

Chapter 1

I count the beams of sunlight spilling through the cracks in the blinds as they stream across the bedroom wall. The simple exertion causes my swollen eye to tear up.

I cautiously place my fingers against my left eyelid and feel the spongy flesh, making me wince. I have not yet found the courage to check my eye in the mirror, but I know it will be several days, if not a week, before it appears anything close to normal again.

Although it had felt good to lash out at the time, spewing out the callous words and seeing the painful expression on Greg's face, even if it had only lasted for a second, I now regretted my decision. Greg's hurt had quickly turned to rage, and I silently watched as his hand closed into a fist, swung out, and made contact with my eye.

Despite the fact that our argument had started over his photos. The instant photos I'd found tucked away in the back of his drawer—pictures of him and women performing sexual acts on each other. Somehow, I had become the villain.

He had come into the room and found me sitting on the bed, looking through them. Instead of showing any sort of shame, Greg had immediately turned on me, wanting to know why I had been going through his things. After going back and forth and yelling about which one of us was in the wrong, I realized I was not going to get any real answers out of him. I suddenly felt the need to make him feel at least an ounce of my pain and betrayal.

I yelled out. "Fine. You know what, Greg? I don't care what you do. Do what you want. It's not like I'm not fucking somebody too!"

A hushed silence fell over the room before a look of hurt and understanding had appeared across his face. "What do you mean...somebody else?" Greg had ground out between his teeth.

“You heard me. I’ve been fucking someone else, too,” I spewed out again in the heat of anger. And although it had not been true, somehow, that little lie had made me the culprit. Never mind the fact that the evidence of his deeds were spread across our marriage bed.

And, of course, it had only made sense for Greg to blame my best friend Trudy for instigating the whole thing.

“I know that friend of yours put you up to this.” Greg spat out the word friend like it left a bad taste in his mouth. He paced back and forth, cradling his hand as I lay sprawled across the bed, with my hand shielding my eye as I sobbed into the bed sheets.

“I knew it wasn’t a good idea to move back here after getting out.” He stopped pacing and turned sharply, facing the bed. “I better not catch you talking to her again. You hear me, Shawna?! You hear me?!” he yelled again before charging out of the bedroom.

I laid on the bed listening for what felt like an eternity before I heard the front door close, and Greg’s car peeling out of the driveway a few seconds later. I had lain there for another thirty minutes crying and feeling sorry for myself before remembering that Shawna Jane Hall was better than this. Even if I had allowed myself to become a doormat, I was nobody’s punching bag.

Sure, I had allowed Greg to manipulate me into being what he thought was the perfect wife. If the word ‘wife’ were an object. Over the years, I had grown to feel more like a thing than a person. I had allowed him to control every aspect of my life, including who I talked to and spent time with and even what I wore.

Funny thing was, it hadn’t always been this way. When Greg and I first met in high school, he had been more easygoing, but once he joined the military and we were stationed overseas, where I had no one but him to rely on, and barely understood the language, he’d changed.

But through all the manipulations and berating me when he deemed I had fallen out of line, he had never hit me. There had been the bruises on my arms from the times when he had grabbed or shoved me, where I’d ended up landing against a table or countertop, but this was the first time he had left a mark that a simple pullover could not cover up.

I had been in a few fights growing up and some in high school. Most had been between boys who had been running their mouths about me or Trudy, laughing at our second-hand clothes. But growing up with my male cousins had taught me quickly how to take care of myself, and soon, not even the girls at school thought about challenging me.

Now, I barely recognized the woman I had become. Lying here like some empty shell. Some pathetic version of a woman that I would have made fun of in my past life.

It's eight o'clock in the morning, and Greg has not made it home. I wonder which of the women in the pictures he chose to spend the night with.

I get up from the bed and make my way to the bathroom to stare at myself in the mirror. There's no way I'm going to be meeting Trudy today, even if Greg hadn't forbidden me to do so. I'll have to find my phone and message her that I won't be coming.

I already know she's going to be upset. Since moving back to town, our time together has become more and more less frequent. I can tell that Trudy's independent nature and ease of showing up whenever she wants to, makes Greg uncomfortable even if he won't admit it.

A few times after Greg found out that Trudy was the main provider of her household, he had made snide comments under his breath. He had grown up with beliefs of what a man and woman's place in the household was. And Trudy was not it.

Greg has refused to let me work. Not even from home. In the beginning, I thought it was sweet, but I've grown to realize it was just another form of manipulation and a way for him to keep tabs on me. And any time I've ever gotten close to any woman in the past, he's figured out a way to end the relationship. I'm surprised that he had allowed Trudy and I to be close for so long, but I knew that in time, it would end.

