friend Erin. Mason knows about his father but has no interest in meeting him." Which I am grateful for every single fucking day.

"It mustn't have been easy for you."

"Honestly, if I didn't have help, I don't think I would have survived."

Archer shifts, moving closer to me. "Is his father still alive?"

I shrug, brushing his shoulder with mine. "As far as I know. Like I said, Mason has no interest in meeting him, so I haven't been actively looking." I cross my feet at the ankle and stretch. This floor is horrible on my back, but I am enjoying being close to Archer and not fighting.

"Is he the one who gave you those scars and burn marks?" Archer questions.

I freeze, my heart in my throat and my stomach in a puddle on the elevator floor. I try to avoid this question as much as possible. I hate the looks of pity and the 'so sorry that happened to you' bullshit.

"No." I lie.

Archer gives me a look but doesn't push the issue. "Does he pay any type of child support?"

I relax at the subject change. "Fuck no. His family never acknowledged Mason. Said that he was someone else's bastard child," I snort. "He looks exactly like his father. Has my hair and eye colour though. And personality, thank fuck. Josh was a dick."

Archer touches my thigh and my body sings at the contact. "Talk to Mark on Monday."

I give him a questioning look. "You think he'll help me?"

Archer nods. "It is his job."

I blink at him a few times before smiling. "Thanks Tinman. I guess you do have a heart after all."

Chuckling, he turns his head to me. "You really need to stop talking to Carrie."

I giggle. "No, I like that girl. We're going to become BFFs and she's going to tell me all about baby Lucas," I clasp my hands under my chin. "Maybe even show me pictures. And then we're going to have sleepovers and give each other makeovers and—"

Archer covers my mouth with his hand. "Please don't."

I lick his palm, and he yanks his hand away like it's on fire. "Ha ha. Mason taught me that when he was eight. Gross right?" I laugh.

Archer wipes his hand on his pants. "Very."

“Mason taught me some really gross things over the years. Did you know that if you wet tape, peel off the adhesive, and mush it together, it looks like boogers?”

“That is disgusting.”

“Right! Mason was a gross kid.” I laugh. “But he’s my baby and I love him to death. No matter how gross he is.”

“You are a strange woman, Daniella,” he says, a smiling tugging at his mouth.

I grin and close my eyes. “And you love every moment of my strangeness.”



## A Stick Up Your Ass

Luke

I watch Dani from the corner of my eye as we lay on the floor of the elevator. She's relaxed, calm, and has seemed to have forgotten all about being stuck. Her eyes are closed, and her chest raises and falls slowly.

*Her fear is a ploy. She's using it to make you feel needed,* that voice pipes up.

"Why do you always call me Archer?" I ask.

She turns her head and opens one beautiful eye. "Why do you always call me Daniella?"

Dani chuckles and nudges me with her shoulder. "Tell me about that tattoo I seen peeking out under your sleeve."

"Why are you so interested in it?" I question.

She rolls onto her side and props her head on her hand. Her shirt pulls tight against her hip and shows off her amazing curves and that cute little tummy Gabe was talking about. Out of nowhere, the urge to trace those curves hits me square in the gut and blood rushes straight to my dick.

"Because you don't look like the type of guy that would have a tattoo." She answers.

"And why is that?"

Dani narrows her eyes. "I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you have a stick up your ass."

"I wasn't always so tightly wound. I used to be fun."

Her mouth drops before a grin crosses those beautiful lips. Lips I want to taste, to feel on my skin, to have wrapped around my—when the desire to touch her hit me again, I give my head a good shake. Now is not the time to think about that or lose control.

"Reeeeeeally?" she draws out the word. "Let me see it."

I shake my head.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours." She winks.

"You have tattoos?"

Dani snorts. "Uh, yeah."

"I don't think so."

"Pllllllleeeeeaaaaassssseeee, Archer," Dani whines.

I grin to myself. "Seeing as how you asked so nicely."

"Yay!" Dani says and claps her hands.

I sit up and pull my shirt from my pants. I undo the buttons, slipping my arm out of the sleeve. Her fingers touch my skin, and an electric shock explodes through my body, and I become very aware of just how small this elevator is. How close Dani is sitting to me, the smell of her shampoo, and the way her fingers feel against my skin.

"This is gorgeous," she breathes.

Dani's fingers trace the outline of the sun. A look of pure wonderment crosses her face.

"What does it mean?" her eyes move to mine.

"That's a long story."

"We have time."

I suck in a deep breath. Debating whether to tell her.

"C'mon Archer," she pleads, "just give me the foot notes."

I give in. I can't say no to her. "The sun is for my mother, the moon for my father, and the blue jay for Gabe."

Her fingers move onto the moon. "Explain," Dani says and looks at me from beneath her lashes. "Please."

Something in my chest tightens. "My mother was warm and welcoming; my father is cold and distant and Gabe is a huge Jays fan."

Her fingers still on the blue jay. "That's beautiful," Dani grins. "The first part anyways. Why would *you* get a tattoo of Gabe's favourite baseball team?"

"Lost a bet." I tell her. Although, it wasn't a bet I lost. I almost lost Gabe.

"You lost a bet?" she shakes her head. "That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard, Lucas."

My heart stops at the sound of my name coming from her lips. Her fingers drift over my shoulder and across my chest, curling in my chest hair. A groan climbs up my throat and her eyes meet mine. Dani bites into that plump bottom lip, and I do everything in my power not to suck it into my mouth.

She pulls away, my body missing her touch instantly and I slip my arm back into my sleeve. Silence stretches out between us as I do my shirt up, with Dani watching me too intently.

"Show and tell time," Dani says, but doesn't move to show me.

"Let's see it, Daniella."

"Okay, okay." Dani goes to work rolling up her sleeve and flashing a...

"Pepe le Pew?" I stare at her. "You have a Pepe le Pew tattoo on your forearm."

Dani smiles wide. "He's my favourite, and you have to admit, for a skunk, he's pretty romantic." She says matter-of-factly.

She pulls her sleeve down and unbuttons the top two buttons on her blouse. Moving the fabric aside, she flashes not only an exquisite tattoo of a baby Mason but also the swell of one breast that is pouring over the lace cup of her bra.

I reach out, brushing a finger along the tattoo. A low gasp slips from her lips, and I move my finger lower, swiping it over the swell of her breast. I lift my eyes to meet hers. Her face is flushed, her lips parted, and her pupils are dilated. My smile widens and she jerks back.

"Dimples." She gulps.

The lights in the elevator flickers, then the thing plummets a few more feet. Dani grabs my arm and curls into me. The car jerks to a stop. I rub her back, whispering calming words to her. When Dani's body stops shaking, she looks up at me with terror in her eyes. I cup her cheeks and her lips are on mine in a second.

"Make me forget." Dani pleads against my lips.

I wrap a hand around her neck, holding her to me and slip my tongue in. God, she tastes like paradise. A moan slips from Dani's mouth, and I fight every urge to lay her out on the floor of this elevator and taste her properly.

Dani climbs onto my lap and rolls her hips against mine. I dig a hand into her hair and yank her head back, causing her to whimper.

"Fuck, Archer. Do that again." Dani moans.

I twist my hand in her long honey-blond hair and yank her head back farther. Dani rolls her hips against my hard dick. Her head resting in my palm.

"Sweetheart," I growl, "you're going to kill me if you keep doing that." I suck on her neck, and she rolls her hips again.

"I don't care if this is highschool dry humping, your cock feels fucking amazing." Dani purrs, moving her hips faster.

"We have to stop," I mutter against her collarbone.

Dani grabs the back of my neck and leans back, bringing me with her to the floor. "We don't have to do shit," she says and drags her teeth over my jaw.

"If we don't stop, I'm going to own your pussy." I snarl.

Dani wraps her legs around my waist. "Own it, Luke. It's yours."

I press my hips down, rubbing my cock against her. The friction from my slacks rubbing against my hard cock is driving me insane. Should not have gone commando today. "You don't know what you're asking, Sweetheart."

"The fuck I don't."

"I can't cross this line with you." I nip her bottom lip, soothing the sting with my tongue.

Dani drops her legs and pushes me away, and while it kills me to let her go, I do. I climb off and Dani buttons her shirt up, and curls into a ball with her back to me.

"I'm tired." Dani whispers.

I run a hand over my mouth. "Yeah." I move, resting my back against the wall of the elevator.

I'm such a fucking asshole.

## You Did?

Luke

It's just shy of two in the morning by the time we get out of the elevator. I had covered Dani with my jacket around midnight when she started to shiver. She looks utterly lovely while she sleeps, until she snores. She sleeps with her mouth open too. When I woke her up, she punched me, then asked what in the hell I thought I was doing waking her up like that.

I walk Dani to her car, opening the door for her. "You should lock your doors." I state.

"Locks are broken. Plus, if someone wants to steal the hunk of junk, all the power to them." She flashes a smile that doesn't reach her eyes as she slips behind the wheel. "You're not going to call me in an hour to get me to add something to your schedule, are you?"

I shake my head. "Not tonight. I worked while you slept."

"Of course you did. Weirdo." She mumbles as she shuts the door.

I head towards my truck when she yells, "don't you dare call me tomorrow night either. Take a weekend off Archer, you need it." She starts the car or at least tries to.

"You need a boost?" I yell.

"No. Just give it a minute," she punches the dash, and the car starts up. "Ha! See. Have a good weekend, Archer." She waves out the window and drives off.

Getting in my truck, I take off towards home. I walk in the door, throwing my keys on the table, and head to the fridge for a much-needed beer. Spending almost four hours locked in an elevator with Dani has gotten under my skin.

Being that close to her, touching her, listening to her snore, made me realize that I'm lonelier than I thought. Spending my weekends working instead of going out and meeting people. Calling my assistant in the middle of the night, not so much for work reasons but just to hear her voice thick with sleep and all kinds of husky.

I down my beer and head to the bathroom to shower. I rub one out like I do every night—which is my sad reality—and finish up. I towel off, throw on a pair of boxer briefs and slide under the sheets.

I stare at the ceiling. The moonlight casts a silver line along one wall of the room. I can't sleep, so I do the one thing guaranteed to relax me enough to put me to sleep. I grab my phone and make a call.

"Archer, what in the fuck did I tell you." Dani's voice has that husky sleepy tone to it.

"I just wanted to make sure you got home okay."

There's a pause before Dani speaks. "You did?" surprise colours her tone.

"Yes. After watching you fight with your car, I just wanted to make sure you made it home." And to hear her voice.

A shocked giggle comes over the line. "That's sweet of you, Archer. I made it home just fine."

I smile into the darkness of my room. "Wonderful. Goodnight, Sweetheart."

"Goodnight, Dimples."

\*\*\*\*

I get to work earlier than usual Monday morning to start on the Dobson divorce, getting everything ready for when Joni comes in at ten. Dani walks into the office fifteen minutes later, already yelling at someone.

"Mason, I don't give two sweet fucks that you're tired. You should have thought of that before deciding to have a party while I was stuck in an elevator. Did you really think I wouldn't call Uncle Jake to check in on you?" Dani yells. "And I still don't understand how you managed to convince Uncle Jake to stay, but now he's in deep shit with Auntie Erin."

I stand in the doorway of my office, leaning against the frame.

"I don't care, Mason. I have your phone for another week and you're spending three days with Nanny and Papa. Now, shut your yap and go cut the grass like Nanny asked you to do when I dropped you off. I love you with all my heart, I'll see you Thursday." She hangs up and flops down in her chair with a grunt.

"Daniella," I call.

She jumps and throws a pen at my head; I duck before it hits me.

"What have I told you about doing that!" she spits out. "You're going to give me a heart attack or make me piss myself." She runs her fingers through her hair, that she's wearing down today. "I have a mom bladder. It's not as strong as it used to be."

I pick up her pen and place it on her desk. "Noted."

Dani leans forward, resting her elbows on the desk, and dropping her chin on her palms. "So, how was your weekend?" she bats her lashes at me.

"Unproductive," I cross my arms over my chest.

"So, what did you do instead of working?"

"Daniella, my weekend was horrible. I was incredibly bored."

She sits up straighter. "Then why didn't you go somewhere, or hang out with friends?"

I say nothing. She does not need to know how pathetic I am. That I haven't hung out with anyone in years. Instead, I turn around and head into my office, shutting the door behind me. Just to have it swing open a second later.

"Don't you brush me off," Dani barks. The tick, tick, tick of her shoe tapping against the floor signals her frustration.

I sit behind my desk. "Joni will be here at ten for her meeting. I need you to scribe." I pull up her file and start working, getting ready to make my calls to the women who were accused of sleeping with Doug.

"Fine. Be a dick today, but you didn't *have* to take my advice about the weekend." Dani says.

She turns on heels that make her legs look exquisite and her ass like an oil painting and walks out, slamming my door when she leaves.

\*\*\*\*

Dani brings Joni Dobson in at ten on the dot and sits next to her with a pad of paper, ready to work. She refuses to look at me, her nose is scrunched up in this cute way and her leg bouncing. She's irritated with me.

*It's an act. She's waiting for you to let your guard down then she'll pounce,* that voice speaks up.

I start the meeting, ignoring that annoying voice. I had already spoken with the women who were accused of sleeping with Doug. Out of the ten different women, only four admitted to having a sexual relationship with Doug. The other six swore it was only sexting and video chats.

"I spoke with the women from the text messages. Four did confirm a physical relationship with him," I begin.

Joni smiles and sits back in her chair. "I fucking knew it. Once he got that promotion, he started 'working' late but was never in the office when I called to speak with him. What about the other six?" Joni asks.

"They said they never met him in person, just spoke with him via text messages and video chats." I confirm. "Now that you have the confirmation—" my office door flies open, cutting me off.

Doug storms in, waving papers in the air. "I'm not the only one with proof of cheating!" he slams the papers down on my desk.

"Doug, you cannot barge in here while I'm having a meeting with your soon-to-be ex wife." I say, standing from my chair, but Doug isn't listening. His eyes are trained on Dani.

"Who's this gorgeous creature?" Doug asks with a slimy smile on his face. I grind my teeth to keep myself calm. I don't like how he's looking at her. Like she's something to devour.

Dani lifts her head; eyebrows rise in question. Doug leans on the desk and eyes Dani. My palms itch to grab him by the neck and throw him out of my office.

*Do it. Dani is yours;* another voice makes itself known.

A voice that has never spoken before.

"Hey gorgeous, wanna show me what you've got going on under those clothes." Doug says licking his lips.

Dani smiles and curls a finger at him. "You've got big dick energy for a man with a tiny pecker." Dani says leaning back.

Doug chuckles and grabs Dani's face, gripping it with his hand and making Dani whimper in pain. "Sweetheart, my dick would make you gag as soon as it was in your mouth."

*That does it.*

Rounding the desk, I grab the back of Doug's neck and haul him out of my office, towards the main door.

"Luke! What the fuck!" Doug yells.

I shove him into the hallway. "What the fuck gives you the right to not only barge into a meeting that doesn't involve you but also speak to my assistant the way you did?" I demand.

Doug looks over my shoulder then back at me. I know we have an audience, but I don't care. I push him towards the elevator.

"Come on, Luke. You can't say that you haven't thought about getting all up in that," Doug says.

"Yes, I've thought about it!" I yell. "It's all I've been thinking about since she started here," I shove him again. "Dani is a stunningly gorgeous, strong, incredibly intelligent woman, but I don't tell her what I want to do to her. Especially in front of other people. That's something you say when you have her alone, with your hand in her panties."

A throat clears behind me and my body stiffens. I am a dead man. I turn and meet Dani's death glare as well as everyone else's stunned looks.

"We need to talk." Dani spits out between clenched teeth before pivoting on her heels and marching towards my office.

I stand there like a jackass.

"*Now! Luke!*" Dani hollers over her shoulder.

"We can reschedule," Joni says as she brushes by me and out the door.

I straighten my back, swallow my dread and head for my office; this is not going to end well. I step in, shutting the door behind me. "Daniella—"

She holds her hand up and shakes her head. "I'm going to pretend that what you said is due to the fact that you are under an *extreme* amount of stress right now and not the fact that you want in my pants."

I open my mouth to defend myself, but she continues.

"Not only was what you said extremely out of line and inappropriate, especially in public, but the fact that you've thought about me in that way kinda has me weirded out," she says and steps closer, lifting her chin to look at me. "However, I want you to answer something truthfully," she blinks those stunning eyes at me. "Did you mean it?"

I *want* to say no.

I *want* to lie to her.

However, something inside forces me to be truthful.

"Yes." Once I get that off my chest, I can't stop the words from falling from my mouth. "From the moment I saw you sitting by Carrie's desk, you undid me. Has me thinking about you all hours of

the day and night. Of all the dirty things I want to do to you with my mouth, fingers, and dick. Here and in my bed.”

I close the gap between us. “Has me wanting you in a way I have never wanted any woman before. You burrowed under my skin and made camp there.”

Dani’s eyes go wide, her breath hitches, and a flush works its way up her neck and spreads across her beautiful face. “Luke, I um—” she runs out of my office without finishing what she was saying, swiping her purse as she passes her desk.

*Good job. Push her away before she can get her hooks into you,* that voice praises.

I should be happy about this. It’s what I’ve been aiming for, but I hate it. My lungs constrict at the thought of never seeing her again.

*Go after her. She belongs with you,* that other voice pipes up.

Carrie tries to stop her, but Dani shakes her head not saying a word and leaves.

Fucking hell.

I just lost the best thing that ever happened to me before I got the chance to make her mine.

## His Dipstick

Dani

He wants in your pants and you're not letting him? What in the hell is wrong with you!" Erin yells.

I stare at my phone. "I'm sorry. Did you just ask me why I'm not letting *my boss* in my pants?"

"Damn right I did," she sighs. "Honey, you are a gorgeous, strong, incredible woman, and the sooner you realize that the better off you'll be."

I snort in disbelief.

"I'm serious, Dani. You never put yourself first."

"I do have a child to worry about." I argue.

"He's not a child anymore. He's old enough to get his license, and a job—which he should be doing by the way—he can take care of himself. Treat yourself a little."

"How would sleeping with my boss be treating myself?" I ask.

Erin squeaks into the phone. "You've seen him. Just looking at him is a treat."

I snort out a laugh. "What is wrong with you?"

She shushes me. "Hear me out. It's been years since you've dated anyone and going on dates doesn't count. I can't remember the last time you told me about getting hot and heavy between the sheets. And dry humping in an elevator like two highschoolers doesn't count."

I go to say something but think better of it. It *has* been a while.

"Let him act out all the dirty fantasies he clearly has stacking up in his spank bank. I mean, you already kissed him and that was amazing, right?"

I touch my lips at the memory of his mouth on mine. The taste of him. "Yeah, it was."

Erin cackles. "Knew it!"

"However, one: thanks for putting that in my head, now I'm going to be weirded out at work thinking about him having a spank bank and two: what if he fires me?" I counter.

"Take him to the labour board for wrongful dismissal and for being a fucking dick. Who the hell fucks and chucks anymore, anyways. It's all about ghosting now. Which I guess is the same thing? I don't understand dating terms anymore."

I flop back on my bed. I'm still within my probation period and he can fire me without explanation. But I also don't want to be added to his list of PA's that he's canned. I need to stop talking to Erin about my men problems. All her ideas involve sex.

The doorbell rings. "Hold on Erin. Someone is here."

"Maybe it's that sexy boss of yours, here to check your oil with his dipstick."

"Oh my God! Would you shut up." I laugh as I walk downstairs and answer the door. "Can I help you?" I ask the delivery guy.

"Daniella Carter?"

"That's me."

He shoves a stunning bouquet of flowers at me. "Uh, thanks?"

He nods and walks back to his truck. I shut the door and search for the card.

"Who was it?" Erin asks.

I find the card and open it. "Oh. My. God." I put the flowers on the kitchen table and back away from them like they're going to explode.

"*What! Tell me!*" Erin yells.

"Archer sent me flowers."

Erin screams into the phone. "What kind? Roses? That means he *looooooves* you."

"He sent Lilies and Orchids."



Erin sighs dreamily. "What does the card say?"

"It just says 'Luke.'" I answer.

"Ew. Gross. You would think he'd put something better on the card. Like **'hey beautiful, sorry for telling you my secret fantasies but it's the truth.'**"

I stare at the flowers. "That's uh, really specific."

"You know me. Always the romantic," Erin sings.

"Dork." I giggle.

"I'm your dork and don't you forget it."

I rummage around the kitchen, looking for a vase.

"Are you going to call him?" Erin questions.

"And say what exactly?" I ask.

"Uh, thank you for the flowers for one. And two, tell him how you feel." Erin answers.

I finally find a vase, packed away under the sink. I clean it and fill it with water before cutting the ends off the stems and placing them in. "They are beautiful, but don't you think it's a little creepy? I mean he tells me he thinks about doing dirty things to me then sends me flowers to say sorry."

"So?"

"So? He could've just called." I reply.

"But this is *sooooo* much better."

I touch the petals of the Orchid. My heart banging off my ribs. I have never been given flowers before. Josh was not one for gifts unless they were for himself, and Antoni thought they were pointless because they'll die after four days.

My stomach ties in a knot.

My boss sent me flowers.

My handsome as sin boss sent me flowers.

My handsome as sin boss that I-dry-humped-in-an-elevator sent me flowers.

"Guess I should call and say thank you," I finally say. And find out if there is an ulterior motive behind them. Because even though it was a sweet gesture, it's still kind of creepy.

"But I'm not telling him how I feel." I state.

Erin huffs into the phone. "Fineeeee. Call me later."

We blow kisses into the phone and hang up. I stare at the flowers that are now sitting on my kitchen table. "Damnit." I pull up his name and hit call. I pace around the kitchen while it rings. When I get his voicemail, I hang up.

"Who gave you flowers?" I jump at the sound of Mason's voice.

"What are you doing home?" I ask. It's not that I don't like him being home, but he's supposed to be at my parents.

He shrugs. "Nanny said I could hang with Axe today. Came home to grab something."

"I see."

"So, who gave you flowers?" Mason asks again.

"Axe," I answer.

"*What!* I'm going to kill that asshole."

I start laughing. That was mean of me to say. "Axe didn't send the flowers. My boss did," I say to settle his temper.

Mason turns slowly and looks down at me. "Why is your boss sending you flowers?"

"He did something inappropriate yesterday and sent these to apologize."

"What did he do?" he demands.

"Don't worry about that."

"Ma," Mason growls.

Shit! I woke the protective beast.

“What did your boss do that not only has you off today, but he had to send flowers to apologize?”

I wrap my arms around my baby boy’s waist and put my head against his chest. “I love that you are so protective of me, Bubba, but you don’t have to worry about what happened.”

I’m not going to go into detail with my seventeen-year-old son about what happened. He’d be stupid enough to ride his bike over to the office and beat the snot out of Archer.

Mason wraps his arms around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head. “Love you, Ma.”

That brings a smile to my face. “Love you too, Bubba.”

The front door swings open, cracking off the wall.

“Well, isn’t this sweet,” Axe’s body slams into mine and I’m squished between two tall boys. “I really feel the love in here, you know.”

“I really feel like punching you in the throat, you know.” Mason says.

Mason grabs Axe’s shirt and drags him out of the kitchen.

“Play nice, Bubba.” I call after them, giggling at Mason’s groan.

I turn back to the flowers. I’ve never gotten flowers before, and a part of me is thrilled that a man took a break from his schedule to buy them. I grab my phone again; this time I shoot Archer a text.

**Me: Thank you for the beautiful flowers**

I toss my phone on the table and wander into the living room. My house is clean, mostly because I went on a cleaning bender when I got home yesterday. I tend to do that when I’m upset or angry. I flop on the couch. My phone dings in the kitchen. If it’s Archer, I will talk to him tomorrow. If I can get past the fact that what he said made me mad at myself for the way I reacted that is.

Mad because I want him to do everything he’s been thinking about doing to me. I shouldn’t be thinking these kinds of things, he’s my boss, but there is something about him that has me turned inside out.

He’s just...different. Like a tornado. Beautiful but dangerous. He’s organised and professional and hot under the collar. He’s a rubber band ready to snap. He’s completely different from me and I think that’s part of the attraction.

“Oh, thank Christ! You’re alive.” Erin’s voice rings out.

I was so deep in my thoughts that I didn’t even hear the door open.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

She walks into the living room and sits next to me. “I texted you like six hours ago, and you never answered.”

I give her a look. “You did not. I was just talking to you a few minutes ago.”

“It’s ten after five.”

“*What!*” I scream. I’ve been sitting on the couch for six fucking hours!

“What’s going on, babe?”

I brush my hair off my face, gripping it at the roots and tell Erin everything I have been going over in my head. From my attraction towards Archer and the way his words made me feel.

“Damn.” Erin slumps back against the couch with me.

“Yeah.” I release my hair.

“So, if I understand this correctly, you’re pissed that you’re attracted to him,” she says.

I nod and she slaps the back of my head. “What is wrong with you? There is nothing wrong with being attracted to him.”

I rub my head. “Yeah, there is. He is my boss.”

Erin throws her hands in the air. “And Jake was my professor. What’s your point?”

I open my mouth but snap it shut.

*Shit. She’s right.*

“It’s perfectly normal to be attracted to someone.” Erin points out.

“I know.”

"Then what's the problem?"

That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?

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I never heard back from Archer for the rest of the night. Not even in the middle of the night like usual. As I get ready for the day, I put a little more thought into my outfit, hair, and makeup. Something I never do, but after talking to Erin last night, I figure why not.

I pull out a maroon skirt that hugs my hips and sits mid-thigh. I slip it up my legs, pairing it with a plain white button down, and finish up my makeup. I crawl into my closet, my hand searching under boxes and bags to find my favourite pair of pumps, when it connects with something too big to be in my closet.

I wrap my fingers around it and yank it out from under a box labeled 'Mason's old clothes.'

"What the shit? *Mason!*" I holler. When I don't get an answer, I yell for him again. "*Mason Christopher!*"

His bedroom door creaks open. "Yeah?" he yawns.

"I found your other shoe."

"Awesome sauce."

I throw it out into the hallway. "Why was it in my closet?" I ask, climbing to my feet and meeting him in the hallway.

He's leaning against the door frame, asleep, with his mouth hanging open and drool on his chin.

"*Mason!*" I yell.

He doesn't move. Sighing, I grab the shoe and throw it again, hitting the door with a loud bang. Mason jumps, tripping over his massive shoe and landing on his back with a grunt.

"Bubba," I sing, "why was your shoe in my closet?" I ask again, coming to stand over him.

"I was looking for something." He groans, rolling onto his side.

"What were you looking for?"

"I have no idea." Mason pushes to his feet, staggering a little.

"Go back to bed Bubba," I touch his stubbled cheek. I don't like that one bit. He's my baby boy, he's not supposed to have stubble. "I'll see you when I get home from work."

"Okay," he kisses my cheek. "Love you, Ma."

"Love you, Bubba." I head downstairs as his door closes.

I pop a bagel into the toaster and grab a glass. Surprisingly, Axe left a mouthful of orange juice in the bottle this time. I down the juice and pack my lunch, finishing just as the toaster pops. Buttering the bagel, I wrap it in paper towel and head out the door.

The office is locked when I get there. It's quarter to eight, Archer is usually here by now.

"Hey girl," Carrie says.

I turn to her with a smile.

She pulls out a set of keys and opens the door. "We missed you yesterday."

I snort. "You mean *you* missed me."

Carrie giggles. "Nah. The office wasn't the same. Too quiet. There was no yelling coming out of Luke's office."

"Speaking of Archer. Where is he? He's usually here by now."

Carrie's face drops. "He ah, slept here."

"Serious?" My heart twists in my chest.

She nods. "Yeah. Yesterday was a...a difficult day." She smiles but it doesn't reach her hazel eyes as she flips on the lights. "But today will be better. Now that you're back."

I didn't realize I had that big of an affect in this office. I walk with Carrie towards Archer's office. I sit behind my desk and turn on the computer opening my emails and only find the ones from Monday.

He never sent anything new.

## She?

Dani

Archer hasn't left his office since I got in. He has been getting Carrie to relay messages and bring in any paperwork that I finish for him. I got all dressed up, did my hair and makeup, and for what? He hasn't even come out to piss.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about what Archer said. Ever since I talked to Erin, it has been on repeat. Words shouldn't turn you on, they should get you to the place where the man can start turning you on physically. But those words, said in his deep voice had heat pooling between my thighs.

I stare at my computer screen, the cursor blinking next to the last word I wrote, getting lost in my thoughts.

*From the moment I saw you sitting by Carrie's desk, you undid me. Has me thinking of you all hours of the day and night. Of all the dirty things I want to do to you with my mouth, fingers, and dick. Here and in my bed. Has me wanting you in a way I have never wanted any woman before. You burrowed under my skin and made camp there.*

I close my eyes and drop my head on the desk. Banging it on the wood, I try to scramble his words.

"He feels awful." I jump at the sound of Carrie's voice.

I lift my head to find her perched on the edge of my desk. "Well, he should. Saying shit like that in front of everyone." I glance around to make sure no one's in ear shot. "Do you know what he said to me in his office?"

"He told me later that day. I have never heard Luke say anything like that before. Sure, he was king charmer back in the day, but he has never blurted shit like that aloud."

I drop my head in my hands. "God," I groan mortified. I want to slide under the desk and stay there until this all blows over. Carrie pulls my hands away from my face and grins.

"You should talk to him," Carrie says and holds up a hand as soon as I open my mouth to reply. "Hear me out. He feels like a complete ass. Sure, he sent you flowers but he never apologized."

"I know. And why did he send me flowers? A simple 'I'm sorry' would've been good enough for me." I blow out a breath.

"Luke is used to spending his money on things to apologise. Sarah would never accept just an apology, he always had to buy her something to prove he was sorry. Mainly flowers and jewelry." Carrie informs me.

"Well, I would prefer an actual apology instead of a gift," I say. "Although, it was nice to receive flowers."

Carrie smiles and I now see the family resemblance. They all have the same smile and dimples.

"Talk to him. I'm getting tired of walking back and forth. Elle is going to dump me if I lose my ass," she laughs. "That's her favourite body part."

I pop my lips. "Oh...alright."

Standing from my chair I walk over to his door. I take a deep breath, and knock before walking in. Archer is sitting behind his desk, hunched over his keyboard. His usually neat desk is covered in papers. His jaw is covered with two-day old stubble, his hair's a disaster, sticking up in complete disorder like he has been running his fingers through it. His tie is gone, as well as his suit jacket, leaving him in only a charcoal vest and burgundy dress shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

There is a blanket folded on the arm of the couch with a pillow sitting on top.

"Archer," I call.

His shoulders tense but he doesn't look up.

“Archer,” I try again. Same reaction as before. I drop my hands to my hips and tap my foot. I’m getting irritated. “For fuck sakes Luke, would you look at me. I’m trying to talk to you.” I say, using my mom voice.

His head jerks up then and my next breath gets caught in my throat. He’s even more handsome looking like a gigantic clusterfuck than all cleaned up.

“Finally. Jesus. You have selective hearing like Mason.” I complain.

Archer straightens from his desk and walks over to where I’m standing. His solid chest raising and falling with hard breaths. I force myself to keep my eyes on his face but with his shirt unbuttoned and the sight of that light chest hair, I can’t help it as they travel down his thick neck, across his broad shoulders and down his solid chest and hard stomach towards his belt.

“Daniella.” His voice is gravelly and thick and so sensual that my skin breaks out in goosebumps.

My eyes snap back to his. “I’m not mad at you for what you said,” I announce. “Well, maybe a little because you said it in front of everybody.” My face starts to burn as I think back to what he said and how I would love for him to do whatever it is he wants to do to me. Archer takes a step closer, towering over me and making me feel even shorter than I already am.

“I apologize, Daniella. I should not have said those things.”

“But you mean them, right?” I don’t know why I’m hung up on what he said. Maybe because it makes me feel powerful knowing I have that kind of impact on him.

“I do, but I should’ve kept them to myself.”

I reach out and place a hand on his chest. His peck flexes under his charcoal vest. I’m going to kick myself for what I’m about to ask but I really, *really* need to know. “What kind of dirty things do you want to do to me?”

I look up at him, his ice blue eyes darken with heat. Archer takes another step forward, crowding me until my legs hit the couch and I’m forced to sit. He positions his body over mine, resting his hands on the back of the couch and dropping his forehead on mine.

“That’s something I’m not comfortable talking about with you.” He answers.

“Why?”

His eyes close and he sucks in a sharp breath. “Because I want to *show* you. Not tell you.”

My whole-body flushes, it feels like someone set me on fire. I tilt my chin just enough that I can feel his breath on my lips.

“Kiss me.” I breathe.

Archer moves, dropping to his knees in front of me and pressing his lips against mine. His arm wrap around my waist, and I’m hauled against his hard chest, my body melting against his. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I open my mouth and invite his tongue in. Sitting up straighter, I press my chest to his and a low rumble comes from his throat. His other hand moves up my bare thigh and under my skirt setting my skin ablaze.

I could do this for hours. His taste is exhilarating. I break the kiss and pull back, placing my hands on his chest before it escalates further.

“Luke,” I breath his name and lick my swollen lips.

He shakes his head and straightens, holding his hand out to me. I take it and stand, straightening my skirt before following him over to his desk and cleaning up the papers. Archer sits behind his desk as I organize it for him. I take his mug and refill it, placing it in front of him.

“Will that be everything, Mr. Archer?” I ask, hand on the doorknob.

“Yes, Daniella.”

I nod once and step out, shutting the door behind me.

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"For the love, Mason. Just make yourself a sandwich." I rub my forehead.

"With what?" Mason grunts.

I curse my son under my breath. "Are you kidding me? Nanny has a fridge full of lunch meats, lettuce, cheese, and tomatoes. Make something."

"Can't you come over and do it?" he whines.

"Goodbye, Mason." I hang up and rub my temples.

It's only one-thirty in the afternoon and he has called me eighteen times for some of the stupidest shit. This one being the dumbest. It's as if Mom leaving him alone for the day has messed with his brain and he can't function without her.

I spin myself in my chair. Archer hasn't asked me to do anything for him yet, and I'm bored as hell. We sort of talked about his little slip up with the whole hand-in-the-panties-do-dirty-things-to-me situation. However, he has yet to leave his office. My desk phone rings.

"Lucas Archer's office."

"You have a visitor," Carrie sings into the phone.

"Who?" I glance towards the front of the office, but I don't see anyone I know.

"No idea. She refuses to give me her name."

*She?*

"I'll be right there." I hang up and head towards Carrie's desk. Maybe it's Erin. She has been known to randomly show up at my place of employment. But she would've said her name was Queen kickass or something equally stupid.

Carrie points to the chair across from her desk.

*Son of a bitch.*

"Hello, Helen." I gripe.

Helen rises gracefully, her pantsuit looking crisp. "Daniella. Nice to see you," she says, expressionless.

That's a fucking lie. That crotchety bitch never liked me. Said I seduced her son with my whore body—insert eye roll—when, in fact, he stalked me for months and bugged me everyday until I said yes to a date.

"How did you find me?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

She checks her nails as she speaks. "That is none of your concern." Her eyes are shrewd as she looks down her nose at me. "I must speak with you. It is regarding Joshua."

I don't want to speak about *Joshu-blah*. Unless she is here to hand me a big fat cheque for unpaid child support. Better get this over with so I can continue with my day.

"Follow me," I mutter and head towards the conference room, motioning for her to sit. "What did you want talk about?" I ask.

She sits gracefully. Knees together, ankles crossed and her hands in her lap. "Joshua wants Mason to move in with him."

My stomach drops like a ball of lead and my heart slams against my chest. They want to take my baby. Mustering confidence that I don't have, I say, "that's not happening."

Helen looks at me shocked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Helen. Not. Happening."

She sighs in that condescending way of hers. "He is his father, Daniella. He has the right to have his son in his life."

I bark out a humorless laugh. "I seem to recall both you and John telling me he was someone else's bastard son."

"We said no such thing, Daniella. We have always wanted Mason in our lives."

I roll my eyes.

"However, cutting Mason out of Joshua's life needed to be done for his future," Helen says.

"Oh, yeah. Sure," I nod mockingly, my confidence slowly rising. "For his hockey career. How did that work out?"

Helen's face screws up in anger, making me smile inside. "You know he got hurt before he was drafted to the NHL."

I grunt. "Oh, I heard all about that. From three different people, one being Sean. Your own nephew. Fell out of a tree while piss loaded drunk trying to impress some girls."

Helen scoffs. "He hurt himself at hockey practice."

I laugh. "Is that what he told you?"

Helen leans forward in the chair, ignoring what I just said. "He would be playing for Toronto right now if he didn't blow out his knee."

I laugh again. "He wasn't *that* good, Helen. The only reason Toronto was even looking at him is because the coach is good friends with you and John."

She stands quickly. "Joshua is an amazing left wing. Received a scholarship to play in university and was hand picked by Team Canada to play on the junior team," she steps closer to me. "That wouldn't have happened if he was spending all his time with you and *that* child of yours."

"*That* child. *That* child!" I seethe. "That child is your grandson. Your *only* grandson. And you'll never be seeing him. Ever." Anger rolling under my skin. "Get the fuck out!"

Helen huffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not leaving." She pulls out her phone and taps on the screen a few times before putting it back in her purse.

"I don't give two shits, Helen. Leave."

Helen smirks as Josh walks into the room.

"Dani baby," he says with a slimy smile. "Guess Mom told you I want him to come live me with permanently." He smirks. "You know we have the means to take him from you."

"The only way you're taking *my* baby boy is over my dead fucking body!"

"That can be arranged," Josh says.

"Mason wants nothing to do with you. You were nothing but a sperm donor!" I scream in their faces.

Helen's hand moves and she slaps me across the face.

"How dare you call my son a sperm donor!" Helen fumes as Josh chuckles. "He did nothing but love you and how do you repay him? By getting pregnant." Tears of anger well in her eyes. "You seduced him with your body, and he fell for it. You almost ruined his life." Helen composes herself, tugging on the bottom of her jacket.

"You have a month to give Mason to us or I will report you to the Children's Aid Society for neglect and have them take him from you." Helen says and takes Josh by the arm, slamming the door behind her.