Even before blaming Trudy for my fake cheating, he had already begun to imply that he didn't trust her. Leaving the house one day, he had passed her on her way coming to see me. When he returned that evening, he said something about the way Trudy looked at him that day, made him think she was sneaky. And he did not like sneaky people.

But I suppose, that would mean he doesn't care much for himself, considering all the pictures I found hidden away in the back of his drawer. If you don't call that sneaky, I don't know what is. And Greg had been at this for a while. He had to have been... to have left those pictures in his dresser drawer, meant he had become complacent and wasn't worried about me finding them.

I walk back into the bedroom, pick up my phone from the nightstand. Before I call Trudy, I need to make sure none of the anger or resentment I am currently feeling comes through. I have been able to keep the current circumstances of my marriage from her, and I don't need her realizing something is wrong and rushing over here. I could never face her looking like this.

I take a deep breath, count to ten, then dial her number. She picks up on the second ring.

"Shawna, I was just about to call you."

"Ah, how sweet. Glad to know, I'm the first thing you think of every morning."

"I was going to make sure we were still on for today," she says, ignoring my small attempt at humor.

"About that..."

"Shawna. Seriously." Trudy's voice rises, irritated. "You know what, I'm sorry. Is everything okay?"

Okay, that's more like it. Trudy has always been slow to anger and doesn't like stirring things up. Although, sometimes, I wish she would. As much as I try to keep what's going on at home away from her, I wish she would ask more questions and try to find out why I've begun to grow more distant. Sometimes, I wish she would call me out on my bullshit. But it's not her role in our relationship. It's mine.

"Girl, yes. I'm sorry I'm going to have to cancel, again. It's just, I woke up this morning a little nauseous. Feels like a migraine coming on."

I lie. I've never had a migraine in my life.

“I didn’t realize you suffered from…” she trails off. “You said you were nauseous. You don’t think you might be…?”

I pull the phone away, cover it with my hand, and choke back a laugh. Unless Greg had his vasectomy reversed without telling me. Besides, he hadn’t touched me in over a month.

“No, no,” I say, putting the phone back to my ear. “I’m sure that’s not it.”

There’s silence on her end. Not sure what she’s thinking.

“But anyway. I think it would be best for me to rest now.”

“Yeah, I understand. Feel better, okay?” Trudy says.

“I will. Thanks.” I smile, knowing she is worried about me.

I’m just about to end the call when she says. “Shawna. You know I’m here if you need me?”

“Girl, yeah. I know,” I say, trying to make light of the situation. “But nothing a couple of Excedrin won’t fix.”

I poke my swollen eyelid with my finger. If only.

“Talk to you later.” I end the phone call.

In the bathroom, I lean into the shower stall and set the water to the desired temperature, making sure to avoid my eye in the mirror.

Standing with my back facing the downpour, I place my hands against the tile. The water beats down against my back. I hope it will somehow clear my head and give me all the answers I need to move forward from this moment in my life.

No life-altering thoughts come in the next few minutes, and I give in, turn around, face the spray, and begin lathering myself with body wash. Some of the soap makes its way into my eye, stinging.

Shit, that hurts.

Once the shower is finished, I stand in the center of the bathroom, towel off, and try to figure out what I'll be wearing now that I am stuck in the house for the day.

I head to the walk-in closet at the back of the bathroom, defiantly leaving my wet towel on the floor. Greg hates when things are out of order. If he came home to find a towel lying on the floor, there's no telling what he would do. But today, I don't have to worry about that; he's not here, is he?

After dressing in an old pair of sweats, I make my way back through the bathroom, stepping over the towel, into the bedroom, and stare at the bed. I consider leaving it unmade, but I'm not there yet. It's one thing to leave a wet towel lying on the floor—one I will most likely pick up soon—but leaving our marital bed unmade after what happened would send a different message. One I'm not sure I am ready to relay.

And while I'm currently wearing the reminder of what Greg is capable of when he does not get his way, I know I don't need to anger him any further.

I am tucking the sheets under the mattress when something glossy catches my eye. I kneel down beside the bed and pick up the photo of my husband and a light-skinned beauty as she poses for a photo with her mouth stretched wide and her tongue salaciously placed against my husband's cock.

I wonder if she knows he's married. I wonder if *he* knows he's married.

I remember when Greg first bought that camera. When he brought it home, he was so enamored with the fact that instant cameras were a thing again.

At the time, I wondered what plans he'd had for the camera. Wasn't like he had shown much interest in photography before. And I think the last pictures of the two of us, might have been on our honeymoon?