I stand there stunned, my cheek stinging. My hands curl into fists at my sides.

*You have a month to give Mason to us or I will report you to the Children's Aid Society for neglect and have them take him from you.*

I squeeze my eyes shut. Although that doesn't stop the lump swelling in my throat or the burning behind my eyes. My heart hammers in my chest as I back against the wall and slide down, burying my face in my hands as the tears come. A sob hiccups out as a pair of strong arms slides under my legs and behind my back.

"I've got you," comes the deep voice I've gotten used to hearing.

I push back against his chest. "Just leave me here."

Archer doesn't say anything, instead I'm lifted from the ground. I push against his hold but it's no use. Archer's grip on me is too strong. Another sob hiccups out and I curl towards his warm body, letting the tears flow freely as I grip his vest. His hand smooths through my hair as I cry in his arms, until there are no more tears, and I fall into a sob induced sleep.



\*\*\*\*

I wake with a start, bolting upwards. It's dim in Archer's office. I'm on the porn couch, covered in his suit jacket.

"You're awake," Archer says.

I jerk to the left to find Archer walking out of what I now know is a washroom and not a closet like I first thought.

"How long was I out for?"

He looks at his watch. "Five hours."

I jump off the couch. "*Five hours!*"

"Daniella," Archer holds his hands in front of his chest, trying to calm me down.

I scramble out of his office. "Fucking hell Archer, why didn't you wake me earlier? I've probably got you backlogged." I check my emails, finding nothing new from him.

"Daniella," he calls again.

"What are you working on now? Do you need me to proofread anything?" I look up at him through hair that fell into my eyes.

"Sweetheart, stop." He rounds my desk and takes me by the shoulders.

"I'm sorry." I whisper.

"There's nothing to be sorry about." Archer states.

I shake my head. "There's plenty. Sleeping while at work is one. Having Mason's sperm donor and his mother show up is another."

His hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing over the scar on the side of my face.

"There's nothing to be sorry about." He repeats.

"But—"

"Nothing, Daniella."

I stare into those ice blue eyes, not believing that the man who is being so kind, so gentle, is the same man I threatened to staple his dick to his leg a week ago. He has done a complete three-sixty since his case of verbal diarrhea on Monday.

His thumb strokes my cheek again. "Go home, Daniella. Get some rest. I will see you in the morning."

All I do is nod.

Archer drops his hands and makes his way to his office. "Have a good night. Oh, and Daniella,"

I blink and look over at him.

"You look utterly breathtaking today." Archer says and walks back into his office.

Closing the door behind him.

## Satan's Balls

Luke

I decide to close the office today and let everyone work from home. It's forty degrees already and it's only quarter to eight in the morning. I tried having my coffee on the balcony and as soon as I stepped outside, the heat sucked the air from my lungs and the humidity hasn't even hit yet.

After Dani's breakdown yesterday, I don't want her to feel uncomfortable in the office. I was questioned by Carrie for hours and Mark and Jim had asked if she was alright. They had heard everything.

Plus, I might have something planned for later. It could very well blow up in my face, but hey, why not take a chance.

*You're doing it again. She's going to break your heart,* that voice states.

*She's yours, show her who she belongs to,* that other voice pipes up.

I don't care what that first voice says, I'm hooked on Dani, and I want her to know it.

I just poured my second cup of coffee when my cell rings. "Yeah?"

"Daaaaaaaaaaamn Archer—" Dani announces.

"I'm buzzing you in," I hit nine to open the main door.

The knock comes moments later. I check myself out in the toaster—loser—and answer the door.

Dani whistles as she enters. She looks wonderful. Her hair is in a ponytail that's swinging down her back. Her face is free of makeup, and she's wearing an oversized tank top and jean shorts. Her skin's flushed pink from the heat.

"It's as hot as Satan's balls out there," Dani pants and wipes her forehead as she kicks the door shut behind her. "I've got boob sweat and I drove here." She drops her purse on the counter in the kitchen and wanders around my sub-penthouse. I can't pull my eyes away from her legs.

They are spectacular. Thick thighs to dig your fingers into. Shapely calves to kiss down. Perfection.

"Nice place, Archer." Dani compliments.

"Thank you."

She walks over to the floor to ceiling windows and moves the curtain. Dani gasps. "Oh wow," she breathes. "The view from here is amazing."

*The view from where I'm standing is pretty incredible too.*

She presses her face against the glass. Her breath fogging up the window. "It's a better view than what I have. All I can see out my living room window are my neighbours."

I chuckle. "I'm sure it's a nice view."

Dani barks out a laugh. "Sure. If you have a thing for ninety-year-old ladies who don't believe in curtains, or bras," she glances over her shoulder at me, eyebrows raised.

"I do not," I reply.

Dani turns back to the window. Her natural beauty is something to behold. Her fair skin reflexes the sunlight softly, giving her an otherworldly glow. She's an angel. A stunningly beautiful angel with a no bullshit attitude.

*This is going to go tits up,* that voice warns.

"Shall we get to work," I say and motion towards my home office.

"Snazzy," Dani remarks as she brushes past me and into the office.

"There is not much room in here. The desk takes up most of the space. I hope you're okay with that." I query.

Dani sits in my desk chair and spins herself around. "As long as you're wearing deodorant, I'm cool," she gives me a once over. "Look at you, Archer. I didn't think you owned anything but suits." Dani smiles up at me.

I pull over another chair and sit behind my desktop, handing her my laptop. "I have a dresser full of clothes that aren't suits." I respond.

"Can I see?"

"No, you cannot see."

"You know I'm going to go snooping when I'm bored," Dani smiles brightly.

"Guess I'll have to stay on top of you." I wink and Dani flushes.

I log into my computer and do the same for Dani on the laptop. "Would you like to listen to some music?" I ask.

"As long as it's not that easy listening shit you have playing at the office." Dani answers with a smile.

"It's not the office music. *I* don't even like it. However, playing my music at work would not be appropriate." I open Spotify on my phone.

Guitar riffs come through the Bluetooth speakers all over my condo, as Pantera's Cowboys From Hell begins to play. Dani stares at me wide eyed, her mouth hanging open. I reach over and shut it with a smirk. She blinks a few times, then slaps my arm.

"Ha, ha. Very funny, Archer. You got me. You can put on what you *actually* listen to."

"This is what I listen to," I lean closer. "What were you expecting?"

"Classical, or country." Dani answers. "I didn't take you for a heavy metal fan."

"Heavy metal, rock, punk. I listen to it all."

Dani snorts out a laugh. "You're just full of surprises, Archer."

I smirk, reaching into my bag. I grab the papers I worked on yesterday and hand them over.

"Proof, type, print." I state.

Dani salutes me. "Yes sir."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I'm starving," Dani complains, and pulls my attention away from the proposal I am in the middle of writing.

"You got food in this place?" Dani asks as she stretches, making these strange sounds as she cracks her back over the chair.

"I do," I remark.

"Good. I'll make us lunch."

I hold up a hand. "No, *I'll* make us lunch."

I stand as Dani blinks up at me. "You can cook?"

"Yes. And very well too." I walk into the kitchen and dig through the fridge. Pulling out what I need to make a couple of club sandwiches. I'll be cooking later tonight.

"Do you have any allergies, Daniella?"

"Nope!" she yells from the office.

I put the sandwiches together and plate them. "Drink?" I ask.

"Whatcha got?"

"Water, Pepsi, beer, milk, wine." I list off.

"Surprise me." She replies.

I grab two Coors and the plates and walk back into the office. Yes, Dani is on the clock but I'm going easy on her today. I want her to be comfortable.

"Thanks Archer," Dani says as I place the food and beer in front of her. "You're a regular Sally homemaker." She winks as she takes a bite.

We eat in silence. Well, Dani eats. I sit there like an idiot and watch her. She has the sandwich in one hand and is typing with the other. She has a blob of mayonnaise on the corner of her lip, and I act without thinking. Using my thumb, I brush it off her mouth. Her head whips in my direction.

"Mayo," I hold up my thumb.

Dani leans over and sucks my thumb into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the tip.

*She has got you now. You're under her spell until she's done with you,* that voice scolds.

*She's yours now,* that other voice says.

These voices are going to drive me mad.

"Thanks." She smiles and goes back to work.

I, on the other hand, stand quickly and head into the bathroom. I plant my hands on my hips and drop my chin to my chest.

*Why did she have to walk into my office?*

I was doing just fine until Dani came into my life. Now I cannot control myself around her. I constantly start arguments with her because she looks so cute when she's mad. I give her more work than I should, so I can spend more time with her alone. My nights are filled with dreams of her.

"Fuck me."

I've got it bad for Dani.

## Pulling The Pork

Dani

That was mean of me but I couldn't help myself. Archer just looks so drool worthy in his nylon shorts and tank top that is molded to his fantastic chest. That beautiful tattoo on full display. And now he has been in the bathroom for the past fifteen minutes.

I finish off my sandwich and wheel the chair over to the bathroom door, knocking twice.

"Yeah?" Archer answers.

"You fall in?"

The toilet flushes, water turns on then the door opens, and Archer looks down at me. He totally jerked it in there. His face flushed, and he has a fine sheen of sweat above his lip. And he can't play it off as it being hot in here. I need a damn sweater. His AC is pumping out air that belongs in the Arctic.

"Hey hey buddy. You okay?"

"Daniella," he warns.

"Archer," I mimic.

He raises an eyebrow as his lip tips up slightly.

"Were you jerking it in there?" I ask.

"No."

I give him a knowing grin. "Liar. I have a teenage son who thinks I don't know what he's doing in the shower for forty-five minutes."

Archer starts laughing and my stomach sinks. It's a rich sound that has me tingling all over. And I should not be tingling right now.

"I wasn't pulling the pork in there." He states.

I start laughing. "*Pulling the pork!*" I lean over the side of the chair. "*Archer!*" I scream, tears running down my cheeks from laughing.

Straightening, I wipe under my eyes and take a few deep breathes to calm down. "Dear Christ. I haven't heard that term used since highschool. That was good," I sigh with a giggle. "Pulling the pork."

Archer is standing in the bathroom doorway with this goofy look on his face.

"What?" I ask.

"Are you free for dinner tonight?"

I narrow my eyes. "Are you asking me on a date?"

"No, I'm asking you if you'd like to stay for dinner." He answers easily.

My brows creep up my forehead. "How is that different than a date?"

He grabs the back of the chair and pushes me over to the desk. "It just is."

He sits in his chair, and I spin to face him. His eyes are concentrating on what's on his screen.

"Yes," I say after a few minutes.

Archer looks over. "Yes what?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, I'm free for this non-dinner date."

He turns back to his computer. "Good."

\*\*\*\*

Around eight, Archer starts supper. I wait until he's busy in the kitchen before I swipe my phone off the desk and run into the bathroom. I pull up Erin's number and hit the call button.

"Hel—"

"Archer asked me to stay for dinner!" I whisper yell.

"He asked you to dinner!" Erin squeals.

"Yeah, and he's cooking."

Erin squeals again. "Tell me *everything*!"

I give Erin a rundown of the day, from what he's wearing, to what I did with his thumb and his invite for dinner.

"I'm so excited! You going to let him in your pants?"

I groan. "Would you stop with that," I grin to myself. "And maybe."

Erin screams into the phone.

"*What!* What happened? Is my Doll okay?" I hear Jake yell.

"Dani's fine. She's going to fuck her boss!" Erin screams.

"*I never said that, Erin!*" I scream.

"You said maybe. Maybe means yes." Erin explains.

A throat clears behind me, and I turn slowly, coming face to chest with my hot boss. I lift my eyes slowly, my face burning.

"I'll call you back." Erin's still talking as I hang up. He hands over a bottle of beer. "Thanks." I whisper.

Erin is extremely loud when she's excited, and I have a sneaking suspicion Archer heard most, if not all, of that conversation.

He nods and turns. "Oh, and Daniella,"

I look over at him.

"Nine times out of ten, maybe means yes," he smirks, flashing one dimple, and leaves.

"Oh God." I sink onto the floor as I down my beer. This is going to be the most awkward non-dinner date ever.

\*\*\*\*\*

I sit in the bathroom until the sweet smell of chicken parmesan makes its way into the room. I walk into the office and peek out the door. Archer is standing at the counter, putting a salad together. He looks relaxed and content in the kitchen. His knife kissing the cutting board. The ropes of muscles in his forearm flex with every chop and suddenly I find cooking extremely sexy.

"You can sit at the island, Daniella." Archer says.

I jump and step out. "How did you know I was standing there?"

"Your perfume."

My brows furrow in confusion. "It's not even that strong." I mumble and make my way over to the island, hopping up on the stool. I watch as he moves around the kitchen. Stirring the pasta, checking on the chicken and grabbing two beers from the fridge. He opens one and hands it to me.

"Thanks. Who taught you how to cook?" I ask.

"My Mother. She said every man should know how to cook, clean, do laundry and treat a lady like a queen." Archer answers.

I take a drink. "I tried teaching Mason to cook. He got bored halfway through. I was showing him how to make minute rice." I snort.

Archer chuckles as he scrapes the carrots into the bowl.

"Do you need help?" I question.

"I'm good. Relax. Let me cook for you." Archer replies.

My cheeks heat and I take another drink. He keeps this up and he could very well be getting into my pants.

The timer goes off and Archer grabs the chicken out of the oven before draining the pasta and adding it to the sauce along with the chicken covered in parmesan cheese. He packs everything up and adds it to the basket.

“Shall we?” he grabs his keys and opens the door.

I stare at him confused. “Uh, where are we going?”

Archer glances down at me and grins. “You’ll see.”

I step out and the elevator door opens, and we step in. When the doors open again, my breath catches in my throat.

“Oh. Wow.” I breathe.

I step off the elevator and stroll over to one of the tables. There are fairy lights hanging over a canopy, the table is set, and there’s a vase with roses and candles sitting in the middle.

I turn to Archer. “You did all this,” I wave a hand at the table, “for me?”

Archer places his free hand on my lower back. “I did,” he says. He leads me over to the table, placing the basket down and pulling out my chair.

“It’s beautiful. But why?” I sit and wait as Archer pulls the food out of the basket.

“After yesterday, I thought you deserved something wonderful.” He plates my food and opens my beer before he sits and gets his own.

I blink quickly, forcing the tears of gratitude back. “Thank you, Luke.”

He looks up and smiles. “You’re welcome, Dani.”

# I Took It Off

Dani

My God, Archer. That was fucking orgasmic.” I wipe my mouth with the napkin he placed on my lap before we started eating.

Archer chuckles as he cleans up. “I’ve never had anyone say my food was orgasmic.”

“Then they’re stupid.” I finish off my beer and pop the top of another one. I should slow down on the alcohol, since I’m driving home later but it has been nice to sit with Archer and not fight.

“I don’t cook for many people. Mostly Gabe.”

“See? Stupid.”

Archer chuckles and opens his own beer. I look across the rooftop. The city is lit up and I can see the CN Tower from where we are.

“This view is stunning,” I sigh blissfully.

“Not as stunning as the view I have.”

My eyes snap to Archer’s. My chest tightens as what he said sinks in. “Are you flirting with me?” “Yes.”

Well, that’s straight to the point. “I’m blaming the beer.” I grin but Archer doesn’t, however.

“This has nothing to do with the beer,” he admits.

Fuck me in the backseat of your car. Archer just might get lucky.

He reaches across the table and moves a piece of hair out of my eyes. “You’re fucking stunning, Dani and I’m absolutely floored every time I lay eyes on you.”

I flush from my hair to my feet. I don’t take compliments very well.

“Th—thanks.” I stammer.

His fingers snag my chin, and his thumb brushes my bottom lip. I nip the tip of his thumb and earn a growl. Archer presses it against my lips and I suck it into my mouth.

“I want to kiss you,” Archer confesses, removing his thumb. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about since the elevator incident.”

“Me too.” I admit.

He smiles and leans across the table. His lips brush mine. Once then twice, and I find myself leaning into the kiss. Archer pulls away and I whimper. He stands and rounds the table, holding out his hand and I take it without thinking. I’m pulled me to my feet, his large arm wraps around my waist, holding me flush with his hard chest. His mouth meets mine again and this time he doesn’t hold back.

Archer dives in with his tongue, deepening the kiss from the get-go. I hold onto his waist, pressing myself closer to him. This is the king of kisses. The passion, the hunger.

My toes curl as his hand wraps in my hair, holding me to him. I savour the taste of him, the smell of him. It’s an assault on the senses and it sends me into a spiral. His mouth goes on the move, across my cheek and down my neck. I tilt my head to give him more room to explore.

When his lips grazes the welt on my neck, I move my hands up his ribs and over his chest, pushing back a little. “I really should get going,” I whisper.

“You could stay.” He mutters, running his fingers down my cheek.

“I can’t.” Although I very much want to.

Archer moves my hair away from my face. “I’ll drive you home.”

“Oh, no. I can’t ask you to do that. I’ll call Erin. Or walk.”

“If you won’t let me drive you, I’ll walk you home.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Archer silences me with a soft kiss.



“Do not fight me on this, Sweetheart.” He says against my lips before breaking us apart and collecting the basket.

Okay, he needs to stop this or I’m going to fall in love with him. Archer hit the button for his floor. “I’ll make sure your car is at your home by the morning.”

Archer places the basket on the counter. “Give me a moment.” He walks into the other room and comes out wearing a baseball hat. Which knocks his sexiness into the thousands.

*Is there anything this guy can’t wear.*

The walk to my house is a quiet one. Archer makes sure that I’m always walking on the inside of him. His hand lands on my lower back periodically whenever we’re crossing the street.

My house is dark when we arrive. Probably should have left a light on but I didn’t expect to stay out this late.

“Thank you for dinner,” I say as I search my purse for my keys.

“You are very welcome. It was nice having someone to cook for besides my brother.”

“Oh, I’m sure he makes the perfect dinner date,” I say sarcastically.

Archer grunts. “Gabe eats the food as I’m cooking, leaving almost nothing to plate. Worst dinner date ever.”

I snort out a laugh. “Sounds like Mason.” I shove my key in the door, not knowing how to end the night.

Archer takes my face in his hands; his thumbs stroking my cheeks, over the scar—always over the scar—before he kisses me softly. The kiss has me asking him inside.

Almost.

“Oh, gross! *Ma!*”

I jump back from Archer and find Mason walking up the walkway, his duffle bag hanging at his side.

“The neighbours can see you.” He gags as he comes to a stop next to me.

Mason sizes up Archer. “Who’s this?”

“None of your business. Get in the house.” I hiss.

“Not until you introduce me to the man who was trying to eat your face.”

I close my eyes. If this is what it’s like to have a brother, I’m so happy I’m an only child. “Mason, this is Luke. Luke, my son Mason.” I introduce them.

Archer extends his hand. Mason looks at it like it might detach from Archer’s arm and attack him.

“You bangin’ Ma?” Mason asks, crossing his arms and making himself look bigger than he really is.

Archer drops his hand. “No.”

“Then what do you want with my mother?”

I push my way between them, shutting this down before it gets worse. “Mason, house. Now.”

Mason stares at Archer as he unlocks the door and walks in.

I turn to Archer. “I’m so sorry. He’s a tad bit protective.”

“I see that.”

I pat his chest and back up until my back hits the door. “I’ll ah, I’ll see you Monday.” I rush inside before Archer answers and watch him walk down the street from the slim window next to the door.

“Mason Christopher! You get your ass down here!” I stand at the bottom of the stairs and wait as Mason marches down. Stopping on the second to last step.

“What is wrong with you? Why would you think it’s appropriate to speak like that?” I demand.

“I have the right to know who’s bangin’ you.” Mason shrugs.

“One: it is *none* of your business who I am sleeping with, and two: if you ever act like that again, you’ll be moving in with Nanny and Papa for the rest of the summer. You feel me?”

“So, he *is* bangin’ you.” Mason sucks his teeth.

“No, he’s not. He is the guy who is keeping a roof over your head, clothes on your back and food in your stomach.”

Mason steps down the stairs. “That’s your boss?”

“Yeah.”

He rubs his face, his hands scratching against his stubble. “Sorry Ma. I thought he was some random trying to get in your pants.” Mason apologises.

“Next time think before you speak. Now, get upstairs. It’s bedtime.”

\*\*\*\*

I’m going to duct tape Mason’s clothes on his body. Usually, he leaves them on his bedroom floor but this morning, I found his shirt on *my* bathroom floor.

“*Mason!*” I yell, “why is your shirt on the bathroom floor? I almost decapitated myself on the counter when I slipped on it.”

“I took it off.”

“Why? And what were you doing in my bathroom?” I question, walking to the top of the stairs with his shirt in my hand.

“I do it when I take a shit,” Mason answers. “And my bathroom is out of toilet paper.”

“Why the hell do you do that for?” I shake the shirt at him. “And there’s toilet paper under your sink.”

Mason stands at the bottom of the stairs in only his shorts. “In case I get explosive diarrhea,” he answers, clapping his hands for the shirt. “I didn’t see any under there.”

I swear, if I go in there and find some under the sink, I am going to be so mad.

“You take your shirt off in case you get...explosive diarrhea.” I repeat when it registers what he just said. Do all men do this? I’ll have to ask Jake. I walk down the stairs and hand him his shirt.

“Yeah. I don’t want to get any on it.” He says, slipping his shirt over his head and walking away.

“How would it get on your shirt?” I probe, following him into the kitchen.

He shrugs one large shoulder. “No clue. But better to be safe than sorry.” Mason states, grabbing the milk jug and chugging from it. I grab a cup from the cupboard.

“Cup, Mason,” I shove it into his hand. He pours a huge glass and strolls out of the kitchen as if this conversation never happened.

And I kind of wish it didn’t.

## Among Other Things

Luke

It has been almost two weeks since I kissed Dani and if I'm being honest, I wish I hadn't. Now it's all I think about. I can't be around her without remembering what her lips felt like against mine. Which is making getting any work finished extremely hard.

*Among other things.*

I call her into my office.

"Whatcha want?" Dani asks as she leans into my office. Her pastel pink shirt opening just enough to give me a view of her cleavage.

*I have got to stop looking at her chest.*

"I just got off the phone with Joni. We have a situation."

Dani groans and walks in, flopping down on the couch. The slit in her skirt opens and flashes the creamy skin on her thigh and the scar that runs down to her knee.

"What kind of situation?" she asks.

"Pregnancy."

"Joni's?"

"Nope." I answer.

Dani grunts and sits up. "Let me guess, long nights ahead."

I nod. "Plus, weekends."

Dani cries sarcastically. "But I have a life, *Daddy*."

"You can call me Daddy anytime," I say with a smirk.

"Give me a reason and I'll call you Daddy all you want." She smiles at me, and I return it just to watch her face transform at the sight of my dimples. She's in such awe of those two indentations.

"Guess I have no choice, but I'm not going to be happy about it." Dani sulks.

"Duly noted." I hand over Joni's new file. "You know the drill."

Dani stands and drags herself over to the desk, latching onto the file folder and tugging on it. "Archer, let go."

I haul her over the desk and meet her halfway, planting a kiss on her plump lips, and I'm rewarded with a whimper. When I pull back, her eyes are closed, and her lips are parted. So, I kiss her again, and again, and once more.

"You keep this up and nothing is going to get done." Dani mutters against my lips.

"I'm not against that." I growl.

She grins as she pulls away and this time I let go of the thick folder.

"Proof, type and print," I say.

"Yes sir, Mr. Archer," Dani says in that breathy voice I love so much.

She turns on her heels and sways her hips out the door.

\*\*\*\*

Dani comes back in two and a half hours later. Her hair no longer hanging loose over her shoulders. It is now tied in a top knot, held in place with pens and she looks like she's ready to strangle someone.

Dani tosses the folder on my desk. "I'm done."

I raise a brow. "You're done?"

"Yeah. I'm done with this job. I'm done with this case. I'm just done." She states.

I straighten and round the desk. "And why are you done?" I inquire, taking her chin between my fingers and tilt her head back, forcing her to look at me.

"It's too much, Archer. I can't..." she shakes her head.

"Can't what, Sweetheart?" I step closer.

"I can't do this. My typing skills are shit, I scribe in shorthand that only I understand, and half the time I can't remember what most of it is," Dani takes a deep breath. "And even though things have been better between us since our non-dinner date, it's too much work."

I bend down to meet her eyes. "Daniella," I rub my thumb over her bottom lip, "if I didn't think you could manage it, I wouldn't have hired you."

"I thought you hired me because you thought I was cute."

I kiss the tip of her nose. "That's just a bonus."

Dani closes her eyes, blocking my view of those amazing turquoise pools. Taking a breath, she meets my gaze again. "Okay. But you're going to have to understand something. It's going to take me time to get things done. This is the biggest case you have given me, and I don't have the right skills to finish it in a day."

I caress her cheeks with my thumbs. "Noted."

Dani places her hands on my waist and steps closer. I'm not sure who moved first, but our lips meet again in the most exquisite kiss I've shared with her. Her tiny moans of pleasure shoot a burst of desire through me. I back her up until she's flush with the door.

"Luke," she gasps as my lips slide across her jaw and down her neck.

A knock on the door stops my progress. "Yeah?" I growl against her skin.

"You're one-thirty is here, and I can't find Dani," Carrie says.

*Damn it.*

"Give me a minute, and Daniella is in here with me." I answer.

"Whooooooooo." Carrie hoots.

"Shut it, CeCe."

Carrie's laugh bleeds through the door as she walks away. I lower my forehead against Dani's.

"I should get back to work," she whispers.

I clear my throat. "Yeah." I back up so Dani can fix her clothes and I can adjust myself.

"Anything else, Mr. Archer?"

Fuck, I love when she says that. "No, Daniella."

She dips her chin and opens the door, calling over my one-thirty. Five o'clock can't come fast enough.

\*\*\*\*

The peace Dani and I had was short lived. It's quarter to one in the morning, and we've been at each others' throats for hours.

"Archer, I swear to whoever is listening, I'm going to cut you into tiny pieces and feed you to my neighbours Boxer." Dani threatens.

"You mean it? Truly?" I bark back.

Dani jumps up from her spot behind my computer. "You better fucking believe it. You're getting on my last damn nerve."

I turn to face her. "And how, prey tell, am I getting on your nerves?" I demand. I lean my knuckles on the desk, cracking them in the process.

Dani barks out a laugh and rounds the desk. I straighten as she closes in.

"How? *How?*" she jabs me hard in the chest with her finger. "I told you hours ago that this was going to take time and what have you been saying for the past three hours?" she raises a brow. "*Hurry the fuck up Daniella!*" Dani pushes past me and drops onto the couch.

I drag a hand through my hair. I have been pestering her. "Fuck."

"Language," Dani mutters.

My eyes meet hers. "F.U.C.K." I spell out the word and Dani's lip tips up.

"That's a naughty word, Archer." Her eyes lower and she glances over at me from under her lashes.

"It is a naughty word, Sweetheart." I drag my teeth over my bottom lip and stalk towards the couch. "A naughty word describing what I want to do to you." I drop to my knees in front of her, running my hands up her thighs.

"Archer," Dani warns, her cheeks pink with arousal, but I ignore it and move closer.

"Daniella," I retort. "Tell me you don't want that."

She looks away, biting her lip. I give her thick thighs a squeeze, making her jump.

"Tell me you don't want me to bend you over this couch and fuck your pussy until you can't walk." I lean closer, our lips just inches apart.

"I want that," she breathes. "But I'm still mad at you." Dani shoves my hands away.

I stand and give her my hand. She slips her small one into mine and I help her off the couch.

"I'm sorry, Sweetheart. Let's call it a night and start fresh tomorrow." I brush her hair back from her face.

*You're turning into a pushover*, that voice reprimands.

*You're turning into her comfort*, that other voice praises.

"Good idea," Dani agrees, grabs her purse, and runs out the door without another word.

"Fuck!" I shout into the empty office.

"Language!"

I spin to find Dani standing in the doorway. "I told you to go home."

She steps in. "I forgot something." Raising on her tiptoes, she kisses me deeply, pulling a groan from my throat. "Goodnight, Dimples." Dani speaks against my lips before rushing the main door.

This woman has me turned inside out.

## It's Garbage

Dani

*Daniella!* Archer roars.

*"What!"* I scream back.

*"Get in here!"*

I look towards Carrie's desk and strangle myself for the eighteenth time this hour. I am tired and bitchy from lack of sleep. Carrie giggles as I kick my chair back, which hits the printer and march my ass into his office.

*"What now!"* I fume.

*"What is this mess?"* Archer shakes the papers I just printed out.

*"What the hell are you talking about?"* I attempt to snatch the papers but he won't stop waving them around.

*"This! It makes no sense."*

I grab the papers and read them over. *"I typed up what you asked me to. What's the problem?"* I throw them back.

*"It's garbage!"* Archer crumples them into a ball and tosses them.

*"How?"*

*"It's not what I wrote,"* Archer barks.

*"Not what you wrote!"* I yell. I go to my desk and grab the original. I slam it on the desk and fish the one I typed out of the trash. *"See! The exact same."*

Archer grabs both and shoves them in the shredder. *"Finish the rest."*

I take a deep breath through my nose. *"Fine."* I force through my clenched teeth. I march out and slam the door behind me, knocking something off the wall.

*"Fuck!"* Archer roars.

*"Language!"* I holler back.

I flop in my chair and drop my head in my hands. This case is turning Archer into a stressed-out beast. His demands are getting more ridiculous by the minute. I thought everything was going to get better after our non-dinner date. Sneaking kisses and time alone. Treating me like a human and not a pile of shit. But after last night and this morning, our peace has ended.

*"Daniella!"* Archer howls.

I look over at Carrie again. *"Help me,"* I mouth. Picking up the phone receiver, I call into his office.

*"Get in here."* He barks.

*"That's not happening."*

*"In here! Now!"* he slams the receiver down in my ear.

I stay right where I am. I'm finished with this day and with his fucking temper and it's not even noon. The office door whips open, and Archer marches out.

*"Office. Now."* He growls.

*"No."* I reply.

*"No?"*

I lean back in my chair. *"Nnnnnnnnnnnnooo."*

He rounds my desk and grabs the back of my chair. He wheels me into his office and slams the door, locking it.

*"What's up your ass?"* I question as he squats in front of me.

"Daniella, I am seconds away from firing your ass and hiring one of the bimbos that worked at the mayor's office."

I snort out a laugh. "Yeah, since they would be *so* much better."

Archer narrows his eyes at me. "Daniella."

I grind my teeth. "Whatever. Just give me the new copy so I can get it typed up."

Archer leans forward. His hands are gripping the arms of the chair hard enough that they start to creak. "You are trying my patience, Ms. Carter."

I lean in, my nose brushing his. "And you, Mr. Archer, are driving me insane." I hiss.

His eyes darken as his eyes move to my mouth. I push the chair away with my feet. If he thinks he can just kiss this away, he has got another thing coming. But God, his kisses are the sweetest tasting thing.

"Give me the new copy, Archer," I hold out my hand and wait.

Archer pulls the chair back in front of him. "I'm not playing, Sweetheart."

My heart jumps at the endearment. "Neither am I, Dimples."

His eyes flash with heat. I wiggle my fingers at him. Archer grunts as he stands and slaps the papers in my hand.

"Thank you." I roll myself over to the door, unlocking it and wheeling myself out.

I find Carrie's waiting at my desk with a smirk on her pretty face. "You have a visitor." Carrie sings.

I groan. "Please tell me it's not Helen."

"Nope. This one is very handsome," she points over to her desk.

"Bubba?" I call as I stand.

He raises his hand as he walks over. "Hey, Ma."

"That's your son?" Carrie does a double take. "Okay, one: sorry I called your son handsome. And two: how did he, come out of there?" she points to Mason then to my vagina.

I slap her hand away. "He is very handsome, and I had a caesarean. He was only six pounds when he was born." I meet Mason halfway and he surprises me when he hugs me. "What are you doing here, Bubba?"

"Meeting Spencer at Union and I have time to kill. Did you want to get lunch?"

Oh God. I think I'm going to cry. "You want to have lunch? With me? In public?" my voice comes out as a squeak.

Mason rolls his eyes. "Not if you're going to cry."

I wrap my arms around him again. "I'm totally going to cry." I shake him a little and get a sigh.

I turn to Carrie. "This is my very handsome son, Mason. Mason, this is Carrie."

Mason grins. "Hey—" he clears his throat. "Hi."

Carrie beams and extends her hand. "Hey, nice to meet you. You look just like your mom," Carrie says.

Mason takes her hand and smiles as he rolls his eyes. "That's what every teenage boy wants to hear," he mutters.

I snort, grabbing my purse and open Archer's door. "I'm going to lunch—"

"Like hell you are."

"—with Mason." I raise a brow, daring him to tell me no again.

"You have an hour."

*That's what I thought.*

I shut his door and skip over to Mason.

"Ma, come on." He nods towards Carrie.

My baby boy is embarrassed of me. Parenting win. I smile up at him and slip my arm around his.

"Come on, Bubba. I have an hour."





## Damnit!

Dani

Archer called me thirty-seven times while I was out. He couldn't even let me have a peaceful lunch with my son. Which doesn't happen often.

"He's fuming," Carrie mentions as I walk in, leaving a doggie bag of wings at her desk.

"Lucky me." I mumble as I squeeze out my hair. It started raining when Mason and I left the restaurant.

I go straight to his office and walk in. Stopping dead when I catch sight of him. Archer's pacing around his desk, phone in one hand, the other balled into a fist at his side.

"I understand that. However, with the evidence Mrs. Dobson has given me—yes. Okay, well...uh huh."

I start backing out when his head snaps up and his body turns slowly towards mine. It's like something out of the movies. Like he can smell me or something.

His eyes roam over my wet hair and clothes before motioning for me to close the door. The moment I do; he prowls towards me. Backing me into the door, pressing his warm, hard body against mine and bringing his face to my hair. Which, I must say, is weird.

"Okay. Okay, I see...yes...yes. Thank you." He hangs up and chucks his phone across the room. It hits the wall and shatters into pieces.

"Ah, who was that?" I ask as his head finds the spot between my neck and shoulder and his large hands drop to my hips.

"Doug's new lawyer," he mumbles into my skin.

I wrap my arms around his waist. "And?"

"It's John Whitlock."

"Fucking shit."

"Language, Sweetheart."

I grin. "So, are you going to change your game plan?"

"Big time." The bass in his voice rumbles against my skin.

"And what does this new plan entail?"

Archer moves so we're facing each other. "You."

I point to my chest. "Me?"

"Yes."

"How am I the plan?" I probe.

His lips meet mine in the briefest of kisses. "I need you to come to court with me."

I lean back. "And do what? Cheer for you? Cheerleader outfits do not work on this body."

Archer groans and closes the gap between us again. "Why did you have to put that image in my head." His fingers flex on my hips.

"Add it to your spank bank," I tell him.

"Already done, but no. I don't need you to cheer for me." He drops his forehead to mine.

"Then why do you need me there?" I'm not fully understanding where his train of thought is headed.

"You'll throw John off his game."

I push him back and slip under his arm. "I'm gonna to pass on that."

Archer turns from the door. "Are you serious? This is a make-or-break case for me."

"That's a 'you' problem, not a 'me' problem. I am not going to allow you to use me to win a case."

Archer throws up his hands. "Fine. Remember that when they take you to court for custody of Mason. I will not allow you to use me to win that case."

I balk at his words. "Don't you *dare* bring Mason into this."

Archer crosses his arms over his chest. "Do I look as if I care."

Oh, he's going to care when I stab him in the trachea with a pen. I grind my teeth together to keep my tongue from saying what I really want to say. "Fuck you." I say instead and push past him. I start packing up my things.

"What do you think you're doing?" Archer says from the doorway.

"Quitting." I answer.

"Fine." He says, slamming the door to his office.

\*\*\*\*

The doorbell rings at nine-thirty. I don't bother getting up. Whoever it is can kiss my ass. I've already had Carrie call me multiple times since I left, leaving a dozen messages on my voicemail. Which I deleted. Probably should've at least listened to them or sent her a text. I like that girl. It's not her fault that her cousin is a fucking dickhead.

The doorbell rings again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

"Ugh!" I force myself off the couch and over to the door. "Axe, I swear to God, if this is you being an ass, I'm drowning you in the toilet." I open the door, but it isn't Axe standing on the other side of the door.

"Archer?" I look past him but don't see his truck. "Did you walk here?"

"I did." He answers.

"In the rain?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I had a lot to think about." His eyes rake over my body, making me shiver.

I should leave him out there, but he looks so pathetic. Standing there soaking wet, with his hair plastered to his forehead and his shirt stuck to his...very, hard, chest.

*Damn it!*

I move aside and let him in. "Kitchen. I'll get you something dry to wear."

I hurry up the stairs and rummage around Mason's room. I grab a pair of gray sweatpants—because that's all he seems to have—and a random shirt. "Here. There's a washroom you can use over there." I point to the door off the living room.

"Thank you," he says.

I wait until Archer shuts the door and dump myself into a chair. Nine-thirty at night and he decides to make house calls.

Archer walks out moments later, and I mentally kick myself for lending him Mason's clothes. The shirt has attached itself to his chest. I can see every ridge of his muscles as clear as day, and those gray sweatpants leave nothing to the imagination.

*Note to self: buy Mason darker sweatpants.*

Standing, I stick my hand out. "Gimme."

Archer hands over his wet clothes and I shove them in the dryer, hitting the thirty-minute button. "They'll be wrinkled but dry. You have half an hour."

Archer nods as I sit back down at the table. I wave a hand at the other chair. "Sit. You're making me uneasy."

Archer does just that, clasping his hands and resting them on the table.

"Why are you here, Archer?"

"To apologise."

"Uh-huh. And you didn't think a simple phone call would suffice?" I ask.

He runs a hand through his hair and a whimper escapes my throat.

*Double damnit!*

"Carrie said you weren't answering your phone," he runs his hand through his hair again.

I lean back and grab him a dish towel off the over door. "It's clean." I toss it to him.

"Thanks." Archer dries his hair, causing it to stick up every which way. "I apologise, Daniella." He exhales. "This case is stressing me out and I should have never asked you to play pawn or said those things about Mason." Archer tosses the towel on the table.

He stares at me. Those ice blue eyes pleading with me to forgive him. I look past him. I know if I keep looking, I'll fall and never get back up.

"Is there something you wanted to ask me, Archer?" I question.

He takes my hand in his. "Come back," he flips my hand over and kisses my palm, over the scar. "Please."

I let loose a long breath. "On one condition," I pull back and cross my arms. "You are not to use me as a pawn in any court case and you let me work at my own pace."

"Deal."

My brows fly up my forehead. "Really? You don't want to think about it or negotiate?"

Archer shakes his head. "I don't need to."

I shrug. "Okay, Archer. You've got a deal."

He smiles and those delicious dimples make an appearance. "Shall we seal this deal with a kiss?" Archer asks.

"Really?" I say with a snort.

"Don't make me beg, Sweetheart, because I will."

I tap my chin with my finger. Might as well make him work for it. "Why yes, Archer. Beg me for a kiss."

A smirk grows on his face as he pushes his chair back and walks around the table, dropping to his knees in front of me.

"You're really going all out with this, aren't you?" I say dryly.

Archer grips my knees and widens my legs, wedging himself between them. Seeing him between my thighs turns my mouth dry. I lick my lips and swallow hard.

"Sweetheart, I'm begging you," Archer leans in, tucking his head under my chin. "May I have a kiss?" his deep voice vibrates against my neck, and I shutter.

His lips brush my skin and I whimper. I shove the chair back and drop to my knees in front of him, taking his face in my hands and kissing him. Archer wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me against his chest.

"I'm truly sorry, Sweetheart," he says as his mouth moves down my neck. His tongue starts drawing small circles on my already sensitive skin.

"Uh-huh." Is all I manage to say. My brain seems to be malfunctioning at the moment.

Archer's mouth moves back to mine and his hands slip down my back and over my ass, squeezing and kneading.

"If you keep this up, Archer, I'm going to fuck you on my kitchen floor." I pant when we finally break apart for air.

"I'm not against that."

“Deviant.”

Archer gives me one last kiss and squeeze, then helps me off the floor just as the dryer buzzes. I grab his dry clothes and hand them over. “I’ll drive you back to the office,” I say and swipe my purse off the end of the banister.

“Thank you. Let me just change.” I grab his arm before he even takes a step.

“Keep them.”

He raises a brow. “Won’t Mason know he’s missing clothing?”

“Nope. And I would prefer my son not have anymore gray sweatpants.”

## You Fuck Llama

Dani

I'm going to strangle you with your tie and drag your lifeless body down Queen Street behind my piece of shit Honda!" I holler.

"You mean it, truly!" Archer yells sardonically.

It has been nearly a month since Archer asked me to come back, and things have gone from okay to clusterfuck. We have been at each others' throats for weeks, and on top of that, Josh has been calling and harassing me over Mason. I am in one hell of a pissy mood and the Dobson case isn't helping.

"Damn right I do you fuck llama." I say from behind Archer's computer.

I've been scribing for him for the last five hours. Writing and rewriting what he has been dictating. Why, you ask? Because the asshole shredded the original copy when this whole shitstorm hit.

The tension in the room is as thick as fog rolling over a lake. I'm waiting for some knife wielding manic to bust in and stab me. Which I would welcome with open arms.

We have been working closely the last few weeks to get ready for court and I may or may not have threatened to do bodily harm to Archer a few dozen times.

"Maybe if you made a copy of the original, we wouldn't be in this mess, Daniella." Archer snarls.

I fire out of his chair and lean over the desk. "Don't you dare put the blame on me for this!" I shout and shove papers off his desk like a child having a temper tantrum. "I asked you if you wanted me to make a copy and you said, and I quote '*Not necessary Daniella.*'" I mimic his voice. "And what do you do a week later?" I give him a pointed look. "Oh, that's right, shred it with their old casefile."

Archer drops his fists on the desk and leans in. "You should've made a copy anyway." He growls.

"Oh no. No, no, no." I wave my hands in front of his face. "Around here it's 'do as I say.' I try to do something different, and you rip a strip off me for hours. This is your fault, you douche nozzle."

He pushes off the desk and starts pacing the room.

*Dani one, Archer zero.*

I sit back down and wait for him to begin dictating. After five minutes of him just pacing the office, I reach into the drawer in his desk and grab a handful of elastic bands. "Do you plan on continuing or are you practicing for your runway show in Milan." I deadpan.

"Don't start with your smart mouth, Daniella."

I shoot one at him, catching him right in the chest.

"Stop."

I fire off another one and another. Both bounce off his hard chest and stomach.

"Enough!" Archer roars.

I drop the rest of them on the desk and stand. "You know what? I'm done. It's almost ten-thirty, I haven't seen Mason in weeks. I'm tired and I'm going home." I say, marching around his desk and towards the door. His arm snags me around the waist, knocking me onto the couch.

I bounce and nearly fall off. This couch does not get used much. There isn't even a butt groove for me to land in.

"You leave when I say you leave." Archer seethes.

A shiver runs down my spine. I hate the way I love when he gets like this. How deep his voice gets when he's angry. I've been sex deprived for way too long.

"You can't keep me here," I say.

"Can and will."

I slip my shoe off and propel myself off the couch, shoe in hand when he spins and corners me against the wall, next to the door.

"You better not be thinking what I *know* you're thinking about doing with that shoe Ms. Carter."

Archer grabs both my wrists with one large hand, making me drop my shoe and pins them over my head, smashing his fist into the wall next to my hip, creating an indent. I feel the vibration from the force through my whole body and my nipples harden instantly.

The brute strength of this man is unreal. I've only ever seen someone do that on TV, in movies or read about it in books and to be honest, it's hot.

"You have no idea what I'm thinking," I say, my voice thick with need.

His eyes heat and my stomach clenches in the most delicious way. Heat pools between my thighs, and I slam them together trying to stop the throbbing that started the minute Archer pinned me to the wall.

A smile breaks out on his face, flashing those delightful dimples. He leans in; his lips brush mine when he speaks. "Tell me, Dani, what *are* you thinking?"

I shiver at his words. "I'm not telling you shit," I say but the smirk on his face tells me he knows I'm lying.

"Are you thinking about what I said a month ago or the kisses we shared over the past weeks?" Archer asks. "Or the way my cock felt against your pussy when we were stuck in the elevator?"

My eyes widen as his hand grips my hip and squeezes, sending fire through my veins. My tongue darts out to wet my lips. The hand on my hip moves slowly down my thigh and under my skirt. He grips my bare skin and a moan escapes from me.

"Do you want me to own your pussy, Sweetheart?" his voice dips low as he nuzzles my neck.

I nod because I can't speak. His hand slips between my legs and up the inside of my thigh until his knuckle drags along my soaking panties. Another moan passes my lips, ending in a whimper when he applies pressure. He lifts his head to watch me as a finger works its way under the thin piece of barely there fabric and slides along my wet pussy.

"Please." The word burst from my lips.

Archer smiles before removing his finger and sucking it into his mouth. I almost lose it right then.

"You taste...dangerous." His mouth crashes into mine in a kiss that has me arching my back and moaning into his mouth. Something I'll be embarrassed about tomorrow, but right now; I don't give two sweet fucks. I can't remember the last time I was kissed like this.

The ones we shared in the last few weeks were soft and gentle. This is a powerful kiss. It's passionate, bruising, and hungry. He kisses like a man starved and I'm his last meal. Archer slides his hand and squeezes my upper thigh, right under my ass cheek, as he releases my wrists.

I grip his shirt, tugging it from his slacks and yanking the sides open causing the buttons pop off, bouncing along the floor.

"Holy shit! I didn't think that was possible." I giggle as I break the kiss.

"Apparently it is," Archer mutters, bringing his mouth back to mine.

A deep rumble comes from his throat when my fingers connect with his bare skin. The hard muscles flex under my fingertips. I take over then, licking at his mouth and flicking my tongue in. His tongue tangles with mine in velvety soft, mind-bending strokes. My knees buckle when he tilts my head, deepening the kiss. I have never been kissed like this; I feel desired. *Needed*. As if he would die if he stopped.

He steps closer to me, pinning me in place with his warm body and does something with his tongue that has me rolling my hips into his. He tears his mouth away from mine. His chest raising against mine with an unsteady breath.

"I want you, Dani. I want to taste you. It's all I think about." Gripping my ass, he lifts me and my skirt, placing my bare ass on the cool leather of the couch.

Kneeling in front of me, he drags his tongue down my neck before sucking over where my pulse is pounding. "Do you want that, Sweetheart? Do you want me to taste you." Archer says against my neck. Sucking, biting, licking the sore skin.

I nod and Archer's mouth is on mine again, softer this time around. My hands dig into his incredibly soft hair, pulling it, and earning a deep growl. He climbs on top of me, pressing me down on the couch, the weight of him is thrilling. Pressing his body between my thighs, Archer shows me just how badly he wants me.

Sweet baby Hades, this man is thick, lengthy, and hard.

*So hard.*

My hands tear at his shirt, pushing it off his wide shoulders. His skin's warm under my cool hands. The ridges of muscles move as I rake my nails across his back. His fingers make quick work of the buttons on my shirt. Archer sits back on his knees, opening the shirt. I grab the two sides and cover myself.

"Let me see you, Sweetheart."

"I...I can't."

"Is it because of the scars?" Archer questions. "I don't care about those. I want to see *you*."

I suck in a sharp breath. He sounds sincere, but I'm unsure. "No one has ever been able to see past the scars." I admit.

Archer slips his hand under my shirt, his fingers skimming the raised skin. "You are beautiful to me." And to prove his point, he kisses the one along the side of my face.

The one he constantly touches.

At first, I thought he was doing it to remind me that it's there. But now I realize he's doing it because it's part of me. It's something that will forever be there as a reminder of the hell I went through.

Out of all the scars and marks on my body, the only ones I love and cherish are my stretch marks and caesarean scar. Because it gave me my entire world. My baby boy. And I wouldn't change them for anything.

I release the sides of the shirt and let him move the fabric away. Archer stills. His eyes heat with both lust and promises.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he says.

Heat floods my face as he traces the marks with his fingers and there are many of them. Archer pulls the cups of my bra down. His head dips and he takes one of my nipples in his mouth. My back curves from the sensation of his hot, wet mouth on my sensitive skin. A moan breaks free as his tongue swirls around the aching bud.

"Luke," I moan.

He releases my breast and moves to the other one. Repeating what he did before. His fingers skim down my round belly and over my hip.

"Fuck you're good at this," I moan.

"I should be. I'm an Aries." Archer mutters against my skin.

A laugh bursts from me. "No you're not. You're a Leo."

A rumble comes from deep in his throat like a beast. "You bet your fine ass I am."

Archer claims my mouth as his fingers move south to the junction of my thigh and pelvis and across another welt. I wiggle, imploring him to move his fingers where I so desperately need them. Instead, he caresses the skin, causing goosebumps to breakout.

"Luke. Please." I plead against his mouth while rolling my hips.

"Beg me, Dani." He says, moving down my body, placing open-mouth kisses along my skin, taking his time to kiss each individual scar, welt and burn mark.

He makes me feel beautiful. Something I haven't felt in years. His fingers curl under the band of my thong, pulling it to the side. The long slow slide of his tongue across my clit has my head falling back. It feels like he's tasting me as if I'm a fine wine. Archer looks up at me from between my legs. My face scrunches up in frustration.

"Beg me, Dani." He commands while he licks me off his lips.

*Damn!*

I'm liking this side of him and not just because his tongue is in my pussy.

"Please, Luke." I say in that breathy voice he loves so much.

"Say it again."

"Please, Luke."

He runs his tongue along my pussy, dipping it inside. "Please what, Dani."

*Oh God.* He's going to make me say it. I roll my hips, hoping that will be good enough but he sits back on his knees.

"I want to hear you say it, Dani. I want to hear you beg me," he inclines his body over mine. "Beg me to eat your pussy. I want you to cum on my face." He growls.

My eyes widen at his words. This is so not the man I work for.

This is a beast.

I grip my breasts, kneading them as I arch my back. "Eat my pussy, Luke." I don't have to ask twice.

He pulls me up and to the edge of the couch, kneeling in front of me. Hands move up my thighs, fingers hook into my thong, and I hear the tearing of fabric.

He ripped my panties off!

I drop against the back of the couch. The feel of his hands on my skin is like a drug.

"Look at me, Sweetheart." He commands. "I want you to watch as I get you off."

Propping myself up on my elbows, I watch as his tongue begins to swirl in circles over my clit, sucking it into his mouth. My hips press forwards as a finger slowly pushes inside, moving painfully slow.

Archer is teasing me, driving me to the brink. I wiggle as he adds another finger, stretching and filling me. Gasping and moaning, I start growing impatient. I'm right there, right at the edge but he refuses to allow me to fall over. Archer sucks my clit into his mouth again. Hard enough to elicit a strangled cry from me.

Then he finally, *finally* moves with purpose.

Pumping his fingers faster as he grazes his teeth over my clit, I fall into an orgasm so strong, so powerful that all the air has been sucked from my lungs. Archer rides out my orgasm with his fingers until I'm an oozing mess of satisfaction. Panting and sated, Archer positions himself over my body, tilting my head and kissing me hard. The taste of me on his lips and tongue, has me rolling my hips again.

The kiss slows then stops.

"I've been dying to taste you since the first day you stepped into my office," he says against my lips.

"Well, you deserve a gold star for that performance," I say and slide my hand between us, cupping him through his slacks. "Now it's my turn." I purr as I push him down on the couch.

My phone starts ringing, and I groan at the sound of Mason's ringtone. "One second," grabbing my purse, I pull my phone out. "What is it Mason?" I bite out.

"There's some dude here," he says.

My desire infused daze clears. I move away from Archer. "You didn't open the door, did you?" I question. Mason is more than capable of taking care of himself, however, I don't need him playing hero and end up hurt.

"No. Said his name is Josh and he's my father." Mason grumbles.



My stomach plummets to my feet and I drop my phone.

"Sweetheart?" Archer's hand lands on my lower back.

I move, my hand shaking as I pick my phone off the ground. "I'm on my way. Do not open the door, do not tell him you're alone, and whatever you do, do not, I repeat, do not call Auntie Erin." I hang up, throwing the cell in my purse. "I gotta go."

"Is everything all right? You look pale."

"No, ah, no. Everything is not all right." I try to fix my clothes but my fingers tremble too much to hold onto the buttons.

Archer moves my hands and begins buttoning up my shirt. His thick fingers swallowing up the small buttons. "Do you need me to drive you home?"

The offer is sweet, but I can't, and I'm too pissed to try to be nice. "No. I—I got this." I answer.

Archer regards me for a moment before letting me go. Kissing him quickly, I bolt from his office. "And put your shirt on, you slut." I call over my shoulder.

His chuckle follows me as I run out of the primary office, taking the stairs, and running through the underground parking. My heels clicking off the cement.

I open my car door and get in, promising that I would get new breaks out of my next paycheck if it would start, and what do you know, fires up on the first go. I race out of the underground parking and head west on Wellington.

"How did he find us?" I say aloud.

Josh has somehow gotten my cell and work numbers and refuses to tell me how. He has been calling nonstop. Leaving nasty voicemails about what he would like to do to me sexually. I've blocked him but somehow, he's able to leave the messages.

I pull my car next to the curb behind a rusty Ford truck and slam on the breaks. I can see Josh talking through the door.

Climbing out, I yell, "what in the fuck are you doing here!" I step onto the sidewalk and march towards my house, opening the small white gate and up the stone walkway.

Josh turns and smiles, opening his arms. "Dani baby."

I slap his arms away, the smile on his face disappearing. "How did you find us?" I demand. The door opens a crack. "*Shut the damn door, Mason!*" I yell. The door slams shut, and the lock thrown. "I asked you a fucking question." I hiss, tapping my foot on the small step.

I didn't get a good look at him when he and his harpy mother showed up at the office. However, now that I'm face to face with him, he hasn't changed much since I saw him last.

Sixteen years ago.

His hair has thinned out and his once flat stomach is now rounder, but he's still handsome.

For a knuckle dragging swamp twat.

"You remember my cousin Maggie?" Josh asks.

I nod.

"Her husband Jim works at Archer law firm."

*God fucking motherfucking damnit!*

"He was telling us at the annual family reunion about Luke's new assistant," Josh gives me a once over, a greasy smile pulling at his lips. "Once he began to describe said assistant, I knew immediately it was you. He gave me your address." Josh leans against the front door.

"Was this before or after you showed up at the office." I demand.

"Before." Josh answers.

"Leave."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you here." I seethe.

His body tenses. "He's *my* son, Daniella."

I step up to him. "Then where the hell have you been the last sixteen years, huh?"

Josh pushes off the door, causing me to take a step back. "You know why I had to leave." He snarls.

"Yeah, because *daddy* said so. That's such bullshit!" I shout.

His face flushes and his hands curl into fists at his sides. I'm pushing it, but I don't care. This fuckwit doesn't scare me anymore.

"If you actually cared about Mason, you would have found a way to see him." I say.

"I'm here now."

"Yeah. Sixteen years too late. Do you know what it's like to explain to your child that his daddy left after his first birthday party because he was told to drop us. The looks of pity and heartbreak from neighbours and friends. You have no right to Mason."

Josh steps closer. "I want to see my son, Daniella."

Knowing that he's not going to leave until he gets what he wants, I back up and bang on the door. "*Mason!*"

The lock clicks and the door opens slowly. "Yeah?"

"Come meet your father." I force out.

"Nope. Not happening."

"He won't leave until you do."

Mason curses under his breath and steps out, straightening to his full height and towering over his father.

"Jesus," Josh mutters as he steps back. "He's ah," he clears his throat, "he's a big boy."

Mason drops a heavy arm over my shoulders.

"He is." I cross my arms.

Josh smiles as he glances up at Mason. "Play hockey, son?"

"No." Mason answers.

Josh's smile drops. "Why's that?"

Mason shrugs. "Don't want to."

Josh shifts his eyes towards me. "Is that because you don't want him to be like his old man." He points an accusing finger at me.

"I put him in hockey, football, and baseball. He didn't like any of them." I pat Mason's chest.

"Can I go now, Ma? I've got company." Mason asks and drops his arm.

"Go ahead. Who's over?"

"Clay and Axe."

"Okay, Bubba. Keep Axe out of my room."

Mason doesn't look at Josh as he shuts the door.

"Goodbye, Josh." I say, reaching for the door handle.

"I want to see him again."

"He doesn't want to see you."

Josh runs a hand through his thinning hair. "He is my son, Dani. I want him in my life."

I grip the door handle. "Here's the thing though," I open the door, "he doesn't want to be in yours."

I slam the door in his face.

## I Don't Care

Dani

I don't want to see him again or be in his life!" Mason yells as he wanders around the kitchen.

"I know, Bubba, but I don't need C.A.S being called because Helen didn't get her way."

And Helen *always* gets her way.

I had explained the whole situation to Mason after Josh left and he went mental. Mason was pissed that I kept this from him and I don't blame him.

"I don't give two shits Ma!" Mason yells.

"I know you're mad, Bubba. I should have told you about this after it happened, but I didn't think Josh would show up."

My phone starts ringing next to my elbow. Archer again. He has been calling for the past three hours. I shut the damn thing off. I am not doing any work for him tonight. I've got enough on my plate at the moment.

Mason drops into a chair. "Do I have to?"

I'm not going to push Mason into doing something he does not want to do. He's seventeen, he has a say in some aspects of his life.

"If you don't want to, I'm not going to force you."

Mason pushes his huge body off the chair. "Thanks, Ma," he kisses my cheek on his way out of the kitchen.

I scrub my face. He might be thanking me now, but when Helen starts throwing her name around and C.A.S shows up, he'll change his tune. I grab my cell and head outside. Turning it on and clearing all the notifications from Archer, I call Mark. If anyone can help, it'll be him. As I listen to it ring, I pace my small front yard.

"Hello?"

"Hey Mark, it's Dani. Sorry for calling so late."

"No worries. I'm just catching up on some work. What's up?"

I explain what has been going on with Josh and the whole C.A.S threat.

"Shit. You should have come to me sooner, babe."

I start biting on the side of my thumb. "I know, but I was sort of hoping that this would have gone away on its own."

"Sorry to tell you this, but it won't. The Whitlock's are cut throats." He says. The sound of rustling papers his background noise.

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask.

Mark sighs and more papers move. "This is going to sound forward, but is there any chance you're free to talk about this in person?"

"Uh, yeah. Where?"

"I can come to you if you'd like." Mark offers.

Do I want Mark here to talk about this with Mason in the house? I glance back at the door. I should involve him in this.

"Sure. I am over on Seaton." I give Mark my address.

"I'll see you in twenty," he says, hanging up.

I stare out over my small yard. I pray Mark can help or point me in the direction of someone who can. Mark's red Audi comes racing up the street. He parks behind my hunk of junk and gets out.

"Hey," I wave as he walks up the walkway with his laptop bag and a coffee. "Come on in. Ignore the noise and mess. Mason's has friends over." I open the door.

"No worries. I'm glad Mason is home."

I shut the door. "Really?"

"I have some questions for him."

"Okay, but he mostly answers in grunts and sighs." I show him to the kitchen. "Have a seat."

Mark sets his laptop up and with a few clicks on the keys, he's ready to go. "Okay," he claps his hands, "I'm going to start a casefile for you. What you chose to do with it is up to you."

I start biting on the side of my thumb again. "Okay."

"Mason's full name?" Mark asks.

"Mason Christopher Carter."

"Age?"

"Seventeen."

"Attending school?"

"Yes. He's going into grade 12 in September."

His fingers move over the keyboard quickly. "Today was the first time he met his father, correct?"

"That he can remember, yes. He did know *about* him though." I switch to my other thumb. I better stop biting it or there is only going to be bone left.

Mark glances up at me over his laptop. "I'm going to give you a rundown on what may happen if you do decide to take this to court. Now, I know you are more worried about C.A.S showing up and I understand that, but I wouldn't worry about that unless it happens."

I'm going to worry about it. I'm a mom, I worry about everything when it comes to my child.

Mark goes into detail about what I would need if I decide to take Josh to court. The majority of it is paperwork on Mason, primarily his birth certificate, and any correspondence I may have between Josh and myself.

"Now, as for retroactive child support—"

I cut Mark off. "What's that?"

"Retroactive child support is when a parent must pay support now to make up for not paying the proper amount in the past. Or in your case, none at all." He answers.

I scratch my head. "Would that have to go to court?"

Mark nods. "A judge must issue the order. Most of the time it can be handled out of the courtroom. However, being that Josh is a Whitlock, John's going to want to take it to court."

That's what I'm afraid of.

## Holy Shit! You're Alive

Luke

**You've reached Dani, leave a message.**

I have been trying to reach Dani for hours. After four calls went through, the rest went straight to voicemail. With the way she bolted out of the office after getting that call from Mason, I'm worried about her. I try her six more times before giving up and calling it a night.

Sleep doesn't come easy. I try for hours but give up once the sun starts shining through the windows. I hop in the shower, making it a quick one and throw on a pair of sweatpants. I head into the kitchen, turning on the coffee maker and grabbing a mug from the cupboard. My thoughts go back to Dani and last night.

Her lips, her moans, how sweet she tasted—fuck! I nearly blew my load from the taste of her alone. Her body is a road map of scars and burns. I don't know what happened or what she went through to receive those marks, but she survived, and it proves just how strong Dani truly is.

Mug in hand, I walk to my office to finish my proposal in preparation for the Dobson case. I sit at my desk and turn on the computer.

I don't remember falling asleep, but the ringing of my phone wakes me. The sun's shining through the windows, I have a piece of paper stuck to the side of my face and drool on my arm. I reach for my cell and my heart jackhammers against my ribs when I see the name.

"Daniella," I answer.

"You rang, Archer."

"After the way you tore out of the office last night, I wanted to make sure you were okay."

A sigh comes from Dani, but it's not one of annoyance. "I'm...I'm sort of okay."

"Feel like explaining?" I question.

She makes a groaning noise. "Josh showed up at the house last night to see Mason."

My temper hops into the drivers seat. "How did he find you?" I growl.

Dani hesitates before answering. "Jim is married to Josh's cousin Maggie."

"Fuck."

"Language."

I smile to myself at our little joke. "Do you need some time off, Sweetheart?"

"I—I'm okay. Really."

Yeah, I smell bullshit on that. "Truly? I'm sure Carrie would not mind filling in for you for a few days."

A soft noise comes through the phone. "I can't afford a few days off, Archer."

"But—"

"I'll be in on Monday," Dani hangs up on me.

\*\*\*\*\*

I finished most of the Dobson proposal by mid-afternoon. Hopefully with this evidence, it will be a quick case. It not only proves that Doug cheated while he was still married, but that a child has come from his infidelity.

I stand and stretch, grabbing my phone, and checking it. I don't know what I expected to find. I spoke to Dani a little over four hours ago, why I have my hopes up that she will call again is beyond me.

*Because she has her hooks in you,* that voice reprimands.

*Because you own her*, that other voice states.

I hit the print button on my keyboard and wait as paper spits out into the tray. Patting around my desk aimlessly, my fingers brush my stapler. I staple all the papers together and put them in my bag. The shrill ringing of my office phone scares the hell out of me.

"Lucas Archer."

"Holy shit! You're alive." Carrie says in way of greeting.

"Of course, I'm alive. You saw me yesterday."

She raspberries into the phone. "Sure, but I figured by the way you and Dani were going at it when I left, I thought she would have killed you by now."

I let a chuckle loose. "If I'm being honest, I could have sworn she wanted to stab me with a pen."

Carrie lets out a squeal and starts laughing. "She wouldn't be the first."

I have been punched and slapped. I have had things thrown at my head. When people don't get their way, they tend to take it out on the person they feel responsible for it.

"So, CeCe, to what do I owe the pleasure of this phone call?" I ask as I finish packing up my papers.

"Well, Elle—"

"Do not put this on me! This was your idea!" Elle yells in the background.

"What was your idea?" I inquire.

"I was thinking of having you and Dani over for dinner tonight."

Dinner.

With Dani.

At Carrie and Elle's.

I would rather scoop my eyes out with a rusty spoon. Those two are like a couple of bloodhounds. They'll know something physical went down between Dani and me last night.

"I don't think so."

"Lucas. Pleeaaaassee." Carrie starts to whine into the phone.

Christ on a cracker. I hate when she does that. It always guilts trips me into doing shit and she knows it. "I shouldn't be saying anything as it is not my place, but something happened last night with Daniella, and she is not in a good place right now."

That should shut her up.

"Dani's totally on board with this, yeah. She's even bringing her friend Erin and her hubby Jake." Carrie says enthusiastically.

Son of a bitch. I rub my forehead. "What time?"

Carrie squeals. "Yay! Be here for eight and wear something casual. Bring beer." The phone disconnects in my ear. I hate when she does that too.

Tossing a shirt on, I swipe my bag and keys and head out to the office to drop off everything while I'm thinking about it. As I wait for the elevator, I notice that my quiet neighbours are moving out. The elevator doors open, and I curse under my breath.

"Hello, Lucas," Sarah says as she steps off the elevator. The Coach bag I bought her on our one-year anniversary dangling from her slim arm.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm your new neighbour," she laughs. "I sold my house. Figured I didn't need a big house when it's just me." She flips her straight black hair over her shoulder. "So, when I saw that the sub-penthouse next to yours was up for sale, I snagged it."

*The heartless bitch is back*, that voice speaks up and I couldn't agree more.

She steps closer to me. "You know, I could move in with you and rent my place," Sarah drags her finger down my chest. Her face twisting up in disgust when she sees my faded Iron Maiden t-shirt.

I hit the button for the elevator. "Not happening."

"I miss you, Lucas."

"I don't care." I stride onto the elevator hitting the button for the parking garage.

"Have dinner with me tonight. We can...talk." Sarah pouts.

Remind me to thank Carrie for doing that whiny thing she does. "I have plans tonight."

The doors close, leaving Sarah on the other side of them with a look of shock on her thin face.

## Group Date

Luke

You know this is a date, right!" Gabe yells from somewhere outside my room.

"It's dinner at CeCe's. Not a date." I answer back.

"Group date," Gabe confirms, showing up in my doorway. "Go commando. Make's it easier for Dani girl to give you a handy under the table."

A laugh breaks free. "I highly doubt that's going to happen."

Gabe flops his massive body on the bed. "I beg to differ," he holds up a hand when I open my mouth to argue. "Did you or did you not have your tongue down her throat and in her pussy last night."

My brows fly up my forehead. "How'd you know that?"

Gabe waves a hand at me. "I have my ways. And did you or did you not have your hands on that banging body." He continues.

"I did." I know where he's going with this and I'm not liking it.

"And do you or do you not want a repeat of that plus a little extra?" he raises a brow in question.

"I do."

"Then shut your face and lose the boxers." Gabe says. I shoot my 'loving' brother a look that he waves off.

"Look. You haven't been laid since that one nighter with Tasha—"

"How, the fuck, did you know *that*?" I ask.

"Lucky guess." Gabe stands. "That is one hell of a dry spell dude, and your hand can only do so much," Gabe smacks something into my palm. "There's more where that came from," he winks, "now lose the boxers." He walks out, shutting the door behind him.

I look down at the condom he placed in my palm, shaking my head. Does he really think I don't have con—I can't even finish that sentence. I drop my head back on my shoulders with a groan. I hate when Gabe is right.

Pulling on my dark wash jeans—over my boxers—and a white button down, I stuff the condom in my wallet—cliché—and I am ready to go.

Gabe's sprawled on the couch, one leg stretched out with the other on the floor, flipping through movies. "Wear your Docs," he doesn't even look over at me.

"Are you going to be here when I get home?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. Depends on whether *you* come home tonight."

I swipe my keys and head for the door. "You should go make nice with my new neighbour. She's single."

Gabe jumps up from the couch. "Really," he fixes his shirt. "I may have to in-tro-duce myself."

I smile as I walk out.

\*\*\*\*

Carrie and Elle live over on Balmoral, in a semi-detached rowhouse. The house is lovely, and their neighbours are amazing, but I hate going over there. The backyard faces St. Michael's Cemetery, and it freaks me out. I'm not saying I'm afraid of ghosts or that they even exist, but when you see someone wandering around in there after midnight, in the dark, it's creepy.

I'm the last person to arrive. Climbing out of my truck, I spot a man standing on the front porch, leaning against the railing.



"Is that a '75 Chevy C10?" he asks, pushing off the railing and walking towards me.

"It is." I answer.

"Damn, that thing is mint," he whistles as he walks around the truck.

"Thanks." I lean in and start it up.

"*Fucking eh!*" he yells.

I pop the hood and let him look his fill.

"Gun it." He says.

Smiling to myself, I lean in and hit the gas, revving it a few times.

"Shit dude, you just gave me a woody."

I shut off the truck. "Luke," I extend my hand.

"Jake," he says, clasping it in a firm grip.

The door opens and a striking red head steps out. "I found him!" she yells into the house. "And he made a friend!"

"Hey Kitten, this is Luke." Jake thumbs at me.

"Luke, nice to meet you. I'm Erin. Dani's best friend." She also extends her hand. "He wasn't bothering you, was he?" Erin nudges Jake in the side.

"I was playing nice, I swear." Jake replies as he pulls on a piece of her hair.

"So, I heard you and Dani got a little hot and heavy last night." She wiggles her brows at me.

Damn, she just put it all out there.

"She told you?" I shouldn't be shocked over this, but I am, and now I'm nervous to find out what else was said.

"Among other things. Like your non-dinner date." Erin nods with a smile. "She's my sista from another mista. We tell each other everything."

*Dear God.*

Jake slaps me on the back. "You get used to it. I've been dealing with this for thirteen years," he leans in. "Doll knows the size of my dick just like Erin will eventually know the size of yours."

Before I can say anything, the door flies open again. "*Lucas!* Did you bring booze?" Carrie yells.

I reach into the back of the truck and pull out a two-four of Canadian. "Yes CeCe."

Carrie claps her hands. "Good. Get in here. We finished off my case."

I follow Erin and Jake into the house, giving Carrie a kiss as I pass.

"Damn, Luke. You are looking extra fine tonight," Elle says as I place the case of beer on the counter.

"I do try."

Elle leans in and whispers, "it's because of Dani, isn't it."

I start putting the beer in the fridge when the laugh of the woman that has me tied in knots fills the air. It's going to be awkward now that I know two people know what went down between Dani and me.

"Not at all."

"Liar." Elle laughs and heads out of the room, just to be replaced by Carrie.

"You going to join us, or do you plan on hiding in the kitchen all night?" Carrie deadpans.

I finish putting the beer in the fridge and grab two, handing one to Carrie as I straighten. "I was putting the beer away before you started hounding me to do it." I pop the top and chug half of it.

"Uh-huh. Sure." She grins as she takes a drink as well.

Carrie keeps smiling and wiggling her brows. "Gabe told you, didn't he?" I finally say.

Shaking her head, she wraps an arm around my waist. "Dani did and I told Gabe." She smiles, all proud of herself. "I didn't know that you two had a thing before last night?"

"I didn't know you and Daniella talked after office hours," I counter with a raised brow.

Carrie screws up her face. "You're not the boss of me after five o'clock." Carrie smiles then pouts. "Had to give Elle ten bucks because you guys made out in one month, but I got a fiver because your face ended up in her pussy."

I down the rest of my beer and reach around Carrie to grab another from the fridge. "Well, I'm so glad I could help bring some money into your life." I reply wryly.

She snorts. "Would've been better if it was the full twenty but, meh."

I drop my arm over her shoulders. "Sorry?"

Carrie slaps my chest. "Asshole." Taking my hand, she hauls me into the living room. "Look who I found." Carrie sings as she flings me onto the couch, next to Dani. Who is looking jaw dropping exquisite in a cute lavender summer dress and bare feet.

"Daniella."

"Archer." She finishes her beer and places it on the coffee table.

Eight pairs of eyes are watching us, waiting to see what we're going to do.

This is going to be the most awkward dinner I've ever been to.

## Gabe Sang Like A Canary

Luke

Wait, wait, *wait!* They expected you to divide up fish. *Fish!* Erin squeals as she begins to cackle.

I nod as I take a drink of my beer. "Oh yeah, and that's not even the weirdest one." I drop an arm over the back of Dani's chair, and she leans into me. She has been slowly inching closer and I'm going to take any closeness I can get from her.

*She's putting on an act for everyone*, that voice chides.

*Show everyone she belongs to you*, that other voice pipes up.

They are starting to get on my nerves.

"What was the weirdest one?" Erin leans her elbow on the table, dropping her chin on her palm.

"Fuck. The weirdest one has to be..." I have to think about this because there have been so many.

"What about the one where the couple wanted shared custody over the dogs?" Carrie chimes in.

"I forgot about the Garcia's." I start laughing and Dani turn against my arm.

"Are you laughing?" she questions, tilting her head. All that honey blonde hair falls over her bare shoulder and all I can picture is all that hair fanned over *my* pillows, in *my* bed.

"Yeah," I answer.

"You can do that?" Dani questions.

Carrie snorts and Elle spits her Rum and Coke all over the table before they both break out in fits of laughter.

Tangling a hand in her hair, I lean in and say, "I can do a lot of things," my lips brush the shell of her ear as I speak. "A lot of things I want to do to you."

Her breath hitches and a shiver rocks her body. Her breathtaking eyes lock with mine and a slow smile grows on my lips.

"Dimples." Dani whispers.

"*Where is he!*" Gabe roars through the dining room. "*You!*"

I look over at my brother and recoil.

"*Go make nice with my new neighbour. She's single.*" Gabe mocks, his hands waving wildly in the air. He knocks hair off his face with a grunt. "You could've mentioned that your new neighbour is Sarah."

I take in my brother. His hair is a mess, his shirt ripped, and a bruise is starting to form on his jaw.

"Wait," Carrie turns to me, "Sarah moved in next door?"

I shutter. "Yeah."

"Fuck. Have fun with that." Carrie says sarcastically and finishes off her beer.

Gabe runs a hand down his body. "She went mental when she found out you were on a date."

"It's not a date." I correct him.

"*Date!*" Gabe yells.

I move my arm from the back of Dani's chair. "I'm sorry, Gabe. I really didn't think she was going to kick your ass." I chuckle.

"It's not funny, Luke." He drops into the empty chair next to me. "She's insane. She's planning to wait by your door for you to come home."

"I'm crashing here, CeCe."

"The fuck you are." Carrie answers.

A hand wraps around my knee. "You can come home with me." Dani whispers.

"Say again." I need to make sure I'm not hearing things.

"I said, you can come home with me. Seeing as how Gabe sang like a canary because Skeletor was kicking his ass."

“Hey!” Gabe pouts.

“Might as well make her watch you do the walk of shame.” Dani states.

Wolf whistles rise from around the table.

“I can’t do that. What would your son think?” I ask.

She waves a hand at me. “Mason can deal.”

“You sure?” I push.

Dani waves me off again. “I’m the mom, I make the rules.” She shrugs. “Plus, if he doesn’t like it, he can go to Clay’s or Axe’s.” Dani pulls out her phone. “If it’ll make you feel better, Archer, I’ll text him and ask.”

If something is going to happen tonight, I would really prefer her massive son—who is crazy protective of her—not be in the house while I fuck her.

“It would.”

As her slender fingers fly across her phone screen, I relax and sit back. Eyeing Carrie across the table, I squirm at the Pennywise smile she’s sporting before giving me a thumbs up.

She needs help.

## I Have A Date

Dani

I can't believe I asked Archer to come home with me. What in the hell am I thinking? What if I'm not good in bed? It has been a while, what if I forget how to do it? What if he gets grossed out by the way my body jiggles when he's pounding into me? What if my scars are too much for him to handle? Oh God, this was a bad idea.

My panic must have shown on my face because Erin kicks my shin under the table. I look up at her and she mouths, "*you'll be fine.*"

"*You sure?*" I mouthed back.

Erin nods. "*And I want all the dirty, nasty details.*" She blows me a kiss with a wink, making me snort.

My phone dings in my hand. "Mason is spending the night at Clay's, so you can crash," I say to Archer as I toss my phone in my purse. "If you still want to."