It had been months since I'd seen the camera, believing it had been tossed to the side after the newness of it had worn off. Well, at least I don't have to wonder what happened to it anymore, I think as I crumple the picture in my hand, before tossing it in a wastebasket.

After the bed is made, I go downstairs. Time to figure out what's for dinner. My stomach growls to remind me that I haven't eaten today. I'm not even sure what to take out. I look at the clock on the microwave, and it's already after one. Too late to thaw anything out, and should I only be cooking for one?

As I consider my options, the front door opens, and Greg walks in. He places his keys inside the bowl on the table near the front door. His eyes trail over my outfit before pausing a second at my face. "We need to talk," he says. "But I need a shower first."

He goes upstairs to the bedroom.

At first, I'm angry. He couldn't be bothered to shower where he was? He spent the night with some woman and probably brought her scent back here with him. At first, I'm angry, but then I remember the towel, and now I'm scared.

I sit at the kitchen island, nervously tapping my fingers against the surface, as I wait for Greg to finish his shower. As the minutes tick down, I grow terrified. My whole body's shaking. Something says I should leave, but where would I go?

The few siblings I do have, I barely speak to, having allowed Greg to push everyone out of my life. And the few times we have talked, I have given them the impression that my life with Greg is good, great even. How would it look for me to show up now, bruised and beaten? How could I face them? How could I face Trudy?

I glance at the refrigerator, thinking I should cook something. Seeing me preparing a meal when he returns might lessen his anger, but there isn't anything for me to cook. I would order something, but I'm not allowed to make purchases without Greg's permission. And right now, it doesn't feel appropriate to ask.

All there is to do, is wait. Wait to see what will happen next.

I check the time. It has been seven minutes since Greg went upstairs. I can still hear the sound of water coming through the ceiling. Allowing two minutes to undress and the ten minutes Greg takes to shower, I have at least five minutes to sit here and wind myself up into a nervous wreck.

The sound of a text message from my phone causes me to jump. It's Trudy. She's messaging me a GIF of a bear giving out hugs to let me know she's thinking of me.

I message back, *Thanks. Maybe lunch next week?* My eye will be back to normal then. If not, shouldn't be anything a little makeup can't cover up.

Sure, just let me know when, is her reply.

As my phone dings with her response, Greg is coming from the bedroom. He's wearing a pair of gray sweatpants. His feet and chest are bare. He's drying his hair with a towel. I suck in my breath as I realize it must be the one I left lying on the floor.

"Who's that?" he asks, looking at my phone.

I consider lying, he did just forbid me from seeing her less than twenty-four hours ago, but I can't think of a single person who would be texting me other than Trudy. And a lie would be pointless. He would just check my phone anyway.

"Trudy. We were supposed to meet for lunch today."

There is a flash of anger in his eyes, but he closes them and takes a breath. When he looks at me again, there is only intent. He removes the towel from his shoulders and places it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

I search his muscular frame, looking for signs of his sexual exploits. Scratches, love bites, hickeys. There appear to be none. At least not from what I can see. My mind flashes back to the photo I found beneath the bed, and I drop my head.

"I wanted to apologize for what happened last night," Greg says.

I flex my fingers, suddenly realizing how tightly I have been gripping my phone.

He watches me as if waiting for me to answer. I am speechless. This is not what I was expecting.

What I was expecting, was to be told how everything was my fault. How, if I had been a better wife, then he wouldn't have had to seek affection elsewhere. If I had not been running my mouth, then he wouldn't have had to close it for me.

Greg was great at laying blame. He was not great at apologies.

But then again, it was early. Didn't mean I wouldn't still end up being blamed for something.

"Um...thank you for saying that," I say. The words come out like I'm trying out a new language.

"And I'm sorry that you found those pictures."

Again, I say thank you.

Before, I was scared; now, I'm anxious. I haven't seen this Greg since high school, and I'm not sure how to take him. The Greg I've known for the last twenty years is manipulating and controlling. He doesn't express concern for others, not unless he can use it for his own benefit. So, how does it benefit him to apologize to me? Especially when I've told him I've been sleeping around as well.

"I...I, wanted you to know that I lied. There hasn't been anyone else. I...only said that...to try and hurt you. I shouldn't have..." I stop, feeling the tears coming.

What the hell is wrong with me? He's the one that hurt me. Not just mentally but physically as well. And here I am, feeling sorry that I lied to him.

"It's okay. I know that you would...never." He walks to me, pulling me into his arms.

I can't remember the last time he's held me like this. Now, I