His large hand lands on my thigh. "Very much."

I relax, feeling a tad better. I'm enjoying this side of Archer. He is more carefree, more laid back.

"Dani and Luke, sittin' in a tree," Carrie sings, "F.U.C.K.I.N.G!"

I snort out a laugh, while Archer shakes his head. "You're a moron CeCe."

She points her beer bottle at her cousin. "Look me dead in the eye and tell me that's not happening tonight." Carrie leans across the table, her nose touching Archer's.

"I can neither confirm nor deny that that will be happening tonight," Archer answers coolly.

Carrie licks her hand and wipes it down his face. "Luke is getting his dick touched tonight. I can tell." Carrie shoots a wink my way.

"Yeah, by his own hand." Gabe calls out from his seat next to Archer. Cat calls and wolf whistles ring out in the room.

"I think they want us to hook up." I whisper.

Archer's hand moves higher up my thigh, fire following the same path his hand took.

"I wouldn't be against it," he mutters.

His eyes are hooded as my gaze meets his and my body warms with yearning as his eyes show promises of what's to come.

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The rest of the night goes by full of laughter and jokes at Archer's expense. The longer I spend listening to the stories Carrie and Gabe are telling about him from his younger days, the more I start to realize that the attraction I have for him is turning into something stronger.

Something deeper.

Something I don't want to get my hopes up for, because I know my heart would not be able to handle being broken by Luke Archer.

We leave shortly after one in the morning. The drive is quiet, his hand resting on my thigh, his thumb caressing my skin.

Archer pulls up behind my hunk of junk and follows me up the walkway and into the house—that's full of fucking *kids!*

"*Mason!*" I scream from the bottom of the stairs. He's in so much fucking trouble.

"Damn, Ms. C," Axe swaggers his way over and drops a heavy arm over my shoulders. "You look fine as hell." He dips his head quickly and I slap a hand over his mouth before his lips touched mine.

I shove Axe away. "*Axton Charles!*" I yell as I slap his arm. "What in the fuck is wrong with you! And why do you smell like Rum."

He smiles that charming smile and staggers back a step. "Lighten up, Dani, it's a party!"

I put my fingers in my mouth and whistle. The house goes stock still. "This party is over! I'm giving you thirty seconds to get out of here or I start calling parents!" I grab Axe's arm. "You stay right here." I hiss.

"I'll stay wherever you want me to, baby." Axe says with a wink.

Kids scramble around, fighting each other to get to the door. "Ten seconds!"

The house empties with two seconds to spare.

"*Mason Christopher!*" I scream again, this time I hear him curse. He comes barrelling down the stairs, in his boxers with his hair a mess and what looks like a hickey on his chest.

"*Kitchen! Both of you!*" I am beyond pissed with this kid.

I turn to Archer. "I'm so sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about."

I shake my head. "This wasn't supposed to happen," I step closer to him, tilting my head back to look at him.

"It's fine. Really." Archer soothes, taking my face in his hands and kisses me so sweetly; it turns me inside out faster than the kiss we shared last night.

"Goodnight, Sweetheart." He says against my lips.

"Night, Dimples."

He backs away, giving me a smile that flashes those dimples before walking out the door. I stand in the hallway until I hear his truck drive away before I march into the kitchen to find Axe vomiting in my sink. I walk over and turn the water on. I'm not cleaning vomit out of the sink tonight.

"What in the fuck were you thinking!" I demand.

Mason stiffens in his chair.

"You said you were crashing at Clay's."

"Well—" Mason starts.

"I'm not finished!" I snarl. "I come home with a man who is interested in me, which hasn't happened in years and what do I find when I open the door?" I slam my hand on the table, making him jump. "A house full of fucking kids and a drunk Axe! Who tried to kiss me, by the way."

Mason fires Axe a nasty look.

"And you are nowhere to be seen. What were you doing upstairs, Mason?" I question.

A soft feminine voice drifts into the kitchen. "M?"

I turn to find a small, rainbow-haired girl, with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and a face full of piercings standing in the doorway.

"Party is over honey, get dressed and go home." I turn back to Mason who has the fucking nerve to look pissed off.

"Who is this woman?" the attitude in this girl's voice has me closing my eyes and counting to five before turning to face her again.

"His mother. Get dressed and head home."

"I thought you said your mom was cool," she grumbles. "I'm out, M. Lose my number." She storms towards the stairs.

"Thanks a lot Ma!" he yells as he straightens, attempting to use his height to intimidate me.

"Watch the attitude, Mason," I warn. "I'm in no mood to deal with it."

He flops back into the chair, deflating.

"If you had asked me if you could have a party, I would have said yes and found someone to chaperone. But instead, you took it upon yourself to throw one, allowed Axe to drink his body weight in Rum, and took a girl to your room." I drop my hands onto my hips.

"He didn't...allow me...Ms. C," Axe hiccups, "I was...drunk...when I...got...here." He starts vomiting again.

"Ma," Mason starts.

I hold up a hand. "How far did you get with Rainbow Brite?"

"Who?"

"The girl."

Mason's face turns ruddy. "Ma!"

"How far, Mason?" I ask.

He scrubs his hand through his hair. "Almost slid into home." He mumbles.

"I'm sorry? What was that?" I heard him fine; I just want him to repeat it.

"Almost slid into home."

I tap my finger against my chin. "So, if I didn't interrupt, you two would've fucked."

His eyes widen and his face turns a deeper shade of red. "*Ma!*"

"*Mason!*"

He eyes Axe, who is passed out on the floor.

"He's not going to help you." I drag in a calming breath. "I was sixteen when I got pregnant with you, you know this. I don't need you following in my footsteps."

"I have no plans on getting pregnant," Mason says sarcastically.

"Smartass," I smirk which turns into a sigh, and I drop into the chair next to him. "Baby, I love you. Very much. You are my entire world. But right now, you are trying my patience," I kiss his forehead. "Grab Axe and head to bed. You're grounded, your phone is mine for two weeks and you'll be staying overnight tomorrow with Nanny and Papa."

He nods, helping Axe off the floor, and dragging him upstairs. "Love you too, Ma." Mason says.

I follow them up, heading into my room, shutting, and locking the door. I strip down and climb under the sheets. As I stare up at the ceiling, I mentally kick myself for trying to have a life. Mason is at that age where he's going to start getting more physical with girls and playing the big guy with his friends.

"Fuck me." I cover my face. I thought things would get easier as he got older. I knew he would have parties when I wasn't home, but I thought I raised him well enough that he would tell me if he was going to do something like this. I would've let him have a party; I would've asked Janelle, our neighbour, to swing by. She's in her early twenties and would've fit in so well the kids wouldn't have known there was an adult there.

My phone starts ringing from its home in my purse. I glance at the time and a small smile graces my lips. I reach over and pull the phone out. "Do you know what time it is, Archer?"

His low chuckle has me smiling into the darkness. "I do know what time it is, Daniella."

"Is this a social or business call?"

"Social."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Are you free tomorrow for dinner?"

I look at my phone. "I'm sorry," I blink a few times, "did you just ask me out to dinner?"

"I did."

I'm struck speechless. I let what he said hang in the air as I try to wrap my head around it.

"Daniella?" he calls.

I shake myself back to reality. "I'd love to have dinner with you." I can't stop the wide smile that breaks out on my face. Looks like I'll be placing a call into my stylist tomorrow.

Aka: Erin.

"Wonderful. I'll pick you up at seven. Unless that's too late for you?"

"No. It's...it's perfect." I smile.

“Great. I’ll see you tomorrow, Daniella.”

“See you tomorrow, Archer.” I hang up and roll over.  
I have a date.



## Suck Me Sideways

Dani

I'm not going commando, Erin."

"Why not? His hand was practically in your pussy last night."

I stick my head out the closet door. "It was not."

Erin waves me off. "It so was. That man can't keep his hands off you. And boo about Mason pussy blocking you."

Erin's sitting on the floor of my room, going through my shoe collection. "I was all excited when you called. I thought I was going to finally find out what Luke is packing. You better have some yummy things to tell me tonight, miss missy. Him going to town on your lady parts two nights ago is not enough for me." Erin complains.

I laugh as I pull an emerald peplum shirt off the hanger. It's my first date shirt. It shows just enough skin to keep them interested but not so much that the guy thinks he's 'getting some' on the ride home.

"What about this?" I hold it up.

"Yes! And your black palazzo pants with..." she rummages through my shoes, "these." She throws a pair of black Mary Janes in my direction.

"Put it all on the bed and sit your butt here." Erin points to the small bench at the end of my bed. I sit with my back to her.

"Axe tired to kiss me last night." I blurt out, removing the towel wrapped around my wet hair.

"He *what!*" Erin squeals.

"He was drunk off his ass, thought he was Casanova and made his move."

"And Mason didn't kill him?" Erin questions.

"Mason was upstairs with a girl."

Erin's mouth drops. "Fuck. Off. He was not!"

I nod my head. "Yep, sure was." My phone dings on the bed, cutting off our conversation. Erin snatches it up, opening the message.

"Sweet lord." Her face turns three shades of red before handing it over to me.

It's a picture message from Gabe.

"*Holy shit!*" I scream as I get an eyeful of Archer in boxer briefs. A message comes right after.

**Gabe: I told him to go commando, but he said no. You like?**

I start laughing. "Fucking Gabe." I take a selfie of myself still wrapped in a towel.

**Me: Very. Does he?**

The reply is instant.

**Gabe: Suck me sideways, I should've asked you out first.**

**Me: You did but I turned you down.**

**Gabe: Ugh, don't remind me. It bruised my ego.**

I giggle and drop the phone in my lap.

"That is *soooo* not fitting inside you without a shit ton of foreplay. Or a bottle of lube." Erin says as she takes my phone and goes back into the messages. "Jake's a big boy but *damn!* It's as big as my arm. You better pray he's a show-er and not a grow-er."

I grab the phone back and toss it on the bed. "What? Why?"

Erin raises a brow. "Did you not just hear what I said? His dick is the length and width of my fucking arm."

"It is not."

"It is too. And if that thing gets any bigger, he's going to rip you in two."

"It's not going to get that far," I say defeated.

"Don't tell me you're still ashamed of the scars." Erin reprimands.

I shrug. "A little. What if when he sees me fully naked, he gets grossed out? I mean, he seen a few of them the other night but he didn't see all of them." I hang my head and wring my hands.

Erin cracks me on the head with the brush. "Don't talk like that. I've seen the way he looks at you. He likes you; he doesn't care about the scars."

"Maybe."

Erin groans at my lack of confidence. "Have you thought about talking to someone about what happened?"

"I did talk to someone," I remind her.

She continues working on my hair. "That was sixteen years ago, babe. It's obvious that it still bothers you. We see past the scars, but you don't." She yells over the noise of the blow dryer.

I sniffle. "I can't. They're all I see when I look in the mirror. They are all anyone sees when they look at me."

Erin shuts off the dryer and wraps her arms around me. "Repeat after me. I am beautiful. I am wanted. I love myself."

I wipe my eyes. "I..."

"I am beautiful. I am wanted. I love myself." She repeats.

"I am beautiful..."

Erin kisses my cheek. "Keep going."

I take a deep breath. "I am beautiful. I am wanted. I love myself." I wipe my cheeks.

She used to get me to repeat that in the mirror everyday for years after my breakup with Josh. He crushed my self-confidence. I still have a challenging time looking at myself in the mirror, but it does help a little.

"You're finished. Go get dressed." Erin says.

I make my way into the bathroom to finish up. Giving myself a once over, I'm okay with what I see in the mirror. My hair is in waves, flowing over my shoulders and down my back. My makeup is soft but subtle, making my eyes pop and my lips look poutier.

The doorbell rings. "*I got it!*" Erin yells as she races from the room. "Hi Luuuuuuke."

I grab my phone and purse, making my way down the stairs. The minute I lay eyes on him, my heart stops then kicks up triple time and I begin to sweat. He's wearing dark jeans, a white button down with the sleeves rolled to the elbows and a vest.

*I am so not in his league.*

I force myself the rest of the way down the stairs before I change my mind and lock myself in my room.

"Hey, Archer," I greet.

He looks around Erin and a slow, wicked smile grows on his lips. "Daniella," my name comes out on a growl. "You look fucking exquisite."

My cheek heat as I look down at my feet. "Th—thank you. You look very handsome."

Erin looks between us before stepping aside. "Well," Erin pushes us out the door, "don't keep her out too late. She has work in the morning." Erin winks and slams the door in our faces.

"Sorry. She's more excited about—" my words are cut off by Archer's mouth.

He claims my mouth and I melt against him. I grab onto his vest and hold on as he tips my head back and deepens the kiss. I climb onto the tips of my toes to get closer to him. He breaks the kiss with a last lingering one before smiling down at me.

"You were saying?"

I blink at him, shaking my head. "Um, what?"

A wolf whistle comes from my living room window. Turning, I find Erin standing at the window, her face pressed against the glass giving herself a pig nose.

"For crying out loud. Go home woman!" I yell and she waves me away.

Archer helps me into his truck and rounds the front of it, getting in and starting it up.

"Where are we going?" I question as he pulls away from the curb.

"The Market."

"Fancy."

Archer chuckles. "You don't get out much, do you Daniella."

I snort. "My last date was the one you crashed. Oh, and FYI, Malakai never called me for a second one." I narrow my eyes at him. "You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

His hand lands on my thigh, his thumb rubbing against the thin fabric of my palazzo's. "I haven't spoken with Malakai since the restaurant."

I sit back. "Mm-hmm."

Archer squeezes my thigh. "Listen, Kai is a good guy but he's an ass where women are involved."

"He seemed nice to me." I respond.

"Did he tell you he's been married four times?"

I gawk at him. "Um, no."

His hand moves up my thigh a little more. "Did he tell you that he has three kids and none of them are with his ex-wives."

My eyes widen. "No. Mom said that he was divorced and had no kids."

"Kai's a charmer and knows what to say to get what he wants. Did he try charming you into bed?"

I chew on my bottom lip. "He tried, but I turned him down."

"Really?"

"I didn't feel anything when we kissed. Not like what I feel with you." I whisper.

That hand on my thigh inches up more, his pointer finger sitting between my pelvis and thigh.

"Good." Is all he says.

We find a spot and park. Archer helps me out of his truck and ushers me towards the doors with his hand on my lower back. The restaurant is lovely, with its intimate seating and huge windows that cover the entire front of the building.

The host greets us. "Good evening."

"Evening," Archer says. "Table for two."

"Unfortunately, we don't have any tables available at the moment," the host informs us. "It could be up to an hour wait."

"Do you want to wait, Sweetheart?" Archer asks, glancing down at me.

"Not really, I'm starving." I smile up at him. "I've got an idea." I pull him out the door and towards his truck.

He groans. "I don't like when you get ideas."

I give him a look over my shoulder. "You'll like this one. I promise."

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"I take back what I said about your ideas," Archer murmurs as he steals one of my onion rings.

"I told you you'd like it." I bite into my burger and look out over the bridge we're standing on. The sun is just starting to set, casting the sky in beautiful shades of red and orange.

"I've never been here before." He states.

I turn to Archer. The waning sunlight turned his tanned skin into a shade of gold that makes his ice blue eyes gleam.

“Really? I used to bring Mason here all the time when he was younger. Autumn is the best time to walk the trail.” I wipe my hand on my pants and take another bite.

“What’s this trail called?” Archer asks.

“Taylor Creek.” I answer.

“I might have to bring you here again.”

I smile up at him and finish off my burger, tossing my garbage in the bag. I hold my hand out. “Finished?”

Archer looks over at me. “Yes Mom.”

I slap his arm and take his garbage. “Smartass.”

He grins and extends his elbow.

“Oh. A smartass and a gentleman.” I slip my arm through his and we head back towards his truck.

Inside the truck, I can feel the tension between us. I want to invite him in but after last time, I’m worried he’ll say no. Archer pulls up behind my hunk of junk and parks. Stretching his arm along the back of the seat, he brushes his fingers through my hair.

“Do you...want to...come in?” I ask, chancing a look at him. “I promise there’s no kids this time.”

“I’d love to.”

He gets out and rounds the front of the truck, opening my door for me. I take the hand he offers and hop out of the truck. Digging my keys out of my purse, I unlock the door and push it open. Peeking my head in to make sure there wasn’t kids inside. When I hear and see nothing, I walk in.

“Want something to drink?” I ask as I walk towards the kitchen.

“No,” Archer snags me around the waist and hauls me against him. “However, I would love some dessert.”

I bite my lip as I gaze up at him. “What kind of dessert were you hoping for?” I breathe as his head lowers.

“Something...dangerous.” His lips brush over mine, once then twice.

I loop my arms around his neck and hold on as he claims my mouth for a second time tonight.

# I Thought You Were Dead

Dani

A large arm lands across my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. “What in the hell—oh right. Archer.” After our needy make-out session, we had a few drinks and forgot I asked him to stay the night.

I curl into his warm body and snuggle close as that arm tightens around me, holding me flush to him. I watch him like a creeper as he sleeps. His breathing is deep, his face relaxed. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him comfortable. I lift my hand and trace the cut of his jaw and his straight nose. His stubble’s already starting to come in and I relish the feel of it against my skin. I hum my comfort song as I ghost my fingers over his cheek.

“Why are you watching me sleep?” comes a deep, sleep thick voice.

I squeal as one beautiful ice blue eye opens.

“I’m not.” I lie.

Archer raises a dark blond brow.

“Okay, I am. But in my defense, I thought you were dead.” I admit.

Archer chuckles as he rolls us over, pressing his hard body into mine. “Why do I find that hard to believe, Sweetheart.”

I shrug. “I have no idea.” I wiggle as something hard presses against me.

“Daniella,” Archer growls.

“Archer,” I tease.

I reach a hand to his cheek and scratch his stubble. He lowers his mouth to mine and kisses me softly. However, the soft kisses don’t last. They turn hungrier, more desperate and the next thing I know, my shirt is over my head and Archer is reaching into his wallet.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I giggle as I watch him pull a condom out.

“Shut it.”

“How long has that been in there?” I cackle. “It’s probably expired.”

“It’s not expired. I only put it in there on Saturday.”

“Someone was thinking highly of themselves that night.” I deadpan.

“Hopeful was more like it,” Archer climbs off the bed, pushing his boxer briefs down and releasing himself.

I blatantly stare at his thick cock. Dear God, that is going to burn like fuck going in. I’m pretty sure I’ve been re-virginized due to lack of penis in my vagina.

Archer kneels on the bed between my legs. His hands move over the skin on my thighs. “Fuck, you’re beautiful.” He places a kiss to the welt that runs between my thigh and pelvis. He goes to tear the condom open when I stop him.

“You don’t need that.”

The look of confusion and utter shock on his face makes me want to giggle.

“STI’s?”

“Haven’t been with anyone in a...long time. And, according to Gabe *and* Carrie, you haven’t either.”

He groans. “Fucking big mouths. What about pregnancy?”

“Tubes are tied.”

Archer gives me a look of confusion. I shake my head, telling him not to pry.

“I’ve been tested. I’m clean.” I throw out.

Archer grins. “Same.”

He hits me with a hard kiss. This kiss turns my insides into a ticking bomb of excitement. Desire swims through my veins, adding to the intense pressure inside me. Dear God if I don't get Archer inside me soon, I might explode. He slides his lips down my jaw. Biting. Kissing. Licking. Turning me inside out. He sucks a nipple into his mouth and my back arches off the bed.

"Fuck, Luke. Keep doing that." I purr.

Archer pulls back and looks down at me. His eyes roam over my naked body. The way Archer stares at me, makes my breath catch and not in a good way.

"What?" I ask as I start to get self-conscious about my scars and soft, round belly.

"You are a Goddess."

My body flushes from my hair to my toes. "I have a mirror, Archer. I know what I look like, and a Goddess isn't it."

"You're beautiful, Dani."

No man has ever told me I was beautiful. They could never see past the scars. Archer lowers his head and kisses me, gliding his tongue over my lips and asking for entrance. Hunger and another emotion expand in my chest almost bursting through.

"Luke," I moan against his lips, and he rolls, settling me on top of him.

"Ride me," he growls.

I hesitate. When I'm on my back, gravity works its magic and holds everything down. But when I'm on top I look like a gelatinous blob.

"You're overthinking this, Sweetheart."

"I'm not—"

"You're beautiful, striking, stunning, breathtaking, magnificent," he props himself up on his elbows. "I want to see you come. I want to watch your face as you bring yourself pleasure using my cock." He kisses my neck. "I need you."

A man has never said he has needed me before. Not like this. Confidence like I've never felt before washes over me and I sit up. I lift my hips and grab his cock with one hand, stroking it once before placing it at my entrance. Archer pulses in my hand and I press down. Gasping as his cock presses further inside me. I still, letting my body adjust to his size.

Archer grasps my hips, "you okay?"

"Give me a minute. It has been a while."

When my body relaxes around his cock, I start moving slowly on top of him. I dig my nails into his chest for leverage as I roll my hips against him.

"Fuck, Sweetheart. You are so tight," he says through clenched teeth.

I sit up and circle my hips. His fingers dig into my hips and I moan.

Loudly.

The room spins and I'm on my back. "Not fast enough." Archer mutters and takes over.

The hair on his chest brush against my hard nipples and my head kicks back. Breaths puff out of my mouth in short quick bursts.

"Harder."

The quick thrusts tears a cry from me. I grip his arms, digging my nails into the hard muscle.

Deeper.

Harder.

Faster.

But I need more.

"More. I need—"

"I know what you need." Archer's drives turn rougher. Nearly animalistic. He grips my leg and hooks it over his hip, diving in deeper. A rumble comes from his chest. A storm brews in my blood.

My pussy tightens. I cannot breathe or think or do more than feel as the tension snaps and a flood of pleasure assaults me and I fall headfirst into waves of ecstasy.

His thrusts slow and his body tenses above mine. Archer drops his head to my shoulder and groans at the same time his cock pulses inside me with his release. He rolls over until I lay on top of him again.

“Damn, Archer. That was...wow.” I lift my hand. “High five.”

“I’m not high fiving you.”

“Why not? I think we both did an excellent job not getting off too soon.”

“You’re something else, Sweetheart.” Archer places kisses along my sweaty shoulder, as his fingers move up and down my back, causing goosebumps to break out along my skin.

“Is that a good thing?”

“Very.” He mutters.

His fingers still on the burn mark next to my spine. I lift my head and say the first thing I can think of to get his mind off the raised skin his fingers are now moving softly over. “Wanna go for round two.”

Archer’s hand flattens and he smiles. “I’d love nothing more than to go again. However, my body, it seems, has turned into a pile of goo.” He kisses my temple, rolling us over and pulling out slowly.

I leave the bed and make my way to the bathroom to clean myself up and go pee before my bladder explodes.

*Note to self: pee first then sex.*

I finish up and flush the toilet, washing my hands. I bring a wet cloth out with me and hand it over to Archer.

“Thanks,” he says, cleaning himself up and handing the cloth back.

I toss it into the bathroom and climb back into bed. Archer tugs me against his chest, holding me close and kissing my shoulder again. I draw circles in his chest hair. “Can I ask you something?” I question.

“Of course.” His fingers slide up and down my arm.

“When you look at me, what do you see?”

His fingers stop moving. “What do you mean? I see you, Sweetheart.”

I shake my head against his chest. “You say that but...” I sigh. “How long will you be able to pretend you don’t see my scars.”

Archer moves and lifts my chin, tilting my head back. “I’m not pretending. Your scars don’t bother me.”

“Really?”

“Truly.” And to prove his point, he kisses the one above my lip then the one on my shoulder. “They’re nothing to be ashamed of. It means you’ve been through hell and survived.”

Oh God, I’m going to cry.

“You are breathtakingly beautiful. Scars and all.”

I wrap my hand around his neck and pull him down for a kiss. “Thank you.”

He smiles and kisses me again. “Goodnight, Sweetheart.”

I smile into the darkness. “Goodnight, Dimples.”

## Vibrating Panties

Luke

We drive to work separately. I'm not giving Carrie something to blab to Gabe about. Which is the first thing she will do if she sees Dani in my truck. Plus, I needed to swing home and grab something I bought for Dani. I was going to give it to her before our date last night but I chickened out.

Dani's already at her desk when I walk in. I place the gift bag in front of her.

Her eyes widen then narrow. "What's this?"

"A gift," I push the bag closer.

She grabs the bag and places it on her lap, opening it slowly. "Archer," she pulls out what I bought her, "you bought me panties?"

I grin. "I did."

She eyes the lacey fabric. "Why?"

"I saw them, I wanted to see you in them, so I bought them." I shrug. "Plus, I do you owe a new pair. Since I ruined your other ones."

"What other—*oh!*" Dani flushes as the memory comes back to her.

She looks around the office, making sure we're the only two around and lifts her skirt, shimmying out of the panties she's wearing and slipping on the ones I bought her.

"How do they look?"

"Lovely." I kiss the end of her nose and head into my office.

I leave my office door open; I want to see her reaction and see how long it takes her to figure out what's happening.

When I spot Dani at Carrie's desk, I pull the remote for the panties from my pocket and hit the power button, putting it on the lowest setting. Dani's knees buckle and she almost drops to the floor. I shut the panties off as she looks down at herself. Carrie fires a look in my direction, and I wave, flashing the remote. Carrie begins to cackle and grabs her phone.

**CeCe: I can't believe you bought her vibrating panties**

**Me: What can I say, I'm a hopeless romantic**

**CeCe: She's going to kill you when she figures it out**

**Me: I know, and I don't care**

Carrie looks in my direction again and smiles.

**CeCe: Happy looks good on you Lucas Michael**

Dani heads back over to her desk and sits, starting on the proofreading I gave her. I hit the next setting on the remote and this time I hear her hit the desk with a yelp. I shut them off again and wait. I hit the highest setting and she screams my name, finally figuring it out.

I smile as she runs into my office, shutting and locking the door. Her face flushed, and she leans against the door.

"Archer," she moans, "turn them off."

"No." I pull her away from the door and against my chest. Dani moans, her hips rolling against mine.

"Luke, I need you inside me."

I claim her mouth as I let the panties do their thing.

"Luke, please." Dani begs.

I slide her skirt up over her hips and press my knuckle against her pussy, claiming her mouth once more. Her hips start rocking against the back of my hand.



I spin her around and slip my hand between her legs from behind and slip two fingers inside. Turning her head, I cover her mouth with mine.

I break away long enough to say, "come for me, Sweetheart."

Dani comes hard, crying out against my mouth. I turn the panties off slowly, wringing the orgasm out for as long as I can before shutting them off. She pushes away from me and rip the panties down her legs.

Dani slams them into my chest. "I hate you so much." She throws open the door.

"You don't want these?" I ask as she walks out.

"Put them in your desk drawer. We'll need them later."

\*\*\*\*\*

I spend the afternoon editing my proposal. Now that John is going to be the defending lawyer, I need to up my game. Pulling up the list of names Joni gave me; I start making calls to see if any of these women would be willing to testify in court.

My door flies open, and Dani saunters in, with a grin on her beautiful face. She shuts the door and I hear the click of the lock. I hang up before the phone has a chance to start ringing. Dani walks around the desk and lowers herself into my lap. Her mouth meets mine as her fingers dig into my hair, pulling a little. I slide my hands up her back and hold her against my chest.

"Grab those panties and let's fool around," she mutters against my lips.

I groan, desperately wanting to. However, I have too much to finish before court next week.

I squeeze her hips and move her off my lap. "I'd love nothing more than to bend you over this desk," I stand, arranging myself, "however, court is next week and I'm swamped."

Dani pouts and pulls at my shirt. "C'mon Archer. You look like you could use some afternoon delight." She drags her teeth over her bottom lip.

I lower my lips to that spot behind her ear, smiling when she whimpers. "I'm so swamped, it looks like it's going to be a late night."

Picking up where I'm going with this, Dani replies, "really? Will you need me to stay late, Mr. Archer?"

"There is paperwork piling up that needs to be proofed, typed and printed."

Dani laughs and moves out of my grip. "Guess I should get started," she nods towards an actual pile of paperwork. "I'll see you for dinner, Mr. Archer." Dani purrs as she grabs the files and walks out of my office.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I said harder you motherfucker!" Dani barks as I slam into her from behind. "I'm not made of glass! Show my pussy who owns it!"

"Your pussy belongs to me." I growl. "Grip the end of the desk."

Her fingers curl into the wood of the desk, lifting her hips higher, lining us up perfectly. Pulling out, much to her displeasure, I slide a finger inside, lubing it up with her juices.

"Luke, if you don't get me off soon, I'm going to be so mad." Dani barks.

I slap her ass. "Trust me, Sweetheart. I'll get you off." I slide back in and press my wet finger against her hole. Rubbing against it until she relaxes.

"Oh. Fuck. Yeah," Dani moans as I slide in to the first knuckle.

*My girl like ass play. Good to know.*

I take over then, thrusting into her hard enough to rock the desk while pumping my finger inside of her. Dani tightens around me and screams as she comes and I follow her with a grunt. I pepper kisses along her neck and pull out slowly, grinning as she groans.

"I can't feel my legs," Dani says into the wood of the desk. "And next time, you're fucking me in the ass."

*God motherfucking damnit.*

This woman is going to be the death of me. I help her up and fix her clothes, giving her a kiss as I hold her to my chest.

"I need to clean up. Pass me my purse," Dani says.

"Why?" I raise an eyebrow but do what she asked.

"I have a change of panties in there," she winks and makes her way into my private washroom. "And order food! I'm hungry!"

Grinning to myself, I do as I'm told while she cleans up.

After we have both washed up and had something to eat, Dani sorts through the paperwork as I continue to work on my proposal. Or should I say try. I can't keep my hands or lips off her.

"Archer, I swear to God, I'm going to bury you in my backyard along with Mason and his ass-hat friends if you don't stop that." She threatens.

I chuckle as I kiss her neck.

Dani's shoulders shoot up, trying to block me. "I mean it."

"You sound about as threatening as a kitten."

She whimpers when I nip her ear. Her nails dig into my thigh. "Archer."

"Daniella."

Her hand moves, cupping me through my slacks. "Two can play at this game," she purrs.

Turning in her chair, Dani gives me a gentle squeeze and smiles, thinking she has the upper hand. I haul her onto my lap and kiss her deeply.

"Nothing's going to get done if you can't keep your hands to yourself." She moans against my lips.

"Tell me you don't want this, and I'll stop."

Dani digs her hands into my hair and pulls. "I never said I didn't." Groaning, she moves away. "Let's finish this up and then we can take the couch for a test drive."

I bury my face where her shoulder meets her neck. "You got another change of panties in that purse."

"Nope. I'll go commando or wear the panties you bought me."

Now it's my turn to groan. "You do that, and I'll be between your thighs for the rest of the night."

"Mmm. I like the sound of that."

I suck on the soft skin of her neck. Her shoulder shoots up again and I back away, chuckling.

"I hate you," Dani says as she gets up and heads towards the washroom. Her phone starts ringing. "Answer that, would you."

Grabbing the phone from her purse, I frown at the name on the screen. "Who's swamp twat?"

Dani dives for the phone. "What the fuck do you want, Josh?" she barks into the phone.

Her whole body stiffens as she paces around the office. Dani's small body starts to vibrate from anger. "*How do you know he's not home! Why are you at my house!*" she hollers.

I pry the phone from her hand and hang up. "I don't want you going home while he's hanging around."

Dani places her hands on her hips. "I'll be fine, Archer."

"You're spending the night with me." I argue, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I said I'll be fine."

"And I said you're staying with me."

She swipes her purse from the couch. "I can handle myself against Josh."

I don't like the fact that Josh is hanging around Dani's house and I really don't like that Dani doesn't seem to be bothered by this.

"I'm sure you can but you're not going home while he's hanging around."

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

She’s starting to try my patience. “Either you come home with me or I stay at your place. Those are your two choices.” I tell her, leaving her no room for arguing.

Or so I thought.

“Get off your high horse, Archer. I don’t need you to save me.” Dani walks out the door.

“I’ll follow you home,” I call after her.

Dani turns to face me. “You do and I’ll send Jake to kick your ass. Don’t think he won’t because you two bonded over your truck. He might be Erin’s hubby but he would fight to the death for me.”

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. I’m done arguing with her stubborn ass tonight. “Fine. Text me when you get home.”

Dani runs back into my office and plants a hard kiss on my lips. “Promise. Goodnight, Dimples.”

“Goodnight, Sweetheart.”

## Oh God Ma!

Dani

Josh is nowhere to be seen as I pull up next to the curb in front of my house. I fire off a quick text to Archer to let him know while I drag my ass inside and lock the door, using both the deadbolt and the child lock. Josh used to break into houses for fun back in high school and I am not taking any chances.

Tossing my purse on the table by the door, I kick off my heels. I need a shower. I'm a mess from my earlier romp with Archer. I grin to myself. That man has a magic dick. I climb the stairs, stripping as I go and I'm naked by the time I reach the top.

"Holy fuck!"

Gasping, I turn to find Axe, completely frozen, standing in the doorway of Mason's room. I swipe my shirt off the floor and cover my nakedness the best I can.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

Axe says nothing, his mouth just hanging open as his eyes roam my body.

"I thought Mason was at your house." I try again.

"Naked." Axe mumbles.

*Oh God.*

"Axe, what the hell—oh God *Ma!*" Mason closes his eyes and pulls his shirt off his back, tossing it at me.

I pull it over my head, and it settles at my knees. "I thought you were at Axe's. I didn't see your shoes or hear anything."

Mason opens one eye before speaking. "Janelle called. She said some dude was sniffing around here, so I came home."

"And you didn't think to call me and tell me you were home? What if I brought Archer home and we started fooling around on the couch?" I ask.

Mason gags and shakes his body out. Axe, on the other hand, snaps out of his stupor and smiles.

"That's something I wouldn't mind seeing," Axe says, his eyes running the length of my now covered body.

Mason grabs Axe's shirt and drags him out of the room. "We were just getting ready to leave when you walked up here naked," Mason gags again. "Is this what you do when I'm not home? Just parade around naked?"

I swat him arm. "No, I don't *parade* around here naked."

"Too bad." Axe mutters.

I fire him a look and he flashes that Axe smile.

Mason shoves Axe towards the stairs. "I'll see you tomorrow sometime, Ma."

"Be home for curfew." I remind him.

"I know. Make sure you have clothes on when I get home."

"Smartass."

They haul ass downstairs and out the door, leaving me standing at the top.

Letting out a breath, I scoop up my clothes and head into my bathroom.

\*\*\*\*

Banging on my front door startles me and I sit up on the couch. Netflix is stuck on *are you still watching*. I glance at the clock, a quarter to one in the morning. The banging continues as I climb off the couch.

I keep the top child lock in place as I open the door enough to look out. It could be Mr. Wallace again. He has been known to lock himself out of the house, so he gave me a spare key. But he usually calls first.

"For fuck sakes. What the fuck are you doing here?" I demand. The scent of stale beer hits me in the face.

"Let me in." He pushes on the door.

"No." I throw all my weight into the solid wood door, but he has a good seventy pounds on me.

"Dani, let me in."

"Go fuck yourself," I say, leaning all my weight against the door.

"I'll break it down," Josh warns.

I manage to get the door closed but before I can throw the deadbolt, Josh slams into it, busting the child lock, and sending me flying into the stairs.

"Where's my son." He slurs.

I pick myself up. "Not here. Get out."

Josh grabs my arm and flings me into the wall, pinning me in place with his body.

"Where did he go? He was here two hours ago." Josh demands.

"Have you been watching the house?"

"I have been watching *my* son. Seeing as how you're out all night. Where is he." Josh grabs my arms tightly and slams me against the wall, rattling the pictures above my head. "Answer me!"

"I know where he is and that's all that matters." I bark.

His hands tighten on my arms and I bite my tongue to keep from crying out. It'll just fuel the fire. He snarls and slams me again, this time knocking a couple of pictures off the wall. They smash on the floor, sending shards of glass everywhere.

"Did you send him out to wander the streets so you can invite Luke over. I know you're fucking him."

I spit in his face. "What I do is none of your business and no, Mason is not wandering the streets. I would *never* do that to my son. No matter what you believe."

"I wouldn't put it past you. You don't give two shits about that kid. I can see it and once **C.A.S** gets here and sees for themselves; they'll hand *my* son to me no questions asked."

"He stopped being your son the minute you left us and never looked back."

Josh slams me against the wall once more before hauling me to the floor and pinning me there with his massive body. The glass shards cutting into my bare arms. His face softens as he looks at me. I push against his shoulders.

"I miss your pussy," he yanks at my shorts. "Fucking was the only thing you were good at."

I smash the heel of my palm into his nose, causing him to roll off me. I scramble to my feet while Josh is preoccupied and run out the door. I'm not going to allow him to hurt me again. I'm not that scared sixteen-year-old girl anymore.

The street is quiet as most of my neighbours are away for the weekend or in bed. I make it as far as my car before I'm tackled to the ground. My face smashing off the bumper of my piece of shit Honda. Blood floods my mouth as my teeth connect with my lip.

"Where do you think you're going," Josh says into my ear, his forearm pressing into my neck. He stands and grips my ankles as I scream and kick. I attempt to grab hold of something but end up ripping my nails to shreds on the sidewalk. He drags me across the pavement, my bare skin splitting and tearing as he pulls me into my small yard.

"*Someone help me!*" I scream.

"*Shut up!*" he yells as he flips me onto my back and straddles my hips.

I punch and claw at him, sinking what is left of my nails into his cheeks, drawing blood. I go for his nose again, knowing if I hit it hard enough a second time, it would break. I smash the heel of my palm

into his nose and hear the snap. Blood drips onto my face. Josh shouts, holding his nose, giving me a chance to get out from under him.

I look around fanatically for something I can use against him. I lunge for the lid of my metal garbage can. It might not do much damage but it's harder than my fists.

"Think you're tough, Dani," Josh grunts as he straightens. Blood gushing down his face, his nose swelling. "You're still that scared teenage girl I fucked on a dare."

I hold the lid by the handle with both hands. I am going to need as much strength as I can muster. "That's such bullshit. Sean told me that you were stalking me for months. He said you were obsessed with me." I fire back.

He growls, his hands squeezing into fists.

"You love bombed me, making me believe that you were this sweet, caring guy that when you asked me, I said yes!" I yell. "But you were nothing but an abusive fucking prick who's still attached to his mothers tit!"

Josh dives at me and I swing. The vibration from the hit reverberates up my arms causing me to drop the lid. It clangs against the walkway. Glancing up, I find Josh a few steps away from me. I managed to hit him in the face and slice his cheek. Blood pours from the deep laceration, and I smile.

He spits out blood and charges me, tackling me to the ground. My head smashes off the front steps, making me see stars.

*"Get off me!"*

*"I said shut the fuck up!"* his meaty hands wrap around my neck, and he bangs my head against the stairs.

A wave of dizziness washes over me, and I fight to keep my eyes open. I reach up and dig my thumbs into his eyes. Josh hollers, shaking his head. I hold on, pushing my thumbs in harder. His hands tighten around my neck, and he beats my head against the stairs again, knocking me out cold.

\*\*\*\*

I startle, sitting up slowly. I'm sore, I can taste blood in my mouth, and I'm wet. I'm outside, and it's pouring rain. I look around, blinking away the dizziness.

Climbing to my feet slowly, I gasp at the sharp pains throughout my body, the wooziness in my head and the nausea rolling in my belly. I manage to make it inside and grab my phone. The phone rings twice before it's answered.

"Sweetheart? What's wrong?"

I breakdown in sobs at the sound of his voice.

"I'm on my way." He hangs up before I have the chance to explain.

I steal a pair of Mason's sweatpants from the laundry room, throwing them on, rolling them at the waist. Swiping my purse off the table, I step outside to find Archer walking up the walkway. I should have checked myself out first, because going by the anger on Archer's face, I can tell that I wasn't looking good.

Archer meets me halfway, his eyes wander, taking me in. It's a few minutes before he finally speaks.

"What. Happened." He growls.

I only shake my head. "I need to go to the hospital."

"No shit. You're bleeding," he lifts my face. "Your face is starting to bloom with bruises. Your stomach is torn up," he turns me, "your back looks like someone took a food grater to your skin and blood is matted in your hair."

I look down to find that my shirt's in ribbons, showing off the road rash from where Josh had dragged me across the pavement. I reach up and feel my head, hissing when I touch a sore spot.

"Oh God." I sob and cover my face with my hands, regretting it immediately.

Strong arms wrap around my shoulders causing me to whimper in pain. I'm scooped up and carried into the house. Archer brings me upstairs and into my bathroom, sitting me on the toilet lid. He brushes hair off my face, his fingers ghosting over my skin.

"First aid kit?" he asks.

"Under the sink." I whisper.

Archer pulls the box out and leaves, coming back with a shirt, and another pair of sleep shorts. He helps me out of Mason's sweatpants and my destroyed shirt, tossing them with the rest of my dirty clothes.

"Jesus fucking Christ." He mutters as he takes me in. "Sweetheart," Archer stands, "were you assaulted?"

I refuse to look at him.

"Daniella." His voice is stern, almost furious.

I chance a look at him. "I wasn't raped."

"Glad to hear it, but that's not what I asked."

"I was attacked."

"Where's Mason?" he questions.

"At Axe's." I answer.

Archer says nothing as he wets a cloth and sinks to his knees in front of me. He swipes at my skin gently. The sting of the cloth against the raw skin on my thighs and stomach has me hissing through my teeth. Archer stays quiet as he dresses me, leading me outside and helping me into his truck.

I can feel the rage radiating off him as he drives, his body's shaking with it. He drops me off at the ER doors and speeds off. I stand there dumbfounded, watching the taillights of his truck disappear around a corner. Tears spring to my eyes. He left me. He said my scars don't bother him. Guess these new ones were his breaking point. Swallowing the steel ball in my throat, I walk in and towards the triage window, knocking once.

The window slides open, and an incredibly young nurse smiles up at me.

"Can I help you?" she asks kindly, and I freeze.

*I can't go through this again.*

The nurse waits me out. I look around before leaning in.

"I, ah...I was...um...attacked." I whisper.

Her face softens. She passes me a clipboard and a pen. "If you could fill this out and bring it back, we'll get you seen as soon as possible."

I nod, taking what she gave me and sit by the windows.

Away from prying eyes.

## He Stays

Luke

I find Dani sitting by the windows. Shoulders slumped and head ducked as she fills out a form. I sit next to her, making her jump.

"It's just me."

"I thought...I thought you left." Her extraordinary eyes wide as she looks at me.

"I was parking the truck. I'm not leaving you here to deal with this alone."

She opens her mouth but snaps it shut and nods. Her chin wiggling. She's going to break down.

I drape my arm along the back of her chair, touching the nape of her neck lightly. Dani hisses and pulls away. I move the collar of her shirt and find a bruise forming on the back of her neck that look an awful lot like fingers. As if someone had their hands wrapped around her neck.

Unadulterated rage flows through me. No one should ever put their hands on another person. However, when I find out who did this—and I have a really good inkling of who it might be—I will return the favour ten-fold.

Dani stands and walks over to the triage window, handing back the clipboard and walking into the room. She sits next to me a few minutes later, purse clutched in her small hands.

"Sweetheart—"

A sob hiccups out as she breaks down. Body curling inward as she cries. Gathering her in my lap, I brush her hair off her face and her small hands curl into my shirt. I do my best to sooth her, however, it doesn't seem to be working.

"Talk to me, Sweetheart."

Dani cries harder, wrapping her arms around my neck. I let her cry. She'll talk when she's ready.

The nurse calls her name a while later. I help Dani to her feet and walk with her through the ER doors and into the room.

"The doctor will be with you in a moment." The nurse says with a sad smile, shutting the door behind her.

"I'll be out in the hall," I say, reaching for the door handle.

"Stay. Please." Dani twists her hands in her lap, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

I only nod and take a seat across from the bed. I can feel the shame pouring off Dani, it's so thick it nearly chokes me.

"It wasn't your fault."

She flinches but doesn't look at me.

"Dani, it's not your fault," I say.

She starts shaking her head.

I cross the space between us. "Sweetheart," I lift her face so she's looking at me. "It's not your fault."

"I asked for it." She whispers.

"How?"

"I...I..." she starts crying again. "I asked for it by opening the door. I asked for it by fighting back," she hiccups as I wrap my arms around her gently. "I brought this on myself. This wouldn't have happened if I had just given Mason to them." Dani admits.

I pull back when she confirms my suspicions. I take her shoulders, causing her to cry out again. I move her shirt down her shoulder on one side and find another nasty bruise and a deep cut. How did I not notice this when I cleaned her up?

"Josh attack you, didn't he?"



She nods this time.

"Look at me, Sweetheart." Her eyes meet mine. "It is *not* your fault. You did *not* ask for this. He has no rights over Mason. You did what any mother would do. Kept your child safe."

"How am I keeping him safe?"

Before I can say anything else, there is a knock on the door, and it opens.

"Ms. Carter. I'm Dr. Singh," the female doctor steps in, shutting the door behind her. She looks through the papers on her clipboard, before glancing at me.

"Would you mind stepping out in the hall while I speak with Ms. Carter."

"She asked me to stay." I respond.

"I will call you back in when I'm done with my questions." Dr. Singh eyes me with suspicion.

I know she thinks I'm the one who did this. Instead of fighting this, I step towards the door.

"He stays." Dani breathes.

"Are you sure? I'm going to be asking some very personal questions and doing an internal exam." The Doctor says.

"He. Stays." Dani says again.

I could see the doctor fighting with her ethics. A woman, who is beaten and bruised is brought to the hospital by a man twice her size, and she doesn't want him to leave the room. I understand where her mind is at, but I could give two shits about what she thinks. I'm here because my Sweetheart needs me to be.

"Very well," Dr. Singh says.

I sit as Dr. Singh places her clipboard on the small counter behind her. "Ms. Carter, can you tell me what transpired."

As Dani explains what had happened, I clench my fists in my lap and grind my teeth to the point of pain.

*He hurt your girl*, that other voice growls. *Time to return the favour.*

I've never agreed with myself more than right now.

Dr. Singh reaches into a cupboard under the counter and pulls out a paper hospital gown.

"I wasn't raped." Dani interjects.

"So you've said. However, you don't know what he or someone else might have done while you were unconscious, and I want to make sure an assault didn't happen." She hands over the gown.

"I'll be back in a moment." She smiles and steps out.

Dani climbs off the bed and starts undressing. Bruises and cuts and road rash come into view. My blunt nails bite into my palms. Marred skin covers her body. With the gown on and Dani sitting back on the table, we wait again in silence for Dr. Singh to return. Dani watches every movement I make, every tick in my jaw as I grind my teeth together. I am beyond furious at this point.

The door opens and Dr. Singh enters. "I'm going to get you to lay down Ms. Carter," she says softly.

"I'll be in the waiting room," I say to Dani as I stand. Her eyes glisten with tears but she nods once. I walk out and close the door behind me.

\*\*\*\*\*

The ER waiting room is quiet as I wait while Dani has her exam done. I check the time again. Twenty to three in the morning. Dani has been in the room for forty-five minutes.

"Mr. Archer," I turn to find Dr. Singh and a male Police Officer walking my way. I take a deep breath through my nose, willing my temper to take a backseat. This is not the time to lose my shit.

"I'm Officer Hale, I'm here because Dr. Singh has some concerns."

I glance at the doctor. Her arms are crossed over her chest and her lips are in a tight line.

He sits next to me. "I have a few que—"

"I know what you're going to ask me, and I'm going to save you the time. I was working on a divorce case, at my condo, when Daniella called me in tears," I say, handing him my phone. "Check my call logs. She called at quarter to two."

The Officer stares at me and I shove my phone in his hand. "Is there someone who can confirm you were at home when the attack happened?" he questions.

"No."

Officer Hale opens my phone and scrolls through my call logs and text messages. "Are you and Ms. Carter in a relationship?"

"We are. It's new. But she is my PA and I have known her for almost two months." I answer.

He keeps scrolling through my phone. "Why are there so many late-night calls to her? Were you keeping tabs on her?"

I take another deep breath. "No. As I said, she is also my PA. I work long hours at the office and at home. Sometimes I need her to add things to my schedule and I am not a man to leave important items until the next day."

"Do you have a temper, Mr. Archer?" Officer Hale questions.

"Yes."

"If something doesn't go your way, does that make you angry?"

I fight the urge to call this guy a fucking dumbass. "From time to time, yes."

"Did Ms. Carter make you angry tonight?" he asks, critically.

"She made me horny," I answer honestly.

Officer Hale stares at me with a look of shock on his face. He's the one asking the questions.

"She made you horny?" he parrots.

"Yes. We were in the middle of being intimate when she received a call from her ex, saying that he was at her house and was demanding to know where their son was. Daniella got upset and headed home sometime after ten to confront him. Leaving me with a case of blue balls." I tap my phone. "If you check my texts, you'll see she texted me when she got home."

"And that didn't make you mad?"

"It made me frustrated. Have you ever had blue balls, Officer Hale?" I smirk when his cheeks turned red.

He continues looking through my phone. "And the next time she spoke with you was when she called around two?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Yes."

"And you found her beaten."

"Yes."

"But you have no one who can confirm you were at home when the attack happened." Officer Hale repeats himself.

This man is pissing me off. I know he is doing his job, but this is getting to be a bit much. "Why would Daniella call me if I was the one who attacked her?" I inquire.

The doctor and Officer share a look. "Maybe she was afraid that if she called someone else, you'd get angry." Dr. Singh states.

"For one, I would've still been there if I was the one who hurt her and two, I'm surprised that she called me. I figured she would've called her best friend, Erin Matthews."

"So, it's not usual for Ms. Carter to call you in the middle of the night?" Officer Hale asks.

"Daniella never calls me after eleven."

Officer Hale hands me back my phone and climbs to his feet. "I'm also going to ask Ms. Carter a few questions. Do not leave until I dismiss you."

I hold up a hand to stop him. "Look, I understand that you are both doing your jobs. A small woman is brought in by a man who is much bigger than her. It's obvious that she's been attacked, and she doesn't want him to leave. I know how that looks." I turn to Dr. Singh. "Was she assaulted?"

The doctor looks to the Officer before answering. "No."

I relax against the chair. "Thank fuck."

They whisper to each other for a few minutes before leaving the ER waiting room.

I sit there for another half an hour before Officer Hale returns. "Ms. Carter confirms that you are not the man that attacked her."

I nod, biting my tongue to stop myself from saying 'I fucking told you so.'

Officer Hale leaves and Dani is wheeled out ten minutes later by a male nurse. I meet them by the triage window, and I'm handed a bag of medication.

"The gauze pads can be removed in twelve hours, then she needs to apply Bacitracin to her stitches every four hours," the nurse informs me. "We have also included some pain medication in case she needs it. We've given her some already."

"Thank you," I kneel next to the chair. "I'll bring the truck around."

Dani nods once.

I take her chin between my fingers. "I'll be right back, Sweetheart. I'm not leaving you."

I wait until she looks at me before heading out and bringing my truck to the ER doors. I help Dani out of the wheelchair as gently as I can and lift her into the truck.

"Archer, put me down. I'm too fat for you to be picking up." Dani swats at my hands.

"You're not fat, Sweetheart." I tell her.

She slumps in the seat as I buckle her in. "You've seen me naked. I shake like Jell-O when you pound into me." She wiggles in her seat.

"You are not fat, Daniella. And I happen to love Jell-O." I admit. She snorts as I shut the door and round the truck, climbing behind the wheel.

I drive her to my place. I'm not taking the chance of staying at her place and have Josh show back up. It wouldn't end well for him.

"This isn't my house," Dani says slowly as we pull into my parking spot.

"You're staying with me for the weekend," I say.

"What about Mason? He's going to freak out if I'm not home."

"I texted him from your phone while you were getting stitched up." I answer. "I didn't go into detail about what happened. I just told him you were spending the weekend."

She looks up at me with a small smile on her face. "Thank you."

As soon as my key slides into the deadbolt, Sarah's door whips open.

"Where have you been?" Sarah questions.

I ignore her and open the door.

"I'm talking to you Lucas," Sarah says and steps into the hallway.

I sigh and speak over my shoulder. "Where I've been is none of your business." I take Dani's hand and lead her into the apartment.

Sarah rushes the door and sticks her foot out, stopping it from closing. "It is my business. We had plans." She pushes the door open wider.

"We did not."

"You said you'd talk to me later." She pouts.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "That was my nice way of saying fuck off."

Sarah's hand flies to her chest in shock. "What has gotten into you, Lucas? You were never like this before."

"More like what has *he* gotten into," Dani calls out from behind me. "Pussy. He has gotten into my pussy."

I bark out a laugh at the look on Sarah's face and the fact that Dani's feeling well enough to be brazen. Although, it could be the pain meds. Dani pops up between me and Sarah like a Jack-in-the-box.

"Now, if you'll excuse us," Dani pushes on my chest, backing me farther into the apartment. "I need Luke to check my oil with his extremely large dipstick." She kicks the door shut in Sarah's face.

I look down into the face of the woman who has me wrapped around her tiny finger and smile.

"Dimples." She whispers as she pokes at my cheeks. "Boop boop."

*Yep. It's the pain meds.*

I lead her into my room, helping her onto the bed.

"I need to change." She starts pulling at her clothes, getting stuck in her shirt.

I grab one of my t-shirts. She'll swim in it, but it'll keep her covered. I help her change and tuck her into bed.

"Will you stay?" Dani asks.

"I'll be in the living room," I inform her.

"Will you stay...with me?"

"You sure? I don't want to accidentally hurt you while we're sleeping." I confess.

"I don't want to be alone right now."

I hesitate. Her body is battered and broken; she needs rest. "I'll stay until you fall asleep, then I'll move to the couch."

She sighs, blowing baby hairs off her face. "Stop being a ding dong, Archer. Get in the bed."

I climb under the covers because I can't say no to this woman. "If you start to feel uncomfortable, just say the word and I'll leave."

Dani nods and curls into me. "Thanks, Luke."

My heart skips a beat at the sound of my name on her lips. "Anything for you, Sweetheart. Always."

## Always

Luke

Dani spent the day in bed. Only getting up to use the bathroom. I brought her food and water, checking on whether she took her pain meds or not. She never did. She didn't eat the food I brought either.

I sit on the couch and watch her sleep through the open bedroom door. She hardly moves, her breathing is shallow, and the odd word works its way from her lips. I'm starting to get worried; I don't think it's normal to sleep for almost thirteen hours.

The front door swings open and Gabe saunters in. "Damn dude," he whistles, "you look like shit." He drops next to me on the couch.

"Thanks." I scrub my face.

Gabe glances into my room. "Ah," Gabe elbows me, "now I know why you look like shit. Up late learning about the female form."

"That's Dani," I reply.

"Even better."

"She was attacked last night."

Gabe's smile vanishes and his body starts shaking. "By. Who." He growls.

I give him the footnotes, as it's not my story to tell.

"Get the boys," Gabe stands, cracking his knuckles, "we got a fuckhead to kill."

"One: we don't have any boys and two: that's not up to us." I state.

"The fuck it's not!" Gabe's hands curl into fists at his side.

Gabe may be the nice, fun one, but he has a temper that could level the city. Especially if the one hurt is someone he cares about.

"It's not up to us, Gabriel. I'm not doing anything that's going to upset Dani even more than she already is." I say.

Gabe flops back down on the couch defeated. "Fine. But if I see him, I cannot be held responsible for my actions. I mean, if I'm driving and he walks out in front of me," Gabe shrugs, "if I hit him, that's not my fault. He walked in front of my car."

"It doesn't count if he's walking on the sidewalk." I deadpan.

"It does if I get run off the road. You know how some people drive around here. Especially in the downtown core."

I bark out a laugh. "Idiot."

Dani lets out a moan and Gabe jumps off the couch and rushes into my room.

"Gabe!" I bark.

"Hey Dani girl," he says softly. "How you feeling babe."

My brother sits next to Dani on the bed, and she cowers away from him. Gabe reaches out to brush her hair off her face when her body starts shaking.

"Don't touch me." She breathes.

"Gabe." I hiss.

He waves me away. "It's only me," he says in a voice so gentle; it doesn't sound like him at all. "You know I'd never hurt you, Dani girl." Gabe reaches out again, and Dani recoils.

"Don't touch me."

Gabe looks at me with anger in his eyes. He stands from the bed and leaves. I walk into my room, taking the empty glass, and refilling it, placing it back on the table with her meds. Dani watches as I take her plate of veggies she never ate and step back from the bed.

"Thank you." She whispers.

I smile the best I can, but the sorrow in her voice makes it hard. "I'm going to get you something fresh to eat, okay?"

She nods and lays back down, wrapped in my shirt and the blanket. I close the door halfway and go into the kitchen.

"I'm going to fucking kill him." Gabe states leaning against the counter. "He did a fucking number on her beautiful face."

"The rest of her isn't any better. Road rash all over her torso and back, she's covered in bruises," I mutter as I pull stuff from the fridge to make her a sandwich. "Blood was matted in her hair. I think he bashed her head against something. The doctor didn't tell me much."

Gabe's face flushes with anger. "Fucking prick."

"She won't let me touch her." I state.

"Seriously?"

I nod as I put her sandwich together. "I want to hold her, comfort her. But every time I try, she curls into herself." I plate it and walk back into the room.

I place it next to the now empty glass. "Try to eat something, Sweetheart."

I make it as far as the door when Dani calls my name. I glance over my shoulder. Dani's sitting up; the blankets are lying on her lap.

"Yes?"

She slowly climbs off the bed and inches her way over to me. I don't move. Hell, I don't even breathe in case it scares her away.

"Thank you. For everything." Her arms slither around my waist and she squeezes gently before letting go.

"Anything for you, Sweetheart," I force a smile. "Always."

## Dani

I feel like shit. My whole body hurts. I guess I should take some pain meds, but I don't have the ambition to move. Archer has been coming in every half hour to check on me. It's worse now than it was before I hugged him, and I feel horrible because I didn't want to touch him.

It has nothing to do with him, he has been nothing but amazing. It has to do with me and that tiny nugget in the back of my head telling me that every man I care about will hurt me.

The door opens and closes, and a body sits on the bed.

"Hey girl."

I roll over to face Elle. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

I sit up, letting the blanket fall on my lap, and pulling the shirt over my shoulders to cover the bruises.

"Luke called CeCe."

"How come?"

She stretches out next to me. "He's freaking out."

My brows creep up my forehead. "Seriously?"

Elle nods. "He wants nothing more than to help you, but he has no idea how."

"And Carrie sent you?"

Elle nods again. "Yep."

"What for?" I cringe. "I'm sorry."

Elle laughs and waves a hand. "CeCe sent me because," she takes a deep breath, "I've been where you are."

I reach over and squeeze her arm. "I'm so sorry."

Elle gives me a sad smile. "I'm here to tell you my story."

"You don't have to," I argue.

Elle holds up a hand. "It's good to get it out. Helps with the healing process."

My therapist told me the same thing, but I only told Erin what actually happened. My parents got the PG-13 version.

Elle takes a deep breath and begins. "My father was a horrible man; used his fists and his words to show 'love.' He raised my brothers the same way." Tears welled in her brown eyes.

"The beatings started when I was around eight and got worse the older I got. The final one happened when I said I was moving out at eighteen. He said the only way I was leaving *his* family was in a body bag."

Elle wipes at the tears on her cheeks. "It lasted three days and my brothers helped. I don't know how I managed to make it to the hospital but I remember collapsing inside the ER doors. I never saw them again after that."

She moves her shoulder length black hair away from her neck. "They broke my spine, neck and jaw," she points to the scar running down her back and another along her jaw. "My teeth aren't real." She reaches into her mouth and pops her top teeth out. "Fucking dentures at eighteen years old." She slurs, popping her teeth back in.

"It took three surgeries to fix the damage and I had to wear a halo for close to a year." Elle brushes her bangs away from her forehead, pointing to the tiny star-shaped scars on the side of her head. "My jaw was wired shut and I couldn't eat solid food for six months."

My beatings were no where near as bad as Elle's and here I am, wallowing about what happened to me.

"Where was your mother?" I ask gently.

"Died when I was three. I was told it was an accidental fall, but I always believed my father had a hand in it." Elle takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. "I survived and so did you."

I let what Elle said hang in the air for a few minutes before I start sharing my own story. "What I'm about to say, I've never told anyone. Except Erin."

"You don't have to say anything," Elle says.

I shake my head. "You shared your story and I'm going to share mine." Taking a deep breath, I begin.

"When I first met Josh, I thought he was the sweetest guy. He would meet me at my locker after every class, I would find little notes, or a flower taped to my locker. He would take me out for dinner every Friday and lavished me with gifts."

I swallow. "We were dating for three months when the manipulation started. It started with him saying I was being dramatic when I cried or I was overreaching when I got angry. My feelings never mattered. He would tell me to suck it up or to just deal with it. He would say something about my looks or weight then tell me he was only joking.

"He never liked how much time I would spend with Erin. Said she was a slut and that he didn't want me hanging out with her because she would turn me into one too. He kept me from her as much as he could and when I would bring it up, he'd say that it wasn't healthy to spend that much time with her and that everyone else thinks so too." Tears begin to roll down my cheeks.

"When I got pregnant however, he started blaming me for things out of my control. He blamed me for the condom breaking, for having morning sickness that lasted all day, for gaining more than twenty-five pounds, for going into labour while a hockey game was on," I snort. "It moved to physical once I started showing."

I wipe my cheeks. "It got worse after Mason was born. He stopped using his fists and started using objects. He's burned me, whipped me, stabbed me. He used a bat to break my hand, stabbed me with a

fork. Pushed me down the stairs while I was holding Mason,” I shake my head. “It only stopped when his daddy told him that he needed to ditch me because the college recruiters were looking at him for a hockey scholarship.”

“How did you get the scar on the side of your face?” Elle questions softly.

I touch it, running my fingers down the raised skin. “Our waiter at the restaurant we were dining at told me I was very beautiful, so Josh decided to change that.”

“You are still beautiful. Even with the scar.”

I touch the fine line scar again. “It took two surgeries to get it to look like this. He flayed me open like a fish.”

Elle squeezes my hand. “We both went through horrible situations and made it out alive. We might not be over what they did but we survived.”

It’s nice to know that I have someone to talk to about what I’m feeling. I mean, Erin knows what happened, but she never experienced it firsthand. And unless you’ve been there, there’s only so much you can fully understand.

“I’m going to tell you something that no one knows about. Not even CeCe.” Elle confesses. “What happened to me was over seventeen years ago but sometimes,” she takes a deep breath, “sometimes I can still feel their hands on my skin. The anger in every hit, every punch.”

“How’d you get through it?”

Elle smiles then, reaching into her pocket and handing me a card. “Dr. Walters did. She still does.”

I turn the card over in my hand, rubbing my thumb along the raised letters of the card.

“I know it’s not my place, but I think you’d benefit from her help,” Elle says, tapping the card.

“She’s been in our shoes; she knows when to listen and when to give advice. She will not push you to talk but she will ask questions that might make you uncomfortable.”

She stands. “I’m not saying give her a call right away, but maybe later on down the line.”

“Thanks, Elle.” I shake the card. “I’ll think about it.”

She smiles again. “Luke cares for you, you know.”

I drop my chin to my chest. “I know.” I whisper.

“No, I don’t think you do.”

I glance at Elle. “I’m sorry?”

“I don’t think you know just how much he cares for you,” she grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Deeply. He cares for you four letter word deeply. And he wants to help you.”

Elle heads for the door. “Give him a chance because he won’t stop trying until you do.”



## Four Letter Word Deeply

Dani

I jerk awake. Sweat's rolling down my back and I'm panting. I take in where I am. I'm at Archer's, in his bed, by myself. I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom. I need a shower. I turn on the water and climb in, whimpering as the water hits the raw skin on my body.

I wash quickly and step out, applying the ointment to the stitches I can reach and wrap a towel around myself. I walk out of the bathroom and into the main apartment.

"Archer?" I call.

"Office."

A small smile pulls at my lips as I walk in the room. He turns in his chair. His eyes take in my body, and I curl inwards. He looks haggard. His hair's a mess, his beard's starting to grow in, and dark circles bloom under his eyes.

I try to think of something to say but come up empty, so I hold up the tube of ointment instead. Archer takes it as he stands and I turn, parting the hair that falls over the spot they shaved to stitch up the laceration. I flinch as he lightly applies the cold ointment. I open my mouth to say something but come up short again. So, I go with the one thing that I know will make him happy.

"I'm hungry." I glance over my shoulder.

"I'll make you something." He smiles but like Elle's, it doesn't reach his eyes.

I move back as he steps towards me, not meaning to. "You can grab a clean shirt from the second drawer of the dresser." He tells me.

I nod and make my way back into his room. Opening the drawer, I'm shocked at what I find. Band shirts. All of them. Not one solid colour in sight. I grab a well-worn Misfits shirt and put it on. It touches mid-thigh and covers everything else.

I'm going to have to go home at some point to get some clean clothes. I pick up the ones I was wearing last night and walk into the kitchen. "Laundry?" I inquire.

Archer points with the knife he's using towards a closet door. "Detergent and dryer sheets are on the top shelf."

I open the door and find a full-size front-loading washer and dryer. I toss my clothes inside and shut the door. Stretching, my fingers just graze the detergent.

"Archer," I call, "I can't reach."

"I'll be right there."

I feel him come up behind me, his body heat making my body stiffen. He places the detergent and dryer sheets on the top of the washing machine. "Do you need me to show you how to use it?" Archer asks.

"I've been doing laundry since I was ten. I think I know how to use a washing machine." I say dryly.

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

"Do you have laundry you need done?" I question.

"You don't need to do my laundry."

"But I only have four things. It's a waste of water."

Archer chuckles. "Such a mom thing to say."

"Shut your face."

"The hamper is in my bathroom."

I make my way into the bathroom and drag the hamper into the closet. "Do you separate your darks and lights?"

“No.”

Oh, thank God. I hate doing that and Archer has a lot of lights. I toss everything in the large drum of the washing machine and add the soap to the compartment, turning it on.

I linger around the island. Archer puts a plate in front of me, along with another glass of water. His eyes linger on my face before he turns and grabs the pan off the stove, sliding a thick western omelet onto the plate.

Archer points to the chair. “Sit.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

My face caught fire. “I’ve got no panties on.”

Archer raises a brow in question.

“These are velvet seats,” I explain.

His other brow goes up.

“Bodily fluids will stain the seat.” I raise my brows.

“You’re on your period?” Archer questions.

“No. That finished last week.”

“You plan on pissing on the chair?”

I flip him off. “No.”

“Then what bodily fluids will get on the chair?” Archer asks, genuinely curious.

I throw my hands up. “I’m ovulating, you dumbass. I’ll cream all over it.”

His brows fire up his forehead. “Didn’t realize I turned you on that much.”

“It has nothing to do with being turned on. Ask Carrie, she’ll tell you.” I bark.

He shakes his head. “Don’t need to know that badly.”

Archer hands over a dish towel and I drape it across the seat and sit down. He stays standing across the counter and digs into his own omelet. I pick at mine before shoving a forkful in my mouth. I don’t know if it’s because I haven’t eaten in twenty-four hours or what, but this is the best omelet I’ve ever eaten.

“I guess you were hungry,” Archer quips with a grin.

“Starving.”

“You want another?”

I shake my head. My stomach is already starting to roll, and it isn’t because of his cooking. It’s from what I’m about to do. “I want to thank you—”

“You already did.”

“Shush. I want to thank you for calling Carrie and having Elle come talk to me.” I drop my hands in my lap. “It helped to talk with someone who has been through something similar.”

I look at Archer then. His eyes soften and I think back to what Elle said.

*Four letter word deeply. And he wants to help you.*

I take a deep breath before spewing everything into the air between us. “When I woke up, you were the first person I called for help. I knew,” I look down at my hands, “I knew you would help me without question. Erin would have too, but she also would’ve taken a hit out on Josh.” I huff out a small laugh. “She still might when she finds out.”

I wave a hand; I’m getting off topic. “I didn’t expect you to stay at the hospital, but you did. I didn’t expect you to take care of me, but you are.” I look back at him then. His face is unreadable, but his eyes are showing emotions that I never thought I would ever see directed at me.

“I didn’t expect you to be my knight in shining armor, but you are.” I glance down at my hands in my lap again. “I don’t think I would’ve been able to handle this on my own and I want to thank you.” I confess.

Archer moves then, turning my chair, and squatting in front of me, making us eye to eye.  
“Sweetheart,” his hand comes up and I flinch.  
Archer drops his hand and straightens. The hurt in his eyes makes my heart twist in my chest.  
“It’s going to take me a while before I allow a man to touch me again.” I say.  
“Will...” he clears his throat, “will you tell me your story?”  
“One day.”  
I feel his fingers ghost across my cheek. “I would never hurt you.”  
“I know you wouldn’t, but I’m feeling extremely vulnerable and guilty and angry, and I can’t allow myself to get hurt.”  
“Sweetheart,” I close my eyes at the sound of the concern in his voice.  
“I...” he exhales, “if you need space, I’ll give you that. If you need comfort, I’ll give you that. But the one thing I will never do, is lay a hand on you in anger.”  
I open my eyes.  
“You mean the world to me and I’ll do what I have to do to keep you in it and that includes leaving you alone. It’ll kill me, but I’ll do it for you.”

## He Can Do No Wrong

Luke

As I look into Dani's beautiful eyes, I can see the doubt there. The guilt of what happened weighing down on her. Reaching out again, she allows me to touch her skin.

"Seeing you like this is killing me, Sweetheart." I hear her gasp as I drop my hand.

"Tell me what to do. I am here for you, always. What do you need?"

She blinks up at me. The bruises on her face are startling. She opens her mouth when the buzzer goes on the washer. Dani heads over to the closet and moves the clothes from one machine to the other. The huge contusions on her thighs are visible when she bends over, and I clench my fists to stop myself from breaking something.

"Elle gave me a card for her therapist," Dani states. "I think I'm going to give her a call."

The rope that has been tied around my chest since I brought her home, loosen and I relax. "That's good, Sweetheart. What else? I will do everything in my power to help you."

"I don't know what you can do." She shuts the door and hits the button.

"I can accept that. Let's start small then," I say.

"How?"

"I'll take you to report this."

Her eyes go wide, and she curls into herself. "There's no point," she sighs, "the cops won't believe me."

"Why's that?"

"Because it's Josh. John and Helen's baby boy. He can do no wrong."

I scrub a hand through my hair. "I think you should."

She barks out a humorless laugh. "Why? They have cops on payroll. I know this for a fact." Dani shakes her head. "I'm not reporting this."

I cross my arms. "I'm not going to budge on this, Sweetheart."

Dani scrunches her nose and raises a brow. My resolve cracks a wee bit. She looks so cute when she does that.

"I'm not going to embarrass myself, Archer. I know what will happen. They'll take my statement and say they'll 'look into it' but they won't." She says.

"You don't know—"

"The fuck I don't! The first time he broke my nose, I reported him, and they laughed me out of the station!" Dani yells.

My blood freezes and my heart stops pumping in my chest as Dani slaps a hand over her mouth.

"What did you say?" I say with a calm that scares me.

I'm beyond pissed.

I'm *murderous*.

"Nothing," she says, the word muffled by her hand.

I step up to her. "Bull. Shit. What did you say?"

Dani shakes her head as she backs up, hitting the island in my kitchen. "I said nothing."

Her eyes start to water and her body begins to tremble but I hold my ground. I'm not going to move on this. Something needs to be done with that asshole.

"I'm going to ask this once and once only, Sweetheart. Is Josh the reason for every scar and burn on your body?"

Her eyes widen and tears pour down her cheeks. I hit the nail on the head, drove it deep and now I feel like a fucking asshole. But my temper is in the drivers seat.

“Why didn’t you fight back? Why did you let it happen!”

A loud sob breaks free from Dani’s mouth and my heart shatters in my chest. I did this. I made her cry.

“Sweetheart,” I start, moving closer.

Dani races from the kitchen, slamming my bedroom door behind her.

I drop my hands to my hips and let out a breath.

I fucked up once again.

## My Best Lingerie

Luke

A knock sounds on the front door. I slowly haul my ass off the couch, where I slept after my blow up yesterday. I open the door, surprised by who is standing there.

"Erin?"

She gives me a shy, sad smile. "Hey Luke. I was going to buzz but someone was walking out, so I snuck in." I move so she can enter. "Nice place," she comments as she looks around.

"I guess you're here for Daniella," I say. I point towards my bedroom door; however, Erin stays where she is.

"To answer the questions I *know* you're dying to ask. Yes, she told me everything. Yes, I'm taking her to the station to report this even though she doesn't want to. And yes," she glances over at the door, "Josh is the reason her body is a road map to hell." Erin confirms my suspicions.

I run a hand down my face.

"The reason she didn't fight back is because he love bombed, manipulated and gaslit her until she believed it was *her* fault for everything that happened."

My chest constricts. Erin squeezes my shoulder. "She doesn't like to talk about it. It took her years to get over what happened. She tried to end her life when Mason was three because she couldn't live with the guilt."

"Guilt over what?" I ask, stunned.

Erin glances back at the bedroom door. "Over having to work two jobs to provide for Mason. Over having to rely on her parents for a place to live and to help her raise Mason." She wipes under her eyes. "Guilt—" she blinks up at the ceiling. "Guilt over having a child with an abusive man. She was so scared he was going to be just like Josh. Mason has a temper."

My heart breaks and it must have shown on my face because Erin wraps me in a tight hug. "She'll be okay hon," she pulls back, "just don't give up on her. She needs to know what it's like to be loved by a good man."

She grins and steps towards my room. "And I know you love her, Luke. I can see it in your eyes when you look at her."

I swallow hard. "What do you see?"

Erin beams as she answers. "You look at her as if she is a Goddess come to life."

Erin knocks on the door and walks in. Dani's sob as her best friend embraces her. I shut the door to give them privacy. Moving into the kitchen, I start the coffee maker.

"*No Erin!*" Dani yells.

"*Yes Daniella!*" Erin yells back. "I'm not letting him get away with this *again!*"

The door swings open, and Dani marches out and straight up to me. "Was this your idea?" she demands.

I glance over her head at Erin. "What idea? You called her over."

Dani jabs me. "Not that. Did you tell her to take me to the station?"

"No."

"Bullshit, Archer. This idea has you written all over it."

"Dani, you need to report what happened," Erin says coming to stand by the island. Dani shoots her a glare that makes me flinch.

"Do you not remember what happened last time I tried that?" Dani asks Erin.

"I do."

"I'm not going through that again."

"I don't care. You need to do something about this." Erin retorts.

"The fuck I do!" Dani shouts.

"Who knows how many other women he has done this to. He needs to pay for his actions!" Erin yells back.

Dani rolls her lips and blinks at Erin.

Erin rounds the island. "Did that never occur to you?"

Dani shakes her head. Erin takes her hand and leads her back to the bedroom, shutting them in.

Two hours pass before they emerge from the room. We face each other; her purse held tightly against her chest.

"After talking to Erin, I've decided to report what happened."

My body relaxes. "I'm glad."

"I, ah...I also wanted to ask if you'd..." Dani looks away.

"If I'd what?" I inquire.

Dani looks everywhere but my face.

"If I'd what, Sweetheart."

"If you'd represent me in court if it gets that far. You can take the payments out of my cheques. Maybe not the whole thing at once because I do have bills to pay and Mason to feed—"

"Unfortunately I can't." I say.

Dani blinks at me. "Oh. Um. Could you recommend—"

I straighten. "Mark. You'll be in capable hands with him."

"How come you can't." She whispers.

"We're in a relationship. Conflict of interest."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense." Dani gives me a small grin.

"And you are taking some time off." I tell her.

Dani shakes her head. "I need the money. I cannot afford to take time off."

"Work from home. I'll set you up."

"But what if you need me to scribe for you?" she asks.

"Video chat." I answer.

"But what if you need me to print something? I don't have a printer." Dani points out.

"Email it to me and I'll print it off."

"But—"

I drop to my knees. "I'm begging here, Sweetheart. On my knees. In a pair of gray sweatpants. My best lingerie."

Dani snorts out a laugh. "You drive a hard bargain, Archer, but fine, I'll work from home."

Dani stares at me, something flashing in her eyes. Something I want so badly from her. Something she already has from me. Something Erin has already figured out.

A wide smile breaks out on my face.

"Dimples." She whispers.

My smile grows as I stand. "Call when you're ready and I'll come set you up."

Dani nods before heading to the door. "Goodbye, Dimples."

"Goodbye, Sweetheart."

## Dr. Walters

Dani

I haven't done this in years." I admit to Dr. Walters. "I'm a bit nervous." I twist my purse strap in my hands. She smiles softly, sitting back in her chair.

"I'm not going to push you to tell me everything that has happened, Dani. I'm here to listen. If you want to sit here in silence for the hour, I'm fine with that. If you'd like to talk about your day, I'm fine with that as well. We'll go at your pace, not mine."

I relax against the back of the chair. The last therapist I saw pushed for information. He was constantly asking me questions about how I viewed myself, what I thought when I looked in the mirror and saw all my scars. He made me feel worse, not better. I told my parents after a month of seeing him and they found me someone else.

But she wasn't any better.

"I'd like to talk about my..." I rolled my wrist, trying to find the words. "Relationship with Josh."

"What would you like to talk about?"

I looked around the office. There were so many things I want to talk about. "I don't know, to be honest."

Dr. Walters smiles. "That's okay. If you'd like to think it over, we can talk about it next time."

I shake my head. "I need to get some of it out. I'm in a new relationship and I don't want what happened in my past to boil over into this one more than it already has."

"Well," she crosses her leg over her knee, "is there something you didn't get a chance to talk about last time you were in therapy?"

I twist my purse strap again. "There is one thing," I take a deep breath. "I had my tubes tied at sixteen because Josh's parents told the doctor to do so."

Normally therapists can school their features but Dr. Walters blanched after I confessed. I ignore the look she's giving me and continue.

"My parents had gone away for the weekend to celebrate their anniversary and I was staying with Erin, my best friend. I was two weeks away from giving birth and they didn't want to leave me alone.

"I was spending the night at Josh's when I went into labour. Helen, Josh's mother, told me that it was just Braxton Hicks contractions and not to worry about it," I snort. "My water broke half an hour later, all over their very expensive white couch."

Dr. Walters leans forward in her chair, completely captivated by my story.

"Josh got pissed because the Leafs were in game four of the playoffs and told me to hold it in. They only took me into the hospital when I wouldn't stop crying from the pain.

"My birth canal was too narrow for Mason to fit through, and they rushed me in for a caesarean. I had no idea that Helen and John told the doctor to tie my tubes as well until I was being discharged and the doctor told me what to expect while I was recovering." I sniffle, wiping at the tears that are running down my cheeks.

"My parents were beyond angry, but we couldn't do anything about it. We didn't have the money to take them to court and because I was under their care and a minor, they could make decisions for me. I looked into having them untied when I was eighteen, but the cost and recovery wasn't something I could afford."

Thick silence fills the room. Dr. Walters sits back, her face unreadable. I glance down at my feet, not sure if I should say something.

"Well," she clears her throat, "I'm at a loss for words. I've heard some horrible things and have been through horrible things in my life but that, that was low."



I meet her eyes and smile. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my chest. Only my family and the Johnston's—Erin's family—knew about what John and Helen did.

“I think I’m going to enjoy working with you, Dr. Walters.”

# I Hate You

Dani

Archer showed up at eight in the morning. It has been three weeks since I seen him last, and I've missed him.

"I said after ten. You hard of hearing," I grunt in way of greeting.

"I'm hard for something," he mutters, and I snort.

"Why are you even up this early? It's Saturday." I walk towards the kitchen with Archer in tow.

"I haven't slept yet," Archer places the bag he's carrying on the table. "I've been working on the case."

"I thought it was an open and shut." I drop into a chair.

"Nope. John keeps 'finding' more evidence against Joni."

I roll my eyes. "Of course, he does." I wave a hand at the bag in front him. "What's all this?"

"Your laptop. Among other things."

I raise a brow at that last statement. Archer opens the bag and pulls out a brand-new HP laptop and a printer/scanner/copier. Along with a fax machine.

"Good lord, Archer. I thought you were just bringing over a laptop."

He smiles and those dimples make an appearance. "I know how much you love to print and make copies, so I got you an all-in-one as well."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't." He smirks. "Where do you want me to set you up?"

I haul my ass off the chair and drag myself upstairs. "You can set up in here."

I open the door to the third bedroom. There's a desk and a double bed inside. They used to be Mason's, but he outgrew them in no time. I flop on the bed, covering my eyes with my arm and listen to Archer putter around the room.

"How are your sessions going with Dr. Walters?" Archer questions.

"I've only had three sessions with her, but I think it's going rather well." I admit.

"That's great, Sweetheart. I'm so proud of you for doing this."

My chest swells at his praise and a small grin grows on my face. I feel the bed dip. I move my arm up my forehead finding Archer staring at me. "Am I wearing something of yours?"

"Do you want to be?"

I snort out a laugh. "Pervert."

His eyes heat. "You have no idea."

Sweet baby Jesus, my stomach turns with excitement. "I've missed you." I blurt out.

He smiles, popping out those fucking dimples. "I've missed you too," he admits, and my heart does a little jig in my chest. "The office isn't the same without you."

"You miss me yelling at you?" I grin as he chuckles.

"And the way you say, 'anything else, Mr. Archer.'"

"Anything else, Mr. Archer." I repeat in that breathy voice he likes so much.

He groans. "You're killing me, Sweetheart." He drags his teeth over his bottom lip, and I snap.

Grabbing him by the shirt, I haul him on top of me. My lips meeting his in a scorching kiss. Archer takes over then, licking at my lips and diving in. I roll my hips, making him groan.

"Dani, I don't want to hurt you, but fuck, I need to be inside you." Archer growls.

Like I'm going to stop him from fucking me into next week.

"I'm technically fully healed," I bite his bottom lip, "however, I know you won't do anything until the bruises are totally gone. So, I'll make you a deal. You go down on me, and I'll return the favour." I wiggle my brows at him. "But not in Mason's old bed. That's just wrong."

Archer scrambles to his feet, tossing me over his shoulder and makes a beeline for my room, shutting and locking the door. He puts me on my feet in the middle of my room.

"Jesus Archer, you'd think I just told you that my pussy—" he cut my words off with a soul searing kiss. His tongue slides into my mouth and dominates. He glides his hands up to cup my face.

I moan into his mouth and get a grunt in return as he moves his hands down to cup my breasts over my shirt. Shudders race down my spine as Archer backs me towards the bed. I sit when my knees hit the mattress. He fondles my breasts, massaging and tweaking the nipples.

"You're wearing too many clothes." Archer snarls.

I laugh as his hands tug at my shirt. Moving myself back on the bed, I shuck the shirt and let him look his fill.

"My memories did not do you justice."

A flush runs down my body. I don't think I'll ever get used to his compliments.

"You're even more beautiful than I remember." Archer prowls onto the bed and over me causing me to lay down until I'm flat on my back.

"I think you need your eyes checked. Beautiful is not a word people have used to describe me." I divulge.

"Then it's not me who needs my eyes checked. You may not see it, but I see the way the men that come into my office look at you," he says. "Hell, Gabe drools all over himself when you enter the room."

I have a reply on the tip of my tongue; however, Archer's mouth meets mine and completely disintegrates my answer. His fingers curl into my sleep shorts and I lift my hips as he yanks them off.

His eyes darken as he spreads my legs and lays on his stomach. "I'm so glad I missed breakfast."

I snort out a laugh that's cut off by a moan as he presses his tongue over my clit in lazy circles. Archer slides his fingers into my pussy, slowly fucking me with them. My mind focuses purely on his lips and tongue on my clit and the fingers invading my body.

"Luke. Faster. I need...I need you to go faster." I pant.

"Trust me, Sweetheart, I know what I'm doing."

My legs press against his head, but he curls his arms around my thighs and lays them over his large shoulders.

"I'm not rushing this." He informs me.

Another suck and lick and my pussy squeezes around his fingers, pulsing around his thick digits. I can't think, breathe, or do much more for that matter. He sucks my clit harder, plunging his fingers in and out of me picking up the pace. Archer lifts his head and I glance at him from lowered lids, my chest heaving while I struggle to breathe.

"Come for me, beautiful. I want to see you fall apart." Archer nips my clit with his teeth, his fingers driving in and out faster than I can catch a breath. He splays his tongue flat against me, pressing down on my clit and then sucking it between his lips.

The world shatters. My body crumbling and letting go so fast I can do nothing but let it happen as a massive wave of pleasure rushes me. My ability to breathe stops as shockwaves spread through my body. I seem to have lost the ability to function. Archer looks into my eyes while his fingers brush hair off my face.

"My beautiful Sweetheart." He peppers kisses along my jaw and neck, stopping where my neck meets my shoulder.

We lay there while I wait for the blood to flow back to the rest of my body. His fingers run up and down my ribs lightly, making me wiggle. Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I pull his shirt up until he takes over, whipping it over his head.

My memories of him did not do him justice either. The light dusting of chest hair, that tattoo. His hard chest and chiselled stomach. Sitting up, I press him back onto the bed and settle between his legs. I catch his eyes and hold them as I pop the button on his jeans and pull the zipper down. Archer takes over then, tossing his jeans and boxer briefs.

Bending close, I lick his balls, getting a groan as he rolls his hips. I lick the underside of his cock to the tip, rolling my tongue around the head and spearing the slit.

Archer's hips buck as he hisses. "Fuck, Dani."

I glance up at him. "Stand up, Luke. I want you to fuck my mouth."

He practically throws me off the bed getting to his feet. Dropping to my knees, I open my mouth and take his cock in with a vigorous suck.

Archer hisses again, rolling his hips and I take him in inch by amazing inch, sucking deeper and rolling his balls in my hand. I swallow around the head of his cock pulling the loudest rumble from his throat.

"You want me to fuck your mouth?"

I hum around his cock. Archer finally starts thrusting hard and fast grabbing my hair and pulling.

"Gonna come." Archer spills down my throat.

There's so much, like he has been saving up for this moment. I swallow and release him with a pop, licking over the sensitive head earning a groan of pleasure-pain. Archer pulls me to my feet and kisses me softly.

The sound of a door opening drives us apart. "Shit. Mason's alive." I whisper.

I drop my forehead against Archer's bare chest. The floor creaks as Mason hauls his huge body towards the bathroom, slamming the door. Archer runs his fingers along my spine.

"I take it you don't do anything of a sexual nature when Mason is home."

I shake my head against his chest. "I'm a screamer."

"I know you are."

I squeak when he grabs my ass. "He can usually sleep through anything though. He must really have to piss."

The bathroom door opens again, and I hear Mason pad his way back to his room. "Morning, Ma."

"Morning, Bubba."

There's a pause. "Morning, Mr. Archer."

"Mor—morning, Mason."

Another door shuts and I snort out a giggle.

"How did he know I was here?" Archer asks.

"Bathroom window faces the street," I say against the skin on his chest.

Archer starts chuckling before bursting into a fit of laughter. The sound sinks into my body and wraps around my heart. I stare up at him like a fucking goober, mesmerized by those dimples when it hits me like a ton of bricks.

I'm in love with Lucas Archer.

## You're Mine

Luke

Dani is back in the office two weeks later. She said she can't work from home anymore. Mason and his friends are driving her nuts and I'm not going to deny her what she wants, because I can't. Dani has me wrapped tight around her finger and I will give her whatever she wants with no questions asked.

I watch her leg swing back and forth as she finishes the notes for my newest case. It's a simple case, not going to court, which gives me a break from having to look at the white walls of the courtroom. I do that enough now with Joni's case, which is still ongoing.

"My eyes are up here, Archer." She teases.

My eyes follow those amazing legs to her hips—hips I was gripping last night—to her soft belly and magnificent breasts. Breasts I molded in my hands last night. Up her neck—the neck I was sucking on last night—to perfect bow lips. Lips I was kissing only a few minutes ago to those amazing eyes.

"Took you long enough." She smiles.

"I was taking the scenic route."

Her face turns red as she looks away. Dani is becoming more comfortable with me. She doesn't wear that spandex thing under her clothing anymore and she's no longer arguing with me when I pay her a compliment. Now she blushes. She's come a long way since I met her months ago. Going to therapy has been really good for her. It has helped her in so many ways.

I stand and come around the desk, sitting in front of her. It's after seven and the office is empty. Dani puts her pad and pen down on the chair next to her. Her eyes taking on a hooded quality.

"I'm giving you ten seconds, Sweetheart."

Dani grins wickedly and jumps from her chair with a squeal, running from the room.

"Ten...nine...eight..." I stand and make my way slowly towards the door.

"Seven...six...five..." I can hear her laughing from somewhere in the office.

"Four...three...two..." I step into the primary office. "One."

She screams and I take off after her. This has become a new thing for us. I like to chase, and she likes being caught.

The office isn't big enough to fully chase her, but she opens the main door and hauls ass into the hallway. I slap the lights off and lock the door quickly before I follow behind her, surprised at how quickly she can run in heels. Dani reaches the stairs and whips open the door. I stop at the open door, giving her a chance to make it down a few flights.

I tear down the stairs, my shoes slapping off the concrete steps. I'm a floor behind her. The door to the underground parking opens and Dani races across the garage.

"Daniella," I call out.

Her laugh is husky and I know she's getting turned on the closer I get. She stops at the truck, yanking on the door. I slow to a walk, pulling my keys out of my pocket, jiggling them. Dani whips around, her chest heaving, her face flushed from running. I stop a few feet from her. We face off and a slow smile grows on my face.

"Mine." I growl.

Dani's scream turns into a laugh as she takes off again, rounding the truck. I go in the opposite direction, cutting her off. She starts giggling uncontrollably, backing up as I stalk towards her. Her back hits the pillar beside my truck. Her eyes darken and her nipples harden against her silk blouse. I cage her in with my arms and her scent overwhelms me. I rake my eyes over her body, smiling as her body react to my gaze.

“Daniella.”

“Archer.”

She bites her bottom lip and I snap into action. Tossing her over my shoulder as she squeals, I unlock the truck and put her inside. I make quick work of getting in and speeding off through the parking garage.

“Hurry up, Archer. I need you inside me.” She starts wiggling on the seat.

I slip my hand up her skirt, finding her commando and soaking wet.

“You’ve been working all day without panties on?” I snarl.

“Uh-huh,” she moans, grinding her hips into my hand. I slide a finger inside and she whimpers.

I pull into the underground parking at my condo and into my spot. Dani unbuckles and climbs in my lap, undoing my slacks.

“Need you now.” Dani whimpers. She pulls me free and lifts her skirt, sinking down slowly. We both groan.

I latch onto her hips as she starts rocking, her mouth meeting mine in hunger. Dani starts moving faster, rolling her hips, and taking me in deeper.

“You keep going like this and I’m not going to make it.”

“You’ll make it,” Dani moans and climbs off my lap. She gets out of the truck and makes a mad dash for the elevator.

I put myself together and jump out of the truck, chasing after her. I catch the doors just as they’re closing, pushing her up against the wall of the car and claiming her mouth.

“You can’t do that to a guy, Sweetheart,” I say against her mouth.

“You’ll thank me later when you have the biggest orgasm of your life,” Dani says.

The elevator comes to a stop and she’s out the door and down the hall to my sub-penthouse. Unlocking the door before I get there. I smash my fist into the door as it starts to close.

“Sweetheart,” I call as I prowl inside.

I find her in my room, sitting on the bed, already naked. I stall in the doorway, my eyes moving faster than my brain can keep up. I tear out of my clothes as fast as I can and drop to my knees in front of her, running my hands up the insides of her thick, glorious thighs.

“I love eating in bed.”

Dani slowly closes her legs.

“Sweetheart.” I groan.

“You’re not eating tonight, Dimples.” She slides back on the bed, rolling onto her stomach and sticking her ass in the air.

She’s going to kill me.

## Good Girl

Dani

This is a bold move on my part. I've never had anal sex before. The closest I've come is when I'm using my vibrator with the anal attachment. But every time I use it, I have the biggest orgasm of my life.

I look over my shoulder at Archer and bite my lip. His ice blue eyes burn with lust. Wetness slips down my thighs. When he looks at me like that, I melt every single time.

"Fuck, Dani." He grabs my cheeks and kneads them.

I reach out, pushing what I brought towards him. The groan that comes from his throat has me throbbing and moving closer. Archer spreads my cheeks and licks down my crack.

*Holy mother of all things naughty.*

"Oh, fuck." I moan into the sheets.

Archer flicks his tongue around my hole. I have never felt anything like this. It feels way better than my vibrator.

"I'm going to fuck your ass, Sweetheart. You want that?"

"Yesss."

"Good girl."

The creak of a lid being opened makes me shiver in anticipation. Cool liquid slides down the crack of my ass, traveling south until he stops it, rubbing it against my hole and working his fingers inside.

"Fuck!" I cry into the sheets as Archer pushes a second finger in.

I relax my body, pushing back against his fingers and moaning. He stretches my muscles, scissoring his fingers to get me ready. The bite of pain and pleasure combined is new and incredibly exciting.

"Luke—"

"That's it, Sweetheart."

Archer stops, removing his fingers. He flips me over on to my back, pulling me to the edge of the bed. Archer stands between my knees and presses his fingers back inside. He grabs the bullet vibrator with his free hand and turns it on.

I choke on a moan when the cool rod slips into my pussy while Archer continues to finger fuck my hole. My gaze meets his and I slide my hands up to tweak my nipples.

"You are so fucking sexy like this," Archer says, his voice low and rough.

He slips the vibrator in and out of me before pressing it in fully. It isn't on one of the higher speeds, so all it does is torture me.

Archer spreads my legs wider, pushing my knees to my chest. "Good girl. Open wide for me."

I hold my legs close to my chest and watch as he greases his cock with the lube, stroking up and down. My head falls back when he hit the next speed on the remote for the vibrator and presses the head of his cock at the entrance of my hole. I bite my lip at the burning sensation. Archer inches his way in slowly, giving my body a chance to adjust to him.

"Luke." I gasp.

"Hang. On." He bites the words out through clenched teeth, pushing in and pulling back in slow, seesaw movements, until he's deep inside.

The speed on the vibrator increases again. Archer pulls back to the tip before pushing in deep. The feeling of fullness is one I've never experienced before. Archer's thrusts are slow as he allows my body to adjust to his size.

"You okay, baby?" Archer questions as he picks up speed.

I nod because I can't speak. There're too many different sensations happening at the moment that my brain is scrambled. Archer increases his speed as he turns up the vibrator. I moan, my muscles tighten, and a ball of fire expands inside of me.

"I need—" I breathe. My legs shake uncontrollably.

"I know what you need." Archer growls.

He reaches down and starts rubbing small circles over my clit. The world stops moving while a wave of absolute bliss rushes through my body. Archer's fingers tighten their hold on my hips, and he thrusts hard, rocking me on the bed and sending me into another orgasm.

His body tenses and his cock pulses as he comes, roaring through his release. He drops his hands next to my shoulders and hangs his head, panting. Sweat dripping off his nose and onto my chest.

"My beautiful Sweetheart." Archer whispers, placing small kisses on my face before pulling out extremely slow.

I free my legs and Archer pulls the toy out. I lay on the bed like a pile of mush as Archer goes into bathroom and starts the shower. I'm lifted off the bed and carried into the bathroom. I'm placed on the bench along the side wall and fall back against the cool tiles. He kneels in front of me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Taking care of you." He smiles and squirts bodywash into his palm and lifts my right leg. He starts washing my legs, rubbing his large hands over my heated skin.

I close my eyes and savour the feel of his hands on my skin. My muscles relax as his hands work over my body. Archer unhooks the showerhead and rinses me off before starting on my hair. His touch is gentle and my heart swells in my chest. I blink quickly as tears fill my eyes.

His hands halt in my hair. "Sweetheart?"

Oh God, here comes the waterworks. I cover my face with my hands.

"Dani?" Archer grips my wrists lightly, moving them from my face. "Talk to me, Sweetheart."

"It's just...I...and...you..." I wave my hands around the shower.

Archer cups my cheeks, rubbing his thumb along the scar on the side of my face.

"I've never had anyone take care of me before," I confess.

Archer leans in and kisses me softly. "You deserve to be taken care of, Sweetheart," he smiles. "I want to be the man that takes care of you."

Here comes the tears again. Archer rinses off my hair and lifts me off the bench, sitting me in his lap.

"Will you let me?" he questions.

"Let you what?" I ask through the tears.

"Take care of you."

"Oh...God." I cry, wrapping my arms around his neck and sobbing into his shoulder.

"Are these happy tears?" Archer asks as his hands rubs slow circles over my back.

I sniffle out a watery laugh. "Yeah, Dimples. They're happy tears."

He holds me until I exhaust myself, shutting off the shower and getting me dressed, drying my hair the best he can before putting me to bed. Archer climbs in and pulls me against his chest, wrapping his arms around me.

"Goodnight, Sweetheart." He kisses my temple.

"Goodnight, Dimples."



# Zombie Apocalypse

Luke

Five O'clock cannot come fast enough. I've been walking around with a woody all day after finding out what Dani wasn't wearing under her dress. I found her panties on the floor of my bathroom. And she doesn't make it easy for me either. Every chance she gets, she's flashing me her cleavage or those amazing thighs. Bending over more than is necessary and swaying those fucking hips of hers every time she leaves the office.

*She owns you now*, that voice pipes up. It has been dormant for a couple of months.

*She does own me and I'm perfectly okay with that*, I answer back.

Great, now I'm talking to myself.

I'm just finishing my second to last meeting for the day when Dani walks into my office, looking paler than normal.

"Daniella?" I ask, concerned.

She slides a piece of paper across my desk and takes my mug. I turn it over and string together an impressive line of F-bombs as I read what's written on the paper. I need to finish this up quickly so I can speak to her.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to know?"

Mr. Nowak shakes his head. "Nothing at this time."

I stand to indicate that the meeting is over. "Wonderful," I extend my hand, "if anything else comes to mind, don't hesitate to call me."

He shakes my offered hand and leaves just as Dani is entering.

"Have a nice day, Mr. Nowak," she says with a smile that doesn't reach those stunning eyes.

"Same to you, darlin'." Mr. Nowak answers with a smile. She dips her chin and closes the door, keeping her back to me for a moment.

"When did this happen?" I question.

She turns, placing my mug on the desk. "Twenty minutes ago."

Dani had pressed charges against Josh after he attacked her over a month ago. It took a while for them to go through, the Whitlocks would have made sure of it.

"Who contacted you?"

"His lawyer. He said that it would be easier if I drop the charges. That I won't win this case and that I will be served with a countersuit." Her tiny hands curl into my vest. "I'm surprised John isn't representing his son." Dani states.

"Conflict of interest. You are not allowed to represent family members or someone you have a personal relationship with." I rub her back in slow circles, the way she likes it. "Have you spoken to Mark yet?"

"He told me to swing by after 2pm." Dani blinks up at me with those turquoise eyes that undo me every time.

"Good." I kiss her gently, enjoying the little whimper that comes from her. "You better go before my last client comes in," I say against her lips.

Dani moans as she backs away. I pull her back for one more quick kiss before spinning her around and smacking her on the ass. "Come home with me tonight."

"I can't. I left Mason alone last night and I have a feeling that little shit had a party," Dani opens the door, "you could come home with me."

"But you don't like to have sex with Mason in the house because you're a screamer."

She smiles wickedly. "Guess you'll have to stick something in my mouth to keep me quiet."

\*\*\*\*

*"Mason Christopher!"* Dani yells as soon as she opens the door.

The house is destroyed. Garbage everywhere, the couch is flipped over, beer cans litter the hall and up the stairs. Dani's pacing at the bottom of the stairs like a caged animal, humming that song again.

*"Mason!"* she yells again.

Scuffling comes from somewhere upstairs before Mason makes an appearance at the top of the stairs. "Ma. What ah, what are you doing home?"

Dani points to the spot next to her. "The workday is over, Mason. Care to explain why my house looks like the zombie apocalypse crashed through it."

Mason makes his way down gingerly. "I ah, had some friends over last night."

"How many friends?"

Mason looks away. "Twenty," he mumbles.

"I'm sorry? How many?" she asks. The tick, tick, tick of Dani's shoe on the floor makes Mason wince. I have a feeling that that's Dani's clock ticking down to detonation.

"Twenty." Mason answers again.

Dani says nothing, her hands curling into fists at her sides. "Who's still here?"

Mason looks back up the stairs. "The guys and uh..." he rubs the back of his neck. "A couple of girls."

That did it.

Dani marches her tiny body upstairs. *"Axton Charles! Clayton Matthew! Girls!"* she yells.

The children in question rush to the top of the stairs. No one says anything. The girls huddle together, next to a boy with blonde hair, while Axe smiles down at Dani, his eyes roaming her body.

"Eyes up here, Axe." Dani scolds.

Mason fires a look at Axe. I would not want to be on the receiving end of that look.

"You kids are going to clean up this house while I cook dinner for Archer," she turns to Mason.

"You are staying with Nanny and Papa for two weeks, starting tonight."

"But I'm going over to Clay's for the night." Mason whines.

Dani drops her hands on her hips. "Fine. Only because it's Clay."

"Hey!" Axe complains.

"Shut it, Axe. I'll pick you up after work tomorrow and drop you off at Nanny's. Where you'll be staying for two weeks."

Mason nods and heads into the living room with the rest of the kids in tow. Dani turns and walks down the stairs, standing two steps from the bottom and looking me right in the eye.

"My tiny badass Sweetheart," I say.

She drapes her arms around my neck and laughs. "I've learnt a thing or two over the years of being a mom."

I drop my hands on her round hips and pull her closer. Her lips meet mine and a collective groan comes from the living room.

"Ma, come on." Mason grumbles.

Dani smiles against my lips. "Watch this." She slides her hands down my arms and around my back, grabbing my ass.

"You're such a pervert, Ma." Mason groans.

Dani giggles against my lips. "The faster you clean up, the faster you can get out of here and not have to watch me feel up Archer."

The house is cleaned in record time.

## Mason

Dani

Oh, yeah. Mmm, right there.” I moan into the blankets.

Archer’s hands are working my back in one of the best massages I have ever had. I jerk when he hits a knot. “Ow!” I turn my head to look at him. “That hurt.”

He grins at me, leaning down and kissing between my shoulders. “Better?”

“Smartass.” I can’t keep the smile out of my voice. He keeps kneading the muscle, eventually getting rid of the knot.

“You’ve got magic fingers, Archer.”

He peppers kisses along my spine, sinking his teeth into my ass cheek. “You know I have magic fingers,” he says while sliding one down my crack and along my pussy.

I bite back a moan as his finger runs back up my crack and down again, this time slipping one finger inside my pussy. I push my hips against his hand, searching for more. He pumps his finger slowly, taking his time and playing around with me. But I don’t want to play. I want rough, hard fucking. I move up the bed and away from his fingers.

Rolling over, I run my hand down my stomach and between my legs, rubbing over my clit. Archer’s hands flex against his bare knees as he watches.

“Baby,” he growls.

My other hand cups my breast, pinching my nipple. His eyes follow my hand as I circle my clit before slipping a finger inside. Archer snaps. He’s on me in a heartbeat, his mouth demanding as his hands grab and knead and pluck at my body.

“Tell me what you want, Sweetheart.” He grinds his hips into mine.

“I want to be fucked, Luke. Hard.”

“God, you’re perfect.” His smile is as wicked as it is sexy. “On your knees, Sweetheart. Head down, ass up.”

I roll over and do what he says, pressing my face into the blankets. My heart is pounding in anticipation. Archer uses his knees to spread my legs wider and settle himself between them.

“You are the most stunning creature I’ve ever seen.” Archer places soft, slow kisses along my spine, and I shiver.

My phone starts ringing on the bedside table.

“Leave it,” Archer says and nips at my shoulder. It stops ringing and starts back up again. I reach over to shut it off when I see the name on the display. My guts tie in knots as I answer with shaking hands.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Carter?”

“Yes?” I sit up, eyes wide as I look over at Archer. His brows pinched together in concern.

“This is Nisha, head nurse of surgery at Toronto General.”

My heart stops. “Uh-huh.”

“Your son Mason has been in an accident.”

My eyes shoot to Archer as I process what was said.

“Does Mason have any allergies to medications?”

I can’t be hearing this right. My mind starts running through different possibilities of what might have happened.

“Ms. Carter? It’s important for us to know if Mason has any allergies before we go ahead with surgery.”

I snap out of my thoughts. "He has none."

"Can we proceed with the surgery?"

*Surgery?*

"Yes—yes. I'll be right there." I hang up and sit there, frozen in place.

Words I've always worried I'd hear but prayed I never would, are finally said to me, and I just...sit there.

"Sweetheart?" Archer's hand lands on my back and I jump into action.

I scramble around, throwing on whatever I can find.

"Dani, what happened?" Archer asks.

"There's been an accident."

"I'll drive," he says, climbing off the bed and starts to dress.

"No. You...you stay here."

"I'm not letting you go alone." He argues.

"I can do this on my own." I hop around on one foot, trying to pull up my pants.

"Dani, you don't need to do this on your own. I'm here." Archer says softly.

"He is *my* son, Luke. Mine! I don't need you to help me!" I snap.

We stare at each other for a moment, hurt flashes in Archer's eyes, and I know I'm going to feel guilty tomorrow but right now, I'm too fucking scared to care.

Archer nods, sitting back on the bed. "Go."

"I'll call you." I run down the stairs and out the door. Yanking my car door open, I get behind the wheel and pray to whoever is listening for my car to start. After a few choice words that would make a trucker blush, it fires up and I tear out of there like a bat outta hell.

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I run through the emergency room and towards the triage window, banging on it until it opens.

"Take a number and have a seat." The grumpy looking nurse slides the window closed. I bang on it again.

She throws open the window. "Listen lady—"

I slam my fists down on the ledge, the track of the window digging into my skin. "Mason Carter. Where is he?"

Her eyes narrow. "You his mother?"

"No, I'm here to sell him some girl scout cookies. Yes, I'm his mother."

She sighs and grabs a piece of paper, jotting something down and shoving it into my hand.

I lean through the window. "I understand that you're stressed working in the ER. I also understand that you have to deal with idiots daily, but you need to check your attitude because the next mother you deal with might not be as nice as me."

She snorts. "Whatever."

I grab the front of her scrubs and haul her halfway through the window. People are watching, but I don't care. I am a mother scared out of her ever-loving mind, with enough adrenaline running through my body that I could bench press a horse.

"Compassion goes a long way," I hiss and release her scrubs. She slams the window shut.

I check the paper she gave me before heading towards the elevators. He's on the second floor, in the surgery wing. I call Erin as I wait for the elevator. My hands shaking as I dial her number.

"Hey girl."

A sob breaks free. "Mason...accident...surgery." Is all I manage to get out.

"Toronto Gen?" Erin asks calmly.

"Yeah." I snifle.

"On my way." Erin hangs up.

The elevator doors open and I step inside. Mason's room is past the nurse's station, on the right. Walking inside, I find the room empty, and smelling like antiseptic and death.

"Ms. Carter?"

I turn to find a short, caramel skinned woman in scrubs. "I'm Nisha. Mason is just finishing up in surgery. They will be bringing him out shortly."

I blink down the hallway. "What...ah, what..." I can't finish my thought.

Nisha touches my shoulder. "The doctor will explain everything," she leads me into the room and sits me down in a chair. "Mason made it through surgery wonderfully. You have a very strong son."

"Thank you." I breathe.

Nisha nods and leaves the room. I bite the side of my thumb, my leg bouncing as I watch the door. After a few minutes, I jump up and pace the floor, glancing at the door every time I pass it.

I pace around the room for what feels like hours, my thumb is bleeding because I chewed the skin off. All these horrible scenarios run rampant through my head.

Was he attacked?

Did he try to help someone and got hurt?

Did Josh do something?

The door opens and two nurses wheel the bed into the room. My hand goes to my throat when I see Mason. He looks so fragile, even though his gigantic frame engulfs the bed. I take measured steps towards him, machines beep on the left side of his bed. A bandage wrapped around his head and his right arm is in a cast. A black bruise covers his jaw, and his leg is elevated, also in a cast.

"Ms. Carter?" a deep voice causes me to jump. I spin and find a dark-skinned man standing in the doorway to Mason's room.

"I'm Dr. Lewis. I did Mason's surgery." He holds out his hand.

I shake my head and step forward, taking his hand. "Yes. Sorry. This is..." I trail off as I look back at my baby.

"It's hard, I know." Dr. Lewis drops my hand.

"What happened?" I inquire. He motions to the chair next to the bed. I sit slowly, dropping my purse on the floor.

"Drunk driver jumped the curb, pinning Mason between his truck and a tree."

My hand flies to my mouth.

"Mason's size played a huge factor in saving his life."

I will never yell at him for eating everything in the house again. Reaching over, I take his massive hand in mine, curling my fingers around his.

"Mason has an eight-inch laceration across his right temple, his forearm and wrist are fractured. His jaw, surprisingly, is not broken from when he hit the tree, but the bruise is nasty."

"When the truck hit him, the impact tore the quadricep tendon in his right leg. I re-attached it, but he is going to need some physiotherapy once he's healed."

I nod absentmindedly, trying to rack my brain on how I'm going to afford all this. My benefits haven't started yet, and I would hate to borrow money. "Thank you."

I don't look at Dr. Lewis as he leaves the room. Bringing Mason's hand to my lips, I kiss the tips of his fingers like I used to do when he was a baby.

"*Daniella Lynne Carter!*" I hear Erin yell.

*You've got to be kidding me.*

I rush to the door and find Erin looking like a creeper into each room she passes.

"*Erin Siobhan Matthews!*" I yell.

Her head snaps up and she races down the hallway, slamming into me with the force of an elephant, knocking me back a step.

“Why didn’t you just ask at the nurse’s station what room Mason was in?” I scold.

Her arms tighten around me. “Because this is more fun.” I can’t help the smile as she pulls away and looks down at me.

“I hate you sometimes,” I say walking into the room.

“But not all the time.” Erin counters as she follows me into the room, shutting the door behind her. Erin gasps when her eyes land on Mason, her hand finds mine and squeezes tight.

“Poor aunties boy.” She whispers.

I pull my hand out of hers and walk over to the bed. His chest is raising and falling steadily, the machines next to the bed beep slowly.

“What happened?” Erin asks.

Tears climb up my throat as I clamber onto the bed with Mason. Taking his hand in mine again, I tell Erin everything the doctor had told me.

“How are you going to pay for that?” Erin inquires.

“I have no idea. Maybe I’ll start stripping.” I reply with a shrug.

“*Dani!*” Erin squeals.

“What? I can dance.”

Erin’s laughing hard enough that she starts to snort. “Maybe Luke can pay for everything.” She suggests.

I snort. “Maybe Archer should start paying *me* for my goods and services.”

“That’s called prostitution,” Erin giggles. “Let me see what I can do. I know a couple insurance companies that may be able to help you.” Erin sits in the chair next to the bed.

“Thanks Erin.”

I don’t know what I would do without her in my life.

## I'll Cover It

Luke

My phone rings in the early morning hours. I reach over and grab it from Dani's nightstand. My chest tightens when I see the name.

"Sweetheart?"

"It's Erin."

"Erin, is everything all right? Did something happen with Daniella?"

Erin sighs. "She's shook up and stressed out."

I sink back down in the bed.

"Mason was in an accident. Can you come down to Toronto Gen?"

I throw off the covers and toss on a pair of gray sweatpants and a faded t-shirt. "What room?" I grab my keys on my way out the door.

"216. Dani needs to talk to you about something." Erin hangs up.

I fly towards the hospital, my heart racing with fear.

Fear for Dani and what she's going through.

Fear for Mason and what he has endured.

I find a parking spot and climb out of my truck. I enter through the ER and walk towards the elevators. I find the room with help from a nurse.

I knock on the door and walk in. Dani's lying next to her monstrous son and Erin's sitting in a chair next to the bed. Erin turns and stares, blindly swatting at Dani's arm.

"Erin, what?" Dani turns and her stunning eyes meet mine.

Her hair is in a messy heap on the top of her head. She's wearing a pair of sweatpants and an oversized shirt that I don't remember her putting on when she left the house but she's still the most stunning creature I have ever seen.

She says nothing as she jumps from the bed and into my waiting arms. Wrapping herself around me and crying into my shoulder. I slide my hand into her hair and hold her against me. Erin looks up at us before standing and swiping her purse off the floor.

"I'm going to head home to shower and change," Erin says. "I'll be back later. Thanks for coming, Luke. I didn't want to leave her alone." Erin squeezes my free shoulder and leaves.

I hold Dani until she calms down. "How's Mason?" I asks, as I place her on her feet, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

"He'll live," Dani motions to the chair.

I sit slowly as Dani climbs back on the bed.

"I asked Erin to call you. I—" she looks back at Mason and gives her head a shake. "I wanted to talk to you about my benefits." She brushes Mason's blond hair off his face. "Mason is going to need some physiotherapy once he's fully healed and that's something I can't afford."

"I'll cover it." I blurt out.

Her head whips around. "What?"

"I will cover it. His hospital bill, anything you need for him when he's home and his physiotherapy. Everything."

"I can't ask you to cover everything, Archer. He's my son. I just wanted to know if I could get my benefits started now."

Reaching over, I take her small hand in mine. "I will cover everything. Don't worry about it."

Her eyes search mine, a fine sheen covering them before she lunges off the bed and wraps her arms around me again, burying her face in my neck.

"Thank you." She whispers.

I hold her close to me, her scent of coconut and vanilla washing over me. Dani kisses me then. A soft, sweet kiss. One of gratitude and it makes my heart lurch in my chest.

A feminine gasp fills the room. "Oh. Oh, Christopher. Look at my boy."

The lady rushes past us and around the other side of the bed. Dani pulls back, kissing me once more before moving off my lap.

"Mom, he's fine. He's going to live." Dani sits back on the bed.

"Are you sure? Look at him, Daniella." Her mother sobs.

"Sandra, the boy will live." I turn and find a large man standing in the doorway.

Standing, I touched Dani's shoulder. "Get the hospital to send the bill and any other paperwork to the office." I place a kiss on her temple and head out of the room and towards the elevators.

"Mr. Archer."

I stop at the sound of the voice from the doorway. Turning, I find Dani's father walking towards me.

"Christopher Carter," he holds his hand out.

"Luke Archer," I take his hand and shake it.

The man shares the same eye and hair colour as his daughter and grandson. "I heard what you said in there about covering the bill for my baby girl. I'm surprised she didn't fight you. Dani is stubborn." He laughs.

"She did. At first."

His hand clamps down on my shoulder. "You're a good man, Luke. No matter what Dani has told her mother."

"I have my moments." I reply.

He laughs again and drops his hand.

"Christopher! Mason's waking up." Sandra calls down the hallway. Christopher gives me a brief nod and heads back towards the room.

I push the button for the elevator and step inside.

"Archer," Dani calls.

I slam my hand against the closing doors. "Sweetheart? Everything okay?" I ask.

She steps onto the elevator. "Have you eaten?" she asks looking up at me.

"I grabbed a coffee on my way over. Does coffee count?"

"No, Archer. Coffee does not count as food." Dani says.

"Then, no. I haven't eaten." I smirk, pulling her against my chest.

Dani smiles at me and hits the button for the main floor. "Good. Lets go have breakfast."

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The cafeteria is crowded, mostly doctors and nurses getting in a quick break. We sit at a corner table by the window with a tray full of eggs, bacon, toast, hash browns and sausage. I have a cup of coffee and Dani has an orange juice.

"I don't know what you said to Dad, but he kicked me out as soon as he stepped into the room." Dani states while she covers her eggs in ketchup before shoving a heaping forkful into her mouth.

"I didn't say anything. He thanked me for covering the bill."

Dani lifts her head, eyes wide and cheeks full of food. "Really?"

"Yes." I answer.

"Huh."

"He also said I was a good man. No matter what you have told your mother."

Dani chokes on her eggs. "I never told Mom you weren't a good man!"



I watch her take a huge bite of her toast over the rim of my cup. "What did you tell her then?"

She swallows. "I said that you're a pain in my ass and that you call me all hours of the night for something that could wait until the next day." Dani laughs and picks up a piece of bacon, pointing it at me. "Mom thinks you have a crush on me."

It's more than a crush at this point. I've fallen madly in love with this woman. Hell, I've been in love with her for a while now. I place my cup down on the table and lean in.

"And what do you think?" I ask, my voice deeper than I intended.

Dani drops her fork and looks at me through those thick lashes. "I know there's an attraction between us and I know that you care about me," she flushes as she bites into another piece of bacon before continuing. "As for having a crush. No, I don't think you do."

"Really? And why is that?" I ask.

"Because you don't offer to pay thousands of dollars to help the woman you have a crush on," she shrugs her shoulders as she stuffs the rest of the bacon into her mouth. "Or that you're banging, for that matter. I think you like like me." Dani mutters with her mouth full.

I walk Dani back to Mason's room half an hour later. "Thanks again Archer."

I dip my chin. "My pleasure." I lean in and place a kiss on her lips. Enjoying the moan I pull from her throat. "I'll see you tomorrow," I say.

"You're coming back tomorrow?" Dani asks bewildered.

"No. I'll see you at the office tomorrow."

Dani backs up a step. "Excuse me?"

"Mason will be fine until you get off work."

Dani's face scrunches up and flushes, making the scars on her fair skin more visible. "I am staying here until he's discharged. I'll work from here."

I step towards her. "I need you in the office."

She drops her hands to her hips. "Too bad."

I crowd her. "Too bad?"

"I'm staying with Mason." Dani states.

"He's not a child, Daniella."

She flinches as if I struck her. "Not a child?" she seethes.

"He's almost an adult. He can survive without you for eight hours."

Dani steps up to me. "He is *my* child. *My* baby boy. No matter how old he is. And I will be by his side until he's discharged." Dani turns and heads for her son's room.

"If you don't show up tomorrow, you're fired." I tell her.

Dani freezes, her shoulders jerk up to her ears. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

Dani spins on her heels and marches her tiny body towards me. "Are you saying that if I choose *my* son over you, I'm fired?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Yes."

Dani stares up at me. "Are you fucking serious?"

"It's my company. I can fire you over the stupidest thing and not have to explain my reasons." I reply. "So, I'll see you tomorrow then, yes?"

Her right hook comes out of nowhere. My eyes meet hers as I rub my jaw. The pain and anger that are swirling in those turquoise pools slices deep into my soul.

"Then I'm fired." She snuffles, fighting back the tears and heads for the door.

"Sweetheart," I call, hoping to fix my fuck up.

She holds up a hand. "I'm not your sweetheart anymore."

My heart dies in my chest and my stomach feels like it's being strangled by a rope of sharp thorns.

“A word of advice, Archer,” she glances over her shoulder, her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “Never ask a mother to choose between her child and a man.” A tear rolls down her cheek. “Her child will always win. Always.”

She wipes her cheek. “No matter how old they are.”

## I Need To Fix This

Luke

I locked myself in my office as soon as I got in this morning. It's only a matter of time before Carrie will come charging in and yell about being a jackass or something to that affect.

*You broke not only your heart but hers as well. You did it, not her,* that voice reprimands.

"*Lucas Michael!*" Carrie bangs on the door with enough force to rattle it. "I've got a bone to pick with you!" she shouts through the door.

I stay where I am. There's nothing she can say to make me open the door while she's fuming.

"I swear to God Lucas, if you don't open this door in two seconds, I'm taking it off the hinges," she continues to bang on the door. "I'll call Uncle Harvey."

Except her calling Dad. Sighing, I open the door and I'm greeted with a fist to the nose.

"What in the fuck were you thinking!" Carrie yells as she marches in.

I cover my nose, blood already pooling in my hand and head into my private washroom. I grab Kleenex to stop the bleeding and wash the blood off my hand.

"Making Dani choose between her son and *you*." Carrie crosses her arms. "I could have told you she was going to choose Mason. And she could've worked from the hospital. You know this." Carrie adds.

I lean against the washroom door. "I know."

Carrie throws her hands up. "Then what's the problem?"

"I'm in love with her."

"That's not—what?" Carrie blinks at me.

"I'm in love with her. I'm madly, deeply, crazily, head over heels in love with her," I admit. "She had my heart the minute she walked through the door, and she'll continue to have it long after she's moved on."

Carrie rushes me and wraps her arms around my waist. "Oh, Luke." She backs away and slaps my chest. "That still doesn't excuse you from what you did. What were you thinking?"

I grab another Kleenex and toss the bloody one. "I wasn't thinking, okay." I flop onto the couch. "Dani has me all mixed up. I want to be with her all the time. I...*have* to be with her. I *need* to. My body craves her all hours of the day and night," I toss the second bloody Kleenex. "I can't breathe without her. It feels like I'm drowning."

Carrie stares at me with wide eyes and her mouth hanging open. "Wow."

"She's like a tornado," I continue. "Beautiful but dangerous. She is chaos and headstrong and blunt. She's everything I'm not."

Carrie sits next to me. "Have you told her?"

I shake my head. "No."

"I think you should," Carrie says.

"Are you insane?"

"Sometimes." Carrie grins. "Look. Call her up, apologise, give her her job back and tell her you love her."

"You *are* insane."

"I'm serious, Luke." Carrie turns to me. "I never seen you act this way in all your years of dating. You're a completely different person when Dani's around. You're happier. More fun. She brings out dorky Luke."

I rub my face, hissing when I touch my nose. "I need to fix this."

Carrie stands from the couch. "Duh."

“Tell me how to fix this.” I beg.

“That’s something I can’t help you with.”

## The Smart Ones Do

Gabe

I stroll down the hospital corridor, my boots slapping against the floor. As I get closer to the nurse's station, heads snap up and mouths fall open. I'm not conceited—well, maybe a little—but I know I get a reaction. My mother used to say I was too handsome for my own good, and she was right.

Stopping at the desk, I smile wide at the three nurses. "Good morning," I say, smiling wider when one fixes her hair sub-consciously. "I'm looking for Mason Carter's room."

All three jump up from their chairs and point over my shoulder. I glance behind me and find Dani standing in the doorway.

"Gabe?" Dani inquires with a raised brow.

I nod my thanks and stride over to her, picking her up in my arms, her feet banging off my knees. I kiss her cheek and she returns it.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, pulling away.

I place her on the floor and follow her into the room, shutting the door behind me. "Carrie called and told me what happened. How's he doing?" I ask.

Dani sits on the bed and waves a hand at the chair. "He'll live, but he's got a lot of recovering to do."

I sit and stretch my legs out in front of me while Dani fills me in on what had happened two nights ago.

I whistle. "Fuck, Dani girl. I'm sorry this happened."

She shrugs and turns, brushing Mason's hair off his forehead. "Thanks." She mutters.

I lean forward and touch her knee to grab her attention. "I also heard what Luke did."

She keeps her face hidden from me, but I see her chin start to wiggle. "He um..." she wipes at her face with the back of her hand. "Yeah."

"I'm going to let you in on a secret," I wait until she looks at me before continuing. "Luke wouldn't know a good thing if it kicked him in the nuts." I lean in farther. "But I do," I say, my voice dropping low.

Dani stares at me, brows furrowed. "Gabe, are you hitting on me?"

"Does that bother you?"

"Yes!" she yells. "Why would you think that's appropriate after what your brother did?"

I stare at Dani. My brain malfunctions. I've never been turned down twice by the same woman. I'm not sure what to do.

"Well?" Dani asks.

I scratch my head. "I'm sorry, Dani girl. I've never had a woman turn me down twice. My brain malfunctioned."

"You should be sorry. What has gotten into you?"

"I'm attracted to you; I figured you were attracted to me too." I admit.

Dani sighs and cups my cheeks. "You are a very handsome man, Gabe. And you mean the world to me," she kisses my forehead. "But you're not the man for me."

"Guess there's no chance of getting in your pants then?" I tease to break the tension.

"No chance," Dani laughs. "But you can get me some food. I'm starving."

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I make a mad dash back to the cafeteria and grab Dani's food. Making it back to the room in under seven minutes.

I ran into an old fling while I was waiting to grab Dani food, one thing led to another, and we hooked up in the washroom. Probably not the right thing to do, but I'm not sorry about it.

"Where in the hell have you been?" she snatches the bag from my hand, squinting her eyes. "You had sex."

"How in the hell do you know that?"

"Your shirt is on inside out and you smell like cum." She plunks herself onto the bed.

"I'm not sorry about that." I tell her.

She snorts. "Dick."

I beam at her and lean down. "If you want to see it, baby girl, all you have to do is ask."

"Don't be gross, Gabriel."

I chuckle and sit down in the chair.

"Can I ask you something? It's kinda personal." Dani says with her mouthful.

"Fire away."

"Do you take your shirt off when you take a shit?"

"I do." I answer.

"Do all men?" she asks.

"The smart ones do."

She takes another bite of her sub. "Why?"

"In case we get explosive diarrhea."

Dani's eyes go wide. "That's what Mason said!"

I chuckle. "Is that why you asked?"

She nods. "I also asked Jake and he said the same thing, but sometimes Jake likes to fuck with me. Especially if I'm trying to verify something Mason said."

I smile and stretch out my long legs. "Well, this time, Jake wasn't fucking with you."

## Broken

Dani

I lock myself in my room and flop down on my bed. Erin ordered me to go home and shower. Or as she so lovingly put it, *'you stink. Go wash your ass.'* I've been at the hospital everyday for a week, making sure Mason isn't in any pain and is getting the best care.

The hospital assured me that his uninsured stay has been paid for in full, up to a month by Archer law firm. Much of my stress lifted off my chest after hearing that, but it wasn't completely gone. And it won't be until Mason is discharged.

I take a deep breath. Archer's scent is still on my blankets, still lingering around my room. Burning climbs up my throat. I try to swallow but all that does is make it worse. I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the tears not to come.

But they do anyways.

A soul deep wail bursts from me, tightening my stomach as I shake from the force of my tears. They pour down my face, no end in sight. Tears of pain and sorrow and heartbreak. I never allowed myself to mourn the love I lost. My sole focus was on my son.

Archer broke my heart; however, I played a part in it. I could've went to the office a few hours a day. Deep down I knew Mason would be okay, Mom or Erin would've sat with him until I was finished.

I wipe my cheeks, sobs still hiccupping out of me. My eyes are sore and my lids are swelling. I curl on my side and let the tears flow. There's no point in fighting them, they'll find a way to escape.

While my heart bleeds out, my body becomes heavy with sleep and I allow it to drag me under on tear-soaked pillows.

Luke

My computer went to sleep hours ago and yet I still sit here, my broken self staring back at me in the dark screen. It's been three days since I broke the love of my life's heart. Since then an elephant has moved into my chest cavity and has been crushing my heart.

I stand and head into my room. Her scent is still lingering in the air. Turning towards my dresser, I find her drawer open a tad with a shirt sleeve hanging out. I pull the drawer out and I'm hit with her coconut and vanilla scent, and I break.

I tug the drawer out, dumping her clothes on the floor with a roar. I yank the others out, throwing them around the room. I tear the sheets off my bed, throw the frame that holds her picture at the wall, shattering the glass.

A soul deep scream bursts from me, turning my blood to ice and freezing my heart. I broke her heart as well as mine. I promised I would never hurt her and I fucking shattered her.

I should have let her work from the hospital, I should have told her to take some time off but I'm a fucking selfish man.

I pick up her picture from under all the broken glass and shake it off. Her beautiful, smiling face is staring back at me.

Those eyes that turn me inside out, shine with happiness and my heart bleeds out as the pressure in my chest gets worse and I drop to the floor, squeezing the picture tight in my fist.

And wallow in heartbreak of my own making.

## He's Scared

Gabe

Two weeks later

My phone starts ringing on the passenger seat of my Charger. I reach over and grab it. "Hello, gorgeous."

"Hello, handsome. I need a favour." Dani says.

"Is it to pleasure you until you scream my name." I smile at the snort she gives me.

"When are you going to stop trying to get into my pants?"

"When you let me in them." I joke.

She's really laughing now. "That's never gonna happen."

"Way to boost my ego," I say with a smile. "What's the favour?"

"My lemon finally died, and I am on my way home with Mason. Any chance you can give us a lift?" Dani pleads.

"Where you at?"

"Dundas and Bay."

"I'm on my way." I find Dani and Mason sitting out front of Canadian Tire on Dundas. Her car is nowhere in sight. I pull up next to the curb and get out.

"Hello, gorgeous." I grin as Dani jumps into my arms, peppering my face with kisses.

"Thank you so much." Her arms squeeze me tight.

"Of course, Dani girl." I reply as she pulls away.

Dani opens the door. "Come on, Bubba. Gabe does not have all day."

"Actually, I'm free today."

Dani fires me a nasty look. "Shut it."

I chuckle as I grab Mason under the arm and help him to my car. Which is extremely hard to do because the kid has a few inches on me, and I stand at six-four. He folds himself into the front seat and pushes it all the way back. Dani rounds the front of the car and slips behind my seat.

"Where to, Dani girl?" I ask, climbing behind the wheel and starting it up. Mason jumps in his seat, looking over at me with wide eyes. "Rumbles the nut sack nicely, doesn't it." I laugh as I rev it a few times.

"Gabe, stop playing with my sons nut sack." Dani deadpans.

"Ma, gross." Mason groans. "187 Seaton. The faster I get home, the less time I'll have to spend with you two perverts."

I let out a laugh and Dani snorts from the back seat. I pull away from the curb and head towards their home.

I park in front of her house and help Mason inside and onto the couch.

"So, how you doing, Dani girl?" I ask as I follow her into the kitchen.

"Not good, Gabe. Not good." She nods towards the backyard.

We step outside and sit on the covered swing. "What's going on?" I question. Dani sits back. Her feet dangling off the swing. I give it a push with mine.

"I'm broken, Gabe. What Luke did—what he said," she covers her face. "He hurt me. Badly." She pulls her knees up to her chest and wraps her arms around them.

"I know he did, baby girl."

Dani sniffles. "Why would he say such a thing? Does he not understand that a mother will *never* choose anyone over her child?" her head drops onto her knees. "And I mean anyone. I'd drop Erin faster than you could blink if she made me choose."



I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her close. "He's scared."

Dani snorts. "Scared? Come on, Gabe."

"I'm serious. What he feels for you, I don't think he has ever felt with the other women he has dated." I tell her.

Her head lifts. "He wanted to marry Sarah."

I shiver. "Don't remind me." I wipe her tears away. "I don't think he really loved her. Cared for her, sure, but loved..." I shrug.

We sit in silence, rocking on the swing.

"Can I tell you something?" she says after a while.

I glance down into Dani's gorgeous, round face. "What's that?"

Tears spill down her cheeks. "I'm in love with him," she sobs, "I'm in love with him and he broke my heart."

*Fuck me sideways.*

I gather her in my arms and hold her against my chest as she cries tears of pain and heartbreak. I rub her back as she cries, trying my best to sooth her, which in turn makes her cry harder.

"Shhh, Dani girl. I've got you." I hold her until her tears subside and she crumples against my chest.

## Damnit, Axe

Dani

The next morning is a complete shitshow. After waking up on the swing in Gabe's arms with swollen eyes and my throat raw, all of Mason's friends showed up around ten, and they were all *starving*. Those little shits raided my cupboards and fridge. I told Mason his friends could stop by once he was feeling better but I didn't mean all at once and the very next day. By the afternoon, the house emptied except for the boys.

"Ma! Food!"

I bring each of them a party size bag of chips. "Make it last," I point between the three of them before heading back into the kitchen.

My phone dings on the table. An email from Mason's physiotherapist, he will be here tomorrow morning to do an assessment on Mason.

"So soon? His cast isn't off yet." I mutter to myself. I guess he wants to get as much information for when it does come off. I run a hand down my face. This is too much.

"Ms. Carter?"

I look up to find Clay standing in the doorway of the kitchen. "Hey, honey."

He shifts his weight. "Can I...speak to you?"

"Of course," I point to the chair across from me.

He glances back at the living room where Axe and Mason are before he sits. "Mason got hurt because of me." He whispers.

My brows furrow in confusion. "A drunk driver hit him. That wasn't your fault."

Clay shakes his head. "I should have been the one who got hit. Mason—" Clay's chin starts to wiggle. "Mason pushed me out of the way."

I reach across the table and take his hand in mine. "Oh honey. It's not—"

"I froze. I-I-I saw the truck heading towards me, and I froze." Tears flow down his cheeks.

My heart shatters at the guilt he is carrying around. "Honey, it's not your fault. Anyone would have froze in that sort of situation."

Clay shakes his head. "Mason didn't."

"That's because it wasn't happening to him. He saw the truck coming and acted," I rub his hand with my other one. "You would've done the same thing."

Clay snuffles. "I don't think I would've."

I rub his hand with my thumb. "Let me tell you a story. When Mason was three, we went over to Jake's house to go swimming," I smirk. "Mason was going through a naked phase and refused to wear anything, including his life jacket.

"He made a beeline towards the pool and jumped into the deep end. I watched it happen but just stood there. My brain wasn't registering what I had just saw. If it wasn't for Jake, something horrible could've happened." I lean over and wipe his cheek.

"It can happen to anyone, honey. People freeze up when something horrible is happening to them or to someone they love. You're not a terrible person. Mason doesn't hate you for what happened and neither do I. We love you, you're family." I smile.

Clay gives me a small grin and stands. "Thank you, Ms. Carter. I feel a bit better knowing that."

"Glad I could help."

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“You got everything, Bubba?” I ask as he makes his way down the stairs.

The last nine weeks have been brutal. With Mason’s casts coming off, all the physio appointments and missing the first three weeks of school, I’m done. Physically and mentally.

“I think so,” he answers.

I hold my hand out for his bag and stuff his lunch inside. A horn blares outside. I open the door to find Axe parked behind my new-to-me Mazda 6. I bought it with my last cheque from Archer law firm. Not the best use of the money, since I’m still looking for work, but with my lemon in car heaven, I needed something to cart Mason around.

“Damnit, Axe. You have a fucking phone, use it!”

He rolls down the window. “Yeah, but then I wouldn’t get to see you,” he winks, and I roll my eyes.

“Get in here and help Mason!” I yell.

Axe gets out and walks up the walkway.

“Ma, I’m fine.” Mason groans.

“You can’t carry your bag and use the crutches at the same time.”

“Yes, I can.” And to prove his point, he slips the bag over his shoulder and moves towards the door.

“Okay, fine. Get going then.” I watch Mason make his way to Axe’s car, fumbling with the door handle. I cover my mouth. I shouldn’t be giggling at this but it’s just too funny. Maybe now he’ll listen.

Probably not.

“Axe,” I laugh out, “help him with the door.”

Axe opens the door with a bow, and I burst out laughing. Mason fires me a look and folds himself into the passenger seat.

I close the door and head into the kitchen, starting up my laptop and go job hunting.

## My Sweetheart

Luke

Here are those papers you asked for, Luke.” Addison purrs as she places them on my desk.

“Thank you, and it’s Mr. Archer. I have told you this multiple times.” I don’t even bother looking at her as she giggles.

I didn’t want to hire her; however, I needed an assistant, and she was the only one available. While she is great at her job, she is a fucking pain in my ass. Hovering around my office door, always asking if I need her to stay late. Calling *me* all hours of the night to see if I need anything added or removed from my schedule.

*Was I this bad when Dani worked here?*

*Pretty much,* that voice answers.

I can feel her eyes on me. Sighing, I glance around the monitor. “What, Addison.”

She comes around the desk, sitting on the edge. “I’ve noticed lately that you’ve been extremely stressed,” she says, reaching out and taking my tie in her hands. Running her fingers along the silk.

“Your point?” I say dryly.

She leans in, flashing way too much cleavage. “I can help you...relieve that stress. The way I used to do for the mayor.” She licks her lips.

This bullshit again. “No, Addison.” I push my chair back and stand quickly. “Collect your things, you’re finished here.”

She laughs. “Always the jokester, Luke.” She sways her boney hips as she walks out the door.

This is getting out of hand. After giving her two written warnings and a suspension within the last eleven weeks, she has yet to take me seriously. I’ll get HR to write up her firing papers tonight.

I head into my private washroom and shut the door, splashing water on my face. I miss my Sweetheart. I miss her to the point of physical pain. I know she is doing well; she still talks to Carrie and Elle; Gabe has been watching out for her like I asked him to and I talk with Erin once a week. She’s working as Erin’s PA and bought herself a newer vehicle. I know it’s not healthy to be so hung up on your ex but she owns my heart. It will always belong to her.

A scream comes from the main office. I bolt from the washroom and out my door, stopping dead in my tracks. My brain not registering what my eyes are seeing.

Dani, my Sweetheart, is standing at Carrie’s desk, wrapped in Carrie’s arms, and squealing. She looks breathtaking. Utterly incredible. My heart begins throwing itself against my ribs and the elephant that has taken up residence in my chest forces the air from my lungs as my eyes rake over her body. Wearing a pair of flowy pants and a fitted lilac shirt. Her curves on full display. I mentally kick myself for pushing her out of my life.

“Daniella.” I whisper.

Her eyes snap to mine and a seed of hope begins to grow as her eyes rake over my body.

“Archer.”

“Can I speak to you for a moment?”

*What are you doing?* that voice yells. *Leave her be.*

“You have five minutes. I have an appointment with Mark at one-thirty.” She heads towards my office, glancing at Addison sitting at her old desk.

I close the door and motion to the chair in front of the desk. I clasp my hands on the desk in front of me. “I’m guessing you’re here because Josh has served you.”

“Yep.”

“May I see the papers?”

"No. This case doesn't involve you." She snaps.

"I'd still like to see the papers," I say gently. "Please." I want to make sure Josh isn't trying to sue her for shit that never happened.

Dani bites her bottom lip, looking everywhere but my face before she opens her purse and pulls out an envelop. "I don't think I'm supposed to be showing you this, but I know you and you won't drop it until I do. Don't tell Mark." She says, pushing it across the desk. "I have no idea what any of it says."

"You worked here for almost four months, and you can't read this?"

"*I can read it!*" she snaps. "I just don't know what it means. They use too many legal terms." Dani crosses her arms and sits back against the chair.

"Maybe if you focused on your work instead of trying to get your boss into bed, you would understand what this says," I smirk.

"Maybe if said boss didn't have me bent over his desk so much, I would have learned a thing or two," Dani says with a grin.

"I'm not sorry about that." I admit. I meet her eyes, hoping to find forgiveness but finding sorrow instead. I remove the papers and skim over them.

Josh is countersuing Dani for neglect of Mason causing bodily harm and false allegations of assault. Stating that if she was home and not sleeping around, Mason would have never been hurt. He also states he never laid a hand on Dani and that all the scars on her were self-inflicted.

"This is ridiculous. You had no way of knowing that Mason was going to get hurt when he went out. Also, there's proof that he abused you. In hospital records and on your body." I hand the papers back and she stuffs them back in her purse.

"Yeah, well. It's my word against his." She stands, shouldering her purse. "Let's hope Mark is a good lawyer or I'm fucked."

## Burn The World Down

Dani

Erin called as I was leaving my meeting with Mark and asked if I wanted to come over for drinks. There was no way I was turning that down after the afternoon I had. I dropped my shit off at home and changed into some more comfortable before heading over.

I don't bother knocking, I just walk in. "Put your dick away, Jakey, I'm here!" I holler, kicking the door shut and strolling into the kitchen.

In all the years they have been married, I have only walked in on them once. And that's only because they were fucking in the kitchen. I refused to eat at that table until they decontaminated it with hospital grade disinfectant.

"You missed it by ten minutes, Doll." Jake answers.

I snort and find Erin sitting at the table, cramming her face with stuffed peppers. Her red hair is a wild mess and her pale skin is flushed.

"You've got sex glow." I tell her.

Erin winks with a grin and points to the chair across from her with her knife. I sit and a plate with two stuffed peppers appears before me.

"Thanks, Jakey." I smile up at him.

"You know I aim to please, Doll." He kisses my forehead and leaves the kitchen. I cut into the massive pepper and shove it in my mouth.

"Luke called me," Erin says with her mouth full.

"Why?"

"We talk."

I narrow my eyes. "You lie."

"Nope. We talk at least once a week. He wants to make sure you're okay."

I don't like them talking, she knows too much. "I would appreciate it if you stopped talking to him. He doesn't need to know what's going on with me. He lost that right."

"Do you know what the first thing out of his mouth is every time we talk?" Erin asks, completely ignoring what I just said. She's on a mission and will ignore everything I say until she gets her point across.

"Is she safe." Erin smacks the table with her hand, rattling the dishes and making me jump. "*Is she safe!* That man is madly in love with you. I have told you this before, and yet, you refuse to believe me."

She shoves another piece of pepper in her mouth and reaches across the table, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. "Babe, you will never find another man like Luke. He sees you. *Only* you. He doesn't see the scars."

I have always known Archer sees past the scars to what lies beneath. He showed me in his touches, his kisses. The way his eyes only focused on me, even when there were other people in the room.

"I don't want to talk about this." I mutter.

"I do. And I will keep talking about this until it gets through your thick skull."

Now she's pissing me off. "He fired me because I chose Mason over him! Mason comes first. Always."

Erin nods calmly. "I understand that. I truly do."

"Do you?" I bark.

"I've been in Mason's life just as long as you have and while I didn't give birth to him, he's my boy. He's aunties boy and he always will be."

"Would you choose him over Jake, if Jake made you choose."

Anger flashes in her emerald-green eyes. Her famous Irish temper shining through. "In a motherfucking heartbeat. Don't think I wouldn't kill for my boy because I would."

And I believe her.

I sigh, placing my fork and knife on my empty plate. "I miss him." I confess.

"I know. I can see it in your eyes and it breaks my heart to see you this way. Why not talk this out with him?" she questions. "That man would burn the world down for you."

I look down at the table. "I'm scared."

"Of what?" Erin asks, getting up and moving next to me.

I drop my head back. "I'm scared of getting hurt again." I glance at her. "Josh hurt me with his hands and his sleeping around. Antoni hurt me when he left me for another woman when our relationship was going so well, or so I thought." I take a shaky breath. "I don't want to get hurt again."

"Oh, babe." Erin wraps her arms around me, stroking my hair. "He's not going to hurt you, Dani. You know that, right?"

I sniffle. "He did the minute he made me choose."

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"Thanks for the ride, Jakey," I say as I fight with the door handle of his truck. "Why won't the door open."

"Hold on Doll, I'll let you out." He laughs as he gets out and rounds the truck.

The door flings open, and I am eye to eye with my best friend's handsome husband.

"I like you, you're cute." I boop his nose.

He chuckles as he helps me down. "You and Erin are going to be so hungover at work tomorrow."

I stumble a step. "Are not."

Jake takes my elbow and helps me inside. "Thanks, Jacob." I snort out a laugh and he shakes his head.

Mason comes down the stairs. "Hey, Uncle Jake."

"Hey, big man."

I spin, bumping into the wall. "Hi Bubba!" I squeal and rush him, wrapping him in my arms.

"You drunk, Ma?"

"Pshh, no." I give him a shake, but he doesn't move.

"She had a few with your auntie," Jake says over my head.

Mason laughs and hugs me back.

"I better get going. I left Erin on the bathroom floor." Jake kisses my hair. "She still doesn't know when she's had too much."

"Bye Jakey! I love you!" I yell.

"Bye Dani! I love you!" Jake yells back, closing the door behind him.

"C'mon, Ma. Time for bed." Mason says.

"I'm hungry." I whine.

"If you eat, you'll barf."

"Nah-uh."

"Ya-huh." Mason turns me towards the stairs and helps me up.

"You're a good boy, Bubba. Anyone would be lucky to have you." I tell him.

He opens my door and I stop dead. There is a bouquet of roses on my bed. I wave a hand at the bed. "What's all this."

Mason pushes me into the room. "Axe bought you flowers."

I blink up at my huge son. He winks and I smack his chest. "That's not funny, Mason! After he saw me naked, I've been showering in my clothes just to be safe."

Mason shivers. "Please don't remind me."

I smack his chest again. "So, who really sent the flowers?"

Mason shrugs. "No idea. Found them on leaning against the front door when I got home." He leaves the room. I pick up the bouquet and look for a card. I find the small envelope and open it.

*I'm going to own your ass and you'll never see Mason again.*

My blood freezes, my heart oozes into a puddle under my feet, my hands shake and sober up quickly as I pull my phone from my pocket and snap a picture. I fire a text to Mark and open Amazon. I order myself a ring doorbell camera and a set of four indoor/outdoor cameras. I should have done this years ago but I never thought I'd have to deal with Josh again.

My phone dings.

**Mark: when were these dropped off?**

**Me: no clue, I just got home. Mason said they were here when he got home.**

I throw the flowers onto the floor and kick them out the door. I want them nowhere near me.

**Mark: he's not to have contact with you, it states as much in his casefile. Do you have cameras in or around your home?**

**Me: just ordered some.**

**Mark: good. We'll talk more tomorrow.**

This day has been a shitshow.



## That's Boy Smell

Dani

Mason! Come help me with the groceries!" I yell as I use my butt to hold open the door while my hands are full. "Damn it," I mutter when a loaf of bread falls to the floor. "*Mason!* I could use your help here!"

Moaning coming from upstairs catches my attention. "The fuck?" I place the bags on the floor and climb the stairs. The moaning gets louder when I get to the top of the stairs joined by grunting. There's no way in hell I'm barging into Mason's room with all that grunting and moaning going on, but I can certainly scare the shit out of him. That'll teach him for having a girl over while I'm out.

I knock on the door. "Bubba? You in there?" I hear muffled curses and I open the door a crack.

"*Ma! I'm naked!*" he yells.

"Are you jerking it? I heard grunting and moaning." I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

This is going to sound all sorts of fucked up, but embarrassing Mason is one of my favourite things to do.

"*Ma!*" Mason groans as the door flies open and he's standing in a pair of shorts and no shirt. His chest covered in sweat and a...hickey. I push my way inside, finding him alone.

"It smells like cum in here," I say over my shoulder.

"That's boy smell." Mason answers.

I snort. "Let me rephrase that. It smells like sex in here." I look at Mason. "Why does it smell like sex in here, Mason Christopher?"

Movement from under his bed catches my attention and I drop to my knees, moving the blanket that's hanging over the side of the bed. I find a boy in his underwear with his clothes in his hands staring at me with wide brown eyes.

I stand and look over at Mason. "Tell your friend it's time to go, then meet me in the kitchen." I leave the room without looking back.

I wait for Mason, pacing the floor. I outed my son before he had the chance to tell me, and I feel fucking awful about it. Why didn't he tell me? I thought we had a close relationship, that Mason would feel comfortable talking to me about anything. Even his sexuality.

His head pokes past the doorframe as the front door closes behind his friend.

"Sit." I point to a chair, and he hauls his body over and drops into the chair.

"I'm not going to ask what you were doing because I have a pretty good idea," I state, and his body relaxes. "However, I am going to ask if you used a condom."

Mason face turns three shades of red. "Ma."

"No, Mason. There is STI's to worry about."

He rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, I did."

I exhale. "How long have you two been seeing each other?"

His face turns a deeper shade of red. "We're not."

"Hold on," I lift a hand up. "Are you telling me that your first time is with a boy you're not even dating?"

Mason snorts. "That wasn't my first time."

"*What!*" I shriek, trying to wrap my head around this. "And when, prey tell, was your first time?"

He shrugs. "After my casts came off."

I stand there gaping at my almost eighteen-year-old son. "With whom, and did you use a condom then too?" I ask, afraid of the answer.

"Chase, and yes I did."

I drop into a chair, rubbing my face.

He moves my hands from my face. "Ma, we were safe. And we have been safe every time since."

*Oh God.*

I don't like this growing up thing one bit.

"Ma?" Mason calls.

I look at him. Instead of seeing a man before me, I see a little boy. His bright turquoise eyes and stunning smile looking up at me from his highchair, with chocolate ice cream all over his face.

A small whimper escapes. "You're not my baby anymore."

Mason wraps his large arms around my shoulders. "I'll always be your baby."

"Oh...God." I sob.

He chuckles and his arms wrap tighter around me. "Come on, Ma."

I pull back and wipe my face. I take a deep breath and give myself a shake. "No more sex in the house when I'm not here or when I am here," I wave my hands. "No sex in the house period."

"Deal. The backseat of cars or seedy motels it is."

I laugh. "Smartass." I touch his cheek, feeling the stubble that's there and start to tear up again.

"Do I need to call Auntie Erin?" he asks.

I give a watery laugh. "No, Bubba. I'll be okay."

He stands and kisses the top of my head. "I guess you know now. Does it...does it bother you?"

"That you're having sex? Yes. Very much."

He rolls his eyes. "You know what I mean."

I take his massive hand in mine. "No, it doesn't bother me that you're gay. I mean, I was shocked, not going to lie about that. However, what bothers me is that I outed you before you could tell me."

Mason sits next to me again. "I wasn't sure how to tell you," he looks down at his lap.

I take his face in my hands. "Bubba, you know you can tell me anything. I'm not going to judge," I kiss his nose and he groans. "Unless you kill someone, then I'll kick your ass. After I help you bury the body of course."

He huffs out a laugh. "Of course."

"Do the boys know?" I question, worry that he's going to tell me they're no longer talking.

"They know. Clay is the one who introduced me to Chase." Mason smiles to himself.

That makes me so happy. They accept Mason because of who he is and not because of who he is attracted to.

"I really like Chase, Ma." Mason confesses.

"Tell me about him."

Mason's smile brightens. "He's sweet and caring. Funny too. And he makes me feel...amazing. And not just because he's good at sucking co—"

I slap my hand over his mouth. "If you finish that sentence, I'm going to tell you all about my sex life."

Mason gags behind my hand. "Deal. Even though that would be a short story."

"Smartass." I grin. "Would you like to invite him over for dinner one night?" I ask, removing my hand from his mouth.

"I'd like that." Mason smile.

"Good," I kiss his forehead. "Now, go do some homework or something." I wave him away. "Tell Chase I'm not mad at him and that I'm excited to meet him properly."

"I will." Mason leaves the kitchen and I slump back in the chair.

I don't like the idea of Mason growing up, but at least I can rest assure that my sex talk worked.



## Than Life Itself

Dani

Three weeks later

I shoot up in bed. The doorbell is going off like mad. “It’s almost one in the morning, who in the fuck is here?” I mutter as I grab my phone and check the camera App.

“For fucks sake.” I don’t bother reacting when I see who it is, the cameras are recording everything. The ringing stops and I lay back down.

—Crash—

Glass shatters somewhere downstairs and I jump out of bed, racing to my bedroom door and locking it. I text Mason, telling him to stay in his room. He won’t get it until the morning. That kid can sleep through a nuclear blast and his door is always locked.

—Bang, bang, bang—

“Open the door, whore!” Josh roars from the other side.

I scramble for my phone and hit call on the first number in my recent calls list. “Go away or I’m calling the cops!”

More banging. “The fuck you will! Let me in!”

I hear whoever answered call my name. “I’m giving you ten seconds to get out of here Josh.”

—Bang, bang, crash—

My bedroom door is hanging off its hinges. Josh storms into my room, grabbing me by the arms. All I can smell is beer. Like it’s oozing out of his pores.

“Drop the lawsuit.” He demands.

“I don’t fucking think so.” I spit back.

“I did nothing to you and you fucking know it!”

“Just like you’re doing *nothing* to me now.”

He brings his elbow up quick, connecting with my nose causing pain to fire through my face as blood runs down into my mouth.

“Bullshit! You’ve always played the victim!” Josh yells, his spit hitting me in the face. “You tricked me into getting you pregnant so you could mooch money from my family. You had everyone believing that I was the bad guy!”

He moves to hit me again, but I avoid the blow to the head. Barely.

“I didn’t trick you into getting me pregnant! I never played the victim; I *was* a fucking victim. Of your abuse, your manipulation, your gaslighting and love bombing! I want you to pay for what you did to me! What you’ve probably done to who knows how many other women.”

“It’s all in your fucking head! You hurt me by blaming me and turning everyone against me! You even had my cousin believing that I hit you. My own fucking family!”

He slams against the wall. My head ricochets off the wall, making me see stars. I lift my knee and connect with his nuts. He drops and I take off across the hall to Mason’s room, banging frantically on his door.

“Dani!” Josh yells as he stumbles out of the room and lunges, knocking us down the stairs.

I throw my hands out to stop from hitting my face on the floor, but they slide when they connect with the tiles, my right wrist twisting and cracking and I smash my face off the ceramic flooring at the bottom.

My head is swimming, my jaw is throbbing, and my vision is blurry as I scramble up the stairs. I bang on Mason’s door again and it opens this time. He takes one look at me, and fury transforms his sweet face into something frightening.

“Ma?”

“*Dani!*” Josh hollers.

Mason pushes me behind him just as Josh reaches the top of the stairs. “Move, *son*.” Josh snarls.

“Get. Out.” Mason says so low, I can barely hear him.

Josh starts laughing. “And what are you going to do, *son*?” Josh takes a swing at Mason, catching him in the jaw. Mason throws a punch of his own, knocking Josh back a step.

“Think you’re tough,” Josh spits blood on the floor. “A whore raised you. You’re nothing but a mama’s boy.” He shoves Mason, hardly moving him. “How many kids do you have running around, huh.”

“I could ask you the same thing.” Mason says icily.

Josh takes another swing and Mason catches Josh’s fist before it connects.

“I can tell you one thing,” Mason says, twisting Josh’s fist. Josh drops to his knees with a whimper as Mason twists his wrist again. “If I did have kids—which I don’t, I wouldn’t leave them high and dry because my *daddy* told me too.”

“She didn’t even want you. Did she tell you that?”

I grip Mason’s arm with my functioning hand.

“She wanted to abort your sorry ass.” Josh lies.

“Okay.” Mason shrugs, letting everything Josh is saying roll off his back.

“Said that having a baby would ruin her life.” Josh’s face is flushed. “You’re the reason she tried to kill herself. You were a horrible child and she had to get away from you.”

No one but my parents and Erin knew about that and it had nothing to do with Mason and everything to do with me.

“How would you know, you weren’t around.” Mason replies.

Mason lets go of his fist and Josh stands, lunging for Mason but never connects.

I look around Mason. “Gabe?”

“The cops are on the way, baby girl,” he says in a voice that does not sound like my sweet Gabe. He lands blow after blow, until Josh’s face is swollen and unrecognizable.

“Gabe! *Gabe stop!*” I yell.

Breathing heavy, Gabe sits back on his heels, his knuckles covered in blood. Josh isn’t moving and his face is a bloody pile of mush. I hear sirens, stopping in front of my house and banging on the door.

“Stay here.” Gabe says as he heads down the stairs.

I grip Mason’s waist. “You okay, Bubba?”

He nods and I feel the slight tremor of his body. He says nothing as he pulls me out from behind him and wraps his arms around my waist, lifting me off the floor. I hold onto my baby as silent sobs rack his large body.

“I wanted you the minute the stick said positive, and the moment I held you,” I pull back to touch his cheek, making his eyes meet mine. “I knew I never wanted to let you go.”

Mason hiccups out a sob.

“You’re my baby boy. My whole world revolves around you.”

His arms squeeze me tighter as he buries his face in my neck. I rub his back to sooth him.

“Is it true?” he mutters.

“Is what true?”

“Did you try to kill yourself because of me?”

*Fuck.*

“No, Bubba. You were not the reason I tried.”

Mason lifts his head and meets my eyes. “Then why?”

I exhale. I had always prayed I would never have to explain my past to him. However, he does deserve to know. “Guilt. I felt like the worlds worst mother. I had to work two jobs and leave you

with Nanny and Papa. I barely spent any time with you when you were younger. I was in a horrible place mentally and I thought you'd be better off without me."

"My best memories all revolve around you, Ma," he places me on the floor. "No matter how busy or tired you were, you always had time for me. I wouldn't be the person I am today without you." He smiles. "I love you, Ma."

I smile up at my baby boy. "And I love you more than life itself."

## I Love Her Snoring

Luke

It's quarter to three in the morning, and I'm sitting at my desk in the office looking through pictures of an incredibly young, very broken Dani.

I convinced Mark to allow me to take over Dani's case. I had to fight him on it but after I paid her bill—in full—and added a small five-hundred-dollar bonus for allowing me to do this, he relented.

The hospital sent over her medical file, and I have been reading through it. There is over fifty pages of broken bones, burns, lacerations, each with a story. And in every story, Dani is to blame. The doctor diagnosed her with intermittent explosive disorder, stating that the Whitlocks have seen her have episodes of impulsive anger that was out of proportion to the event that triggered it.

However, it was redacted once a psychologist found nothing linking Dani to having IED. None of her scars matched what a person suffering from IED scars would look like. Come to find out that the doctor that diagnosed Dani had also diagnosed other women from Josh's past with IED. He was fired when it came to light that he was in the pocket of John Whitlock and getting paid thousands of dollars for these diagnosis.

I can't bring myself to put the pictures away. She looks nothing like the woman I know. Her eyes are dead, her smile is non-existent. I pick up the next picture and have to take a deep breath. Her face is sliced open from her temple to her chin. It's so deep, the skin and muscle is rolled back. I rifle through the notes, finding the one that goes with the picture.

*Nine-inch-deep laceration to the face. Eighteen stitches. Will need surgery to repair the facial muscle and tissue.*

I slam my fist against the desk and jump up from my chair. I begin pacing my office, gripping my hair at the roots, trying to get a handle on my temper. This is not the time to lose it. I glance back at the picture and my anger snaps.

I wipe everything off my desk with a scream. I smash the keyboard and throw the computer monitor across the room. I tear apart my bookshelf, books littering the floor as I rip frames holding my credentials off the walls. I round my desk, grasping the edge and grunting as I flip the mahogany desk on its side.

I drop to the floor, back against the wall, panting. I hang my head and pull my hair. My cell starts ringing from under the pile of books. Sighing, I move the books around until I find it.

"Yeah?"

"Dani's in the hospital," Gabe says.

"What. Happened." I growl, gripping the phone so tight it begins to creak.

"Josh broke in and beat the piss out of her," he informs me.

"Is she okay?" the elephant in my chest cavity presses all its weight on my lungs as I wait for Gabe's answer.

"She's pretending to be. Josh went after Mason too."

"Fuck. Is he okay?" I grip the back of my neck.

"I don't think so. He didn't want to leave her side. It took some coaxing, but he's staying with Dani's parents while she recovers."

I hear a loud snore come through the phone and I smirk.

"Goddamn. How in the hell did you sleep next to that? She just popped my eardrum." Gabe says.

I chuckle. "I love her snoring."

And hearing it now makes me realize how much I miss it. Taking a deep breath, I stand and begin cleaning up the mess I made. "Thanks for watching out for her tonight," I say.

“She’s my girl, I’ll do anything to keep her safe.” Gabe states. “But I should tell you. In keeping her safe, I got into a one-sided fight with Josh.”

“Gabe—”

“He deserved it, and you know it.” Gabe snarls.

“He’s going to press charges; you do realize that.”

“Don’t fucking care. Anyways, I’ll let you get back to doing whatever you’re doing at this fucking hour.” Gabe hangs up.

I tuck my phone into my pocket, grab Dani’s file from where it fell and head home.



## You're Getting A Woody

Dani

A week later

Why am *I* being charged? He broke into *my* house and attacked *me!*" I yell, tossing the papers on the table.

"I'm just as confused as you are, Dani girl." Gabe states from his seat.

"Ugh! I'm so sick of that man. I just want this to be over with." I let my head fall back on my shoulders. "How much do you think it'd cost to take out a hit on him?"

Gabe laughs. "I'll do it for free, baby girl."

The front door opens and heavy footsteps grab my attention. I lift my head in time to see Archer standing next to the table. His eyes roam over my face, down to my broken wrist and back to my face. Fury sizzles in his ice blue eyes and he exhales through his nose hard.

"Josh has added this new charge on top of the existing one against you, Daniella." Archer says in a tone so deep, my southern region begins to tingle. "I am taking over this case."

I blink at him. "You told me you couldn't."

"I am now."

"Mark never told me he handed off the case." I say.

"Surprise." He deadpans. He swipes the papers off the table and paces around the small kitchen, reading over the papers.

"They are dismissing the video evidence, saying that it can be altered? That's a fucking load. They're charging Gabe with assault and you as an accomplice to the assault. Are they fucking serious?"

Archer continues to read through the papers. My heart jumps into my throat every time I catch him glancing at me. It feels like I'm meeting him for the first time all over again. My pulse races, my hands become clammy and my body flushes.

He sits next to me and begins making notes on his laptop.

"It's bullshit, Archer." I mutter.

"I know, baby." He answers, not looking in my direction.

I fire a glance at Gabe, his hands are clasped behind his head, leaning back in his chair with a smirk.

"Did you just call me baby?"

"It slipped out," he mutters.

"I smell bullshit."

He rubs his temples, finally meeting my eyes. "Sweetheart, now is not the time to argue."

My heart melts at the endearment. One I've missed hearing these last three months.

Gabe chuckles. "Yeah, Dani girl, it turns him on."

He flips Gabe off.

"It turns you on?" I ask.

"It does not." He retorts.

"Yes, it does. You're getting a woody right now." Gabe chimes in.

"Shut it, Gabe." Archer barks. He flips back through the pages. "John has been lining the pockets of the judges for years to make sure Josh's cases get thrown out. This is going to be no different," he informs us. "I hate to ask this, but would Mason testify against his father?"

"Fuck yeah he would," I confirm with a thump of my fist on the table. "After what he witnessed, he wouldn't think twice about it."

"Would he be comfortable on the stand or would you like me to come over and work with him?" Archer asks.

The sincere tone of his voice has me fighting back tears. No man—besides Dad—has ever offered to help Mason with something.

“That...that would be great. Thanks, Archer.”

He smiles, flashing those dimples I love so much and nods once.

“Anything for you.”

## **Damn Right I Am!**

Dani

I'm sandwiched between Archer and Gabe, watching my baby take the stand. Something I never thought I would ever witness. We only had four days to prepare Mason for court. The case was bumped up extremely quickly, I have a feeling John and Helen had something to do with that. He did really well at home, but I can see the nervousness in his eyes as he sits.

I give him a smile and blow him a kiss, hoping it helps him relax.

Josh's lawyer stands and starts with the questioning. "State your name for the record please."

"Mason Carter."

Josh huffs. "She didn't even give him my last name. Selfish bitch."

I roll my eyes and glance around Archer's large shoulders to where Josh is sitting. He has three sets of stitches and a busted nose. I peek at Gabe and stifle the laugh that is fighting to get free. He smiles and kisses his busted-up knuckles, giving Josh a finger wave.

"Gabe," Archer hisses. "Don't start shit."

I giggle and Gabe smiles brightly. He's such a bad influence.

"Behave. Both of you." Archer scolds.

"And how old are you, Mason?" Josh's lawyer asks.

"Eighteen."

The lawyer looks up at him. "Really? You're eighteen?" he says with skepticism.

Mason nods and reaches into his suit jacket. "Here's my birth certificate if you don't believe me."

I made him bring it, he can pass for mid-twenties easily. If I had a dollar for every time he's asked if he wanted an alcoholic drink when we go out to eat, I'd be living in a huge house that's fully paid for.

The lawyer waves his hand. "No need. Can you tell me what happened the night Mr. Whitlock came to your home?"

As Mason goes into detail, I watch the judges face. He doesn't look right. All the colour drains from his face.

The judge raises a hand. "I'm going to have to stop you, Mr. Sayer and call a recess."

"But, Your Honor—"

"Recess, Mr. Sayer." He bangs his gavel and stands.

Mason rushes over to us. "What's going on?"

I take his hand. "Pretty sure the judge is going to keel over," I give his hand a squeeze. "You did so good up there, Bubba." I smile up at him.

Archer collects everything and stands. "You did really good, Mason." Archer praises and Mason beams.

"Go grab something to eat. I'm going to find out what's going on." Archer says, walking towards the chambers.

We walk out and sit down on a bench. "You want me to go get food?" Gabe questions.

I shake my head and dig into my purse, pulling out sandwiches and cans of pop. "I always pack food when I go out with Mason because he's *always* hungry." I hand Mason two sandwiches and can of pop. "It's cheaper than getting fast food every three hours. Mason is not a cheap date."

"I'm not sorry about that," Mason says, taking a massive bite of his sandwich.

I smirk and turn to Gabe. "You want one? I have chicken, ham, and turkey."

Gabe starts to laugh. "You remind me of Mom. She always had food in her purse too because *I* was always hungry." Gabe takes two sandwiches and a pop.

"She probably didn't want to shell out hundreds of dollars on fast food either," I snort.

"You're not wrong." He answers.

"Looks like we're getting a different judge," Archer says as he prowls towards us.

If I didn't know how sweet and caring he could be, he would intimidate me. It's like his suits give him powers or something. He seems larger when he wears one. Archer stops in front of me and I hand him a chicken sandwich, which he takes with a smile.

"What happened?" I ask.

"He had a heart attack."

*Well, shit.*

"Who's the replacement?" Gabe asks.

"A new judge. Judge Sandford." Archer bites into his sandwich. "I've never met her, so I can't tell you which way she's going to lean."

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Two hours later, we are back in the courtroom waiting for the new judge. This time though, we are joined by my parents and the Whitlock's.

"I really don't think Mason should be allowed to testify. He never had a chance to get to know his father. To see what a sweet and loving man he is," Helen announces to the room. "Mason only saw what Daniella brings out in Joshua."

I open my mouth to say something when Archer grips my knee. "Don't you dare. If you lash out, they'll use that against you." He whispers against my ear, causing a wave of heat to wash over my skin.

His hand lingers a second too long and Gabe leans around me with a knowing smirk. "Dude, stop feeling up your client under the table." He whispers, making me snort and Archer crack a smile.

"You're just mad it's not you." Archer whispers back.

"Damn right I am! Dani girl, would you be a dear and grab my phone from my pants pocket," Gabe says.

I slap a hand over my mouth to mute the sound of my giggles.

"Your phone's on the table, moron." Mason states from behind us. "I'm sitting behind a bunch of perverts, getting scarred for life."

That gets us all laughing.

A door opens to our left and the new judge steps out. She's young. Maybe late thirties. I hear Josh curse under his breath as she takes a seat.

"I can tell by the looks on your faces that there is some confusion as to why I'm here and Judge Rye is not," she moves around some papers. "Judge Rye has suffered a heart attack and has been taken to the hospital. I am his replacement, Judge Sandford."

She looks up from the papers in front of her. "I see that this case has been added to a countersuit. I will address the original case after this one, so that we don't have to set another date." She motions to the stand. "Mason," she calls.

Mason stands and walks with more confidence than before. He sits and looks to Judge Sandford.

"I see from the record that you were in the middle of your testimony, but I am going to ask you to start from the beginning." She smiles at him, and he relaxes.

Mason begins, answering Mr. Sayer's questions without hesitation.

"No further questions, Your Honor." Mr. Sayer says, sitting next to Josh.

Judge Sandford stares at Josh. "You attacked the mother of your child!" she says aghast.

"Only to defend myself," Josh says.

"Defend yourself? You're a good foot taller than her and a hundred pounds heavier and you had to defend yourself." She shakes her head.

"I didn't want to," Josh implores, looking over at me. "I'm still in love with Dani."

Judge Sandford gives him a look of disbelief. "Moving on. Mr. Archer, if you will."

Archer stands. I hold my breath, reaching for Gabe's hand, squeezing it tight.

"Ow, Dani girl. You wanna ease up there before you pop a few stitches."

I drop his hand. "Sorry."

"I only have one question Mason," Archer looks up. "What did Mr. and Mrs. Whitlock say to you when you were recovering in the hospital back in August?"

"Objection, Your Honor. This is irrelevant to this case," Mr. Sayer says.

"Overruled. I would like to hear this."

Okay, I'm liking this judge. Mason looks to me and I nod. He never told me what was said, only that they offered him a thousand dollars a week if he cut all ties with me and came to live with them.

"They told me that Ma is a whore and a..." he looks at Judge Sandford, then over at me. I give him another small smile, trying to encourage him but I can hear his knee thumbing against the witness stand. He bounces his leg when he's nervous or upset.

"They said she's a whore and a cunt who got pregnant on purpose to steal money from them and destroy Josh's hockey career." Mason looks down at his hands. "They also said that she earned every beating she got from Josh. That it was her own damn fault it happened because she knew he had a temper, and she pushed his buttons anyway."

Horror and rage causes my muscles to stiffen. They knew the whole time and did nothing about it.

"I see. Is there anything else?" Archer asks.

"No sir, Mr. Archer." Mason glances towards me. "I'm sorry, Ma."

"I have no further questions, Your Honor."

## You Won

Luke

Mason walks back towards us and sits behind Gabe. Dani reaches over and squeezes his hand. "So proud of you, Bubba."

I'm proud of him, too. It took a lot of guts for him to get up there in front of his family and strangers and do what he did.

Judge Sandford bangs the gavel. "I don't need to hear anymore. Whitlock verse Carter and Archer is dismissed."

"Your Honor," Mr. Sayer calls out, "I would like to know why you are dismissing this case. You can clearly see my client was attacked."

Judge Sandford leans on the Bench. "This might be true, however, as I was going over this case during recess, I noticed there's video evidence that was rejected. Care to explain why?"

Josh jumps up. "Because she would edit it somehow to make me look like the bad guy! Dani always made me look like the bad guy!" he points over to me. "How do we know that Luke didn't attack her, huh."

Judge Sandford turns to me. "I would like to see the video."

"Your Honor, I really don't think—" Mr. Sayer starts.

"Mr. Archer, do you have a copy of the video?" Judge Sandford questions, cutting off Mr. Sayer.

I pull it up on my phone. "I do."

"Approach the Bench."

I stand and hand my phone over to the judge. "There are two in total." I inform her.

I sit back next to Dani and her hand finds mine. I study the judges face as she reviews the videos. So many emotions cross her face as the video plays. The room is silent, all of them listening to the screaming and what was said.

"Well," judge Sandford places my phone on the Bench, "after watching the videos there is no evidence that Ms. Carter initiated the attack or that she and Mr. Archer planned this attack together. I am dismissing this case. End of discussion." She bangs the gavel on the Bench again. "Now, in the case of Carter verses Whitlock, I'm charging you, Mr. Whitlock with aggravated assault causing bodily harm."

Josh explodes off his chair. "On what grounds!"

Judge Sandford glares at Josh. "After hearing everything, watching the videos, and your outbursts in my courtroom, it's obvious that you have anger issues, Mr. Whitlock. I firmly believe that Ms. Carter did nothing to initiate either attack, other than denying you what you believe you are intitled to."

She stands and motions to the two Officers in the room. "Take him to holding until bail is set."

Dani spins and grips my arm. "What the fuck just happened?"

"You won." I say, packing up my bag.

"Wow," she whisper in disbelief. "I won!" Dani lets out a loud cackle. I glance up, finding her doing a little happy dance. She turns to me with the brightest smile. "Thank you, Archer."

"Anything for you, Sweetheart. Always."

## I Beg To Differ

Luke

Finally home after a long day, I drop onto the couch, loosening my tie. Spending hours sitting next to Dani has fucked with my emotions. I scrub a hand through my hair, hanging my head. Fuck, I miss her.

My phone starts ringing in my jacket pocket.

"Hey, Luke." Erin sings when I answer.

"I'm glad you called, Erin. I need your advice." I admit.

Erin squeals. "I knew this day was going to come!"

"What day?"

"The day you finally pull your head out of your ass and ask me for help. What advice can I bestow."

I rub the back of my neck. "How do I go about telling Daniella why I made her choose?"

Erin makes a clicking noise. "We're coming over," she says and hangs up.

Twenty minutes later, I let Erin and Jake into my condo. Erin kisses my cheek and walks into the living room, dropping onto the couch and patting the spot next to her. I glance over at Jake.

"That spot is for you," he smiles.

I take a seat next to Erin. She faces me with one leg tucked under her ass. "Tell me why you made her choose."

I swallow hard. "Because I'm a selfish man. Because I wanted her all to myself. Because I can't breathe when she's not around. It feels like I'm drowning. She's everything I'm not and I'm addicted to her."

"Damn dude," Jake mutters. "I don't think Doll has ever been told something like that."

"What do you mean?" I look between Jake and Erin.

Erin stands and shoulders her purse. "You have the floor, babe. I'm going to grab something to eat," she kisses Jake and walks out the door.

I stare at Jake. "What just happened?"

"This is a subject that Kitten doesn't like talking about. She loves Dani so fiercely that it upsets her." Jake cracks his knuckles. "And I hate seeing my wife upset."

*Is he going to kick my ass?*

"Doll has a huge heart, and when she loves, she loves with everything she has. But all the men she's ever fallen in love with, have done nothing to deserve it." Jake says.

"Meaning?" I ask.

"Ever since Josh, Dani has only seemed to attract complete fuckheads. None of them have ever treated her with any sort of respect. They use her, treat her like shit, then blame her when they break it off." Jake sits forward in the chair. "That is, until you showed up."

"I'm no better than those men," I admit.

"I beg to differ. You treated her like a fucking queen. Sure, you fucked up, but every guy does at least once."

"Did you?"

"Big time. Erin was my student when we started our relationship. We kept it hidden. No one knew except for Dani," Jake sighs and sits back. "We got caught and I was given an ultimatum: break it off with Erin or lose my job. I broke it off."

"How'd you get her back?"

Jake chuckles. "Tons of groveling, and I tattooed 'property of Erin' over my dick."

I stare at him. "And that worked?"

"Well, the groveling consisted of showing Erin something no one else but family knew about. If you show Dani a side of you that no one has ever seen, it will mean more to her than anything you could ever do or say."

"Does Dani know what you showed Erin?" I question.

"She does. And you've probably seen what it was that I did to get Erin back. There's a few of them in Dani's house," Jake smirks. "And one she wears with pride."

I run a hand through my hair. There is only one thing that I can think of, but I haven't done it in fifteen years. I don't even know if I remember how, to be honest.

"There is one thing that only my family knows about." I tell Jake.

"Then that's what you have to do."



## Scars And All

Dani

I take a deep breath and hit Archer's name. The door buzzes and I walk in, cross the lobby, and wait for the elevator. He had called me last night and asked if I would come over after work today. I don't know why I agreed. Seeing him in court two days ago was too much for my heart to handle. The elevator doors open, and I step in. I send up a little prayer that the thing doesn't stop and hit the button for his floor.

The door is ajar when I exit the elevator. "Archer?" The apartment is quiet, all the lights are off said for one lamp that's throwing a soft glow across the living room. I step inside, closing the door behind me.

"Archer?" I call again.

He comes out of his room and my hearts jumps in my chest.

"Sit. Please." Archer walks over and sits on the chair that's facing the couch, placing a guitar on his lap. "Gabe, you there?"

"I'm here," Gabe's voice comes through the Bluetooth speakers.

"Uh, what's going on?" I ask.

"Sit back and enjoy, Dani girl." Gabe informs me. "This is all for you."

Archer glances at me. "I haven't done this in years, I'm a bit rusty," he strums a few cords. "So, bear with me." He exhales, looking away. "I know this is your comfort song, you hum it when you're nervous, or terrified or furious or happy."

"You noticed that?" I breathe, a little embarrassed.

He nods. "I did. I always thought it was cute." He strums another few cords. "I spent two days learning it," he meets my eyes. "I hope I do it justice."

Archer begins to play, and the tears come. His voice is beautiful. It's deep and soulful, making me shiver and goosebumps to break out along my arms. The way it flows through the song, hitting notes I didn't think his deep voice could hit. I wipe my cheeks. No one has ever taken the time to learn something just for me.

When Gabe joins in on the chorus, I'm floored. Their voices together create the sweetest melody. I mouth the words, not daring to sing along. His eyes never leave mine as he puts his heart into words written by someone else but feel like they were written for me.

This song has always felt like it was meant for me. It was playing on the radio the first time I went to therapy after the whole Josh situation. I took it as a sign that one day I will find a man that would want and love me for who I am. Scars and all.

When the song finishes, Archer places his guitar on the coffee table.

"Thanks, Gabe." Archer says.

"Anytime, Luke." The speakers click when Gabe hangs up.

We stare at each other for a beat before he breaks the silence. "I'm in love with you."

"W—what?" I stammer, my heart in my throat.

"I'm in love with you. I have been in love with you since you walked through my office door." Archer drops to his knees in front of me.

I blink quickly. "I-I-I—"

He takes my face in his hands. "You are loving and caring, intelligent, and strong and so Goddamn beautiful. Inside and out."

I snort. "I have a mirror, Archer; I know what I look like, and beautiful is not it." I sigh, hanging my head. "I have scars inside and out."

He lifts my face, so I am looking him in the eye. "I need you to hear what I'm about to say."

I nod.

"I love you. All of you. Your smile, your laugh, your imperfections, your temper, your sass, your snoring, your love of the word fuck," he winks, and I huff out a laugh. "I love you, and only you."

A tear slides down my cheek and he wipes it away with his thumb.

"I'm not perfect."

"You're perfect to me." Archer kisses my forehead.

I move back to look at him. "What you said at the hospital, what you did while Mason was recovering," I close my eyes. "You hurt me, Luke. Badly. You broke my heart." I take a deep breath. "It took me months to get over what you did."

He brushes the scar on my cheek with his thumb. "I will never forgive myself for the things I said." He admits.

"I'm never going to forget, but I forgive you." I glance at my hands. "I'm in love with you, too." I finally say aloud.

"Those are the best words to ever come out of your mouth." He says and I bark out a laugh.

"Better than 'anything else, Mr. Archer."

"Okay, maybe the second-best thing." He smirks and I smack his chest.

"Smartass." I squeal as Archers scoops me into his arms and brings me into the bedroom, laying me down on my bed.

"I love you, Dani," he says as he kisses me. "I should've told you sooner." He undresses me slowly. "You don't know how much I've missed you." He says against the skin of my neck.

My hands fist his shirt, and he sits back, allowing me to undress him.

"Why did you make me choose?" I question after a moment.

"I shouldn't have."

"Then why did you?"

He takes my face in his large hands again. "Because I'm a selfish man. Because I wanted you all to myself. Because I can't breathe when you're not around. It feels like I'm drowning. You're everything I'm not and I'm addicted to you."

"Really?" I ask.

"Truly."

I push him on his back and kiss him. No man has ever said anything like that to me before. I reach between us and stroke him gently.

"I love you, Luke."

I lift myself up, sinking down slowly. We groan as our bodies come together. Wrapping an arm around my back, Archer sits up, sinking deeper into me.

"Luke," his name comes out on a moan.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and start to rock my hips. Archer grips my hips as his mouth crashes down on mine as we move faster. My head falls back on my shoulders as I get closer to release.

Archer kisses my neck and starts rolling my nipple between his fingers. "Look at me, Sweetheart."

I lift my head and meet his eyes.

"I love you," he says, and I fall apart, bringing him with me.

We stay there, holding onto each other as we catch our breath. Archer peppers my face with kisses as he lays us down. Neither one of us saying anything as we lay tangled in each others' arms. He tightens his grip around my waist and holds me close.

Archer kisses my hair. "I'm never letting you go."

## Anything To Be With You

Dani

Four Months Later

Archer, I told you. I only like being blindfolded when we're having sexy time."

He laughs, placing a kiss on the top of my head and helps me out of the elevator.

"It's freezing out here. Take me back inside." I complain. "I want to use you as my electric blanket."

"Almost there."

I am led across the rooftop and into some place warm.

"Okay, Sweetheart, you can take off the blindfold."

I untie the silk ribbon and blink against the sudden light. "Holy...fucking...shit." I gasp as I take in my surroundings.

We're standing under a massive tent that's lit up by fairy lights wrapped around the polls. There are gas lamps placed at each corner and a table set up in the middle. A gorgeous floral arrangement in the center with every colour of rose you can imagine along with two white pillar candles flanking the sides of the arrangement. The snow has been shovelled away, leaving nothing but dry concrete under our feet.

I turn to Archer. "You did all this?"

He smiles brightly, popping out those cute little dimples. "Gabe, Mason, and the boys helped with the tent."

"Oh, my sweet boys." I sigh. Archer pulls my chair out for me. "Such a gentleman," I say as I sit down at the table.

"Carrie and Elle decorated," he pulls out a basket, the same basket he used the first time we came up here.

"Remind me to thank them. This is stunning."

Archer starts pulling food from the basket. "Oh, they'll remind *you*. Don't you worry about that." He laughs as he sets the food out.

"That smells amazing." I comment as Archer plates my food. That's one of the things I have noticed about him. He always serves me first.

Always.

Doesn't matter if he hasn't eaten all day, he always makes sure I have my food first before he sits down to eat.

He puts a huge chunk of roast beef on the plate, along with garlic potatoes and carrots in brown sugar. He then pulls out a bottle of Merlot. Archer pours the wine and I wait until he has his food before digging into mine. The roast beef melts on my tongue, it's so tender.

Never in a million years did I think I would ever be in a relationship like this. I never thought I would find a man that not only accepted me for me but accepted Mason the way Archer has. He treats me like a queen. Like the sun shines out my ass and that everything I do is perfect, and he treats Mason like own his son.

Archer looks up from his plate. "What?" he asks, wiping his mouth.

I shake my head and grin to myself, shoving a piece of carrot in my mouth. "Nothing."

Archer puts down his fork and leans his arms on the table. "I smell bullshit."

"I just—it's nothing." I wave a hand and go back to my food.

Archer stands and rounds the table. I glance up at him. "What. Daniella." He cups my cheek and brushes his thumb over my scar.

I sigh. "I just never thought I'd be here."

He crouches in front of me. "And where's that?" he tucks a piece of hair behind my ear.

"I never thought I would find someone like you, who accepts me and Mason. The other men I have dated could not understand why I'm a package deal."

"A package deal?" Archer takes my hand in his.

"You know. If you're part of my life, you are also part of Mason's."

He nods in understanding. "I will admit that, at first, I didn't understand why everything you did revolved around Mason. But now, after seeing what you went through to make sure he has everything he needs in life, I'm okay with being the second man in your life."

I blink away the tears that are about to fall and turn away from him. He understands now that Mason is and always will be first in my life.

"Sweetheart, look at me."

I shift my eyes towards him.

"Sweetheart."

I turn to face him fully and fish mouth a few times. "What are...ah, what...did you fall?"

"I didn't fall, Sweetheart." Archer is down on one knee, with a small velvet box in his hand. "I knew the moment you walked into my office, that you were the one for me. I may not have shown it," he smiles, and I snort, "but I knew," he opens the box, "that you were the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with."

My eyes widen at the size of the fucking rock on that ring. "Luke—"

"I want to marry you, Dani. I want to wake up with you every morning and fall asleep with you every night. I want the good days and the bad days. I want the fighting and the makeup sex."

I laugh as tears well in my eyes.

"I want to be there when Mason goes to college. I want to be there when you meet the family of the man Mason falls in love with. I want to be there when Mason gets married," Archer kisses my forehead. "I want everything with you."

All kinds of thoughts start running through my head but the one that stands out the most is 'why?' I start shaking my head. I cannot let him do this.

"How long are you willing to be second in my life, Archer?"

He stands and brings me with him, brushing my hair off my face. "Forever. I want forever with you."

"That's not fair to you. You shouldn't have to be second in anyone's life. You should be with someone who can put you first."

"I don't want anyone else, Dani. I want you." I open my mouth to argue, but he cuts me off. "And I will always want you. Over and over. Without pause, without a doubt, in a heartbeat," he kisses me sweetly, "I'll keep wanting you."

*Oh, God.*

Here come the waterworks.

I cover my face with my hands. Archer's arms wrap around my trembling shoulders, and he rests his chin on my head.

"So, will you?" he says after a moment and I laugh, nodding against his chest. He leans back, lifting my face with a finger under my chin. "What was that? I didn't hear you."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

I glance up into his smiling face. "Yes, I'll marry you."

He scoops me into his arms and kisses me deeply as he slips the stunning white gold Halo ring on my finger and surprisingly, it fits. He pulls out his phone and snaps a picture.

"How did you know the size?"

“Erin came shopping with me.”

I narrow my eyes. “I don’t like you two hanging out. She knows too much and has a big mouth.”

He chuckles and embraces me again. The elevator doors ding and a scream I would know anywhere echoes across the rooftop. Erin crashes into us and if it wasn’t for Archer holding me, she would’ve taken me down.

“*I’m so happy!*” she squeals in my ear, jumping up and down.

“Took you long enough,” Gabe says.

I break away from my little group to find my family and closest friends strolling in our direction.

I whip around to face Archer. “They all knew?”

He nods, taking my face in his large hands. “They were waiting for the text.” He kisses me again; this time we have applause to accompany it.

“My eyes!” Mason groans. “Ma! You’re such a pervert.”

I giggle against Archer’s lips.

“Don’t hog the future Mrs. Archer,” Gabe says as he moves his brother out of the way and picks me up. “Don’t tell Luke that I hit on you because he’ll kick my ass.”

“Don’t piss me off and I won’t.”

“I can’t promise anything.” He winks and places me on my feet.

I make my rounds, getting hugs and kisses and congratulations from everyone. Mom’s a blubbering mess and Dad is misty eyed.

“He’s a good man, Dani girl,” Dad says, kissing my hair. “All that man wants to do is love and take care of you. Let him.”

Before I say anything back, Elle jumps in with a huge hug. “Do you like the set up?” Elle asks.

“It’s absolutely beautiful.” I answer.

“I knew you’d like it.” She squeals.

Another table is added to ours and more food is brought out.

“What’s all this?” I question as Archer walks over, wrapping an arm around my waist and looks down at me, smiling.

“Our engagement party.”

\*\*\*\*

After dinner was done and everyone went on their way, I changed into my pj’s and flop onto the couch. I am exhausted. With the proposal and the impromptu engagement party, I am done for the night.

Archer sits next to me, grabbing my legs and putting them on his lap, running his fingers slowly along my skin. I love having my skin touched. It’s the only thing that can relax me other than sex. His hand moves north slowly.

“Archer.”

“Daniella.”

His grin turns wicked as his fingers slip under my sleep shorts. I grab his wrist, stopping his movement.

“We need to talk about something first,” I say.

Archer leaves his hand on my thigh. “What’s that?” his thumb goes in idle circles on my bare skin.

“Living arrangements. You own, I rent. However, this place is way too small for three people.”

He moves me into his lap. “It’s not that small.”

“Let me rephrase that. It is too small for two adults and three teenage boys.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Three?”

I nod. “Mason, Axe, and Clay. Those boys practically live at my place.”

Archer's hand roams up and down my back. "Then it's a good thing I bought us a new place."

I jerk back. "You what?"

He smiles. "I bought us a new place, which is currently being renovated."

I fish mouth a few times. "Uh..." I throw my hands up. "I've got nothing."

He laughs, pulling me against his chest. "Holy fuck, I rendered you speechless."

I smack his chest. "Shut up. I'm not speechless, I just can't wrap my head around the fact that you bought us a house. *A house!*" I smile to myself. "*Archer!*" I kiss him hard. "You bought my family a house," I say against his lips then start to cry.

"Sweetheart. Oh, baby don't cry. It kills me when you cry." Archer holds me close, and I sniff.

"They're happy tears, I swear." I give him a shaky laugh.

Archer runs his fingers through my hair. I wipe my face and turn in his lap, straddling his legs and taking his face in my hands.

"There's something you need to experience first before we get married though," I say smoothing my hands over his stubbled cheeks. "It might make you change your mind."

"If it's couch sex, we've already done that. And that won't change my mind," he says with a wink. "In fact, I'm buying us a bigger couch, so we have more room."

"No, not couch sex."

His hands run up my back, pressing my chest to his. "What is it then?" he asks, kissing my nose.

His phone rings on the coffee table and I reach over, hitting nine without saying hello.

"Who was that?"

I smile as I climb off his lap. "You'll see."

A knock sounds on the door moments later and I rush to answer it.

"Hey, Ma," Mason says as he walks in with the boys in tow.

"Ms. C, you're killing me in those shorts." Axe groans as he passes by me.

"Thank you for inviting me, Ms. Carter." Clay mutters, his cheeks flushing.

"You know you're welcome anytime, Clay." I smile and his cheeks darken. "Axe, not so much."

"Low blow, Ms. C."

"Sweetheart, what's ah...what's all this?" Archer asks with a look of confusion on his face.

"This is what it's like to live with me." I wave my hands at the boys.

Mason's already in search for food, Axe is trying to sneak a beer from the fridge and Clay is cleaning up after them.

"Axe, put the beer back. Mason, there's snacks on the coffee table, and Clay, you don't need to clean up after them." I point to the living room. "Now march."

All three of them make their way into the living room. Mason flops next to Archer on the couch, Clay takes the loveseat and Axe stretches out on the floor. I take a seat on the other side of Archer and flip on the TV. I find a movie that I know will keep them entertained and press play.

Archer drapes his arm along the back of the couch, and I cuddle into him.

"So, this is your life, huh." He whispers after a moment.

"It is." I look up at him. He kisses me deeply until the boy's groan.

"PDA, Ms. C." Axe groans from the floor.

"Yeah, Ma. Too much, you perverts." Mason adds.

I smile against Archer's mouth. "This is going to be *your* life, are you ready for it?"

Archer smiles, popping those dimples. "I'm ready."

"It will get weird; it will get messy and it will get worse." I warn him.

"Bring it on, Sweetheart. Because I'll do anything to be with you."

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## **Other Books By Amanda**

### The Collector Series

Book One (Forthcoming 2024)

Novella (Forthcoming 2024)

### Standalones

Standalone (Forthcoming 2024)

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Amanda lives in Ontario, Canada with her family. She's been writing since the age of 10 and has always wanted to become an author. She Beta and ARC reads for other indie authors, however when she's not writing or reading, she's watching Netflix documentaries or embarrassing her kids with her singing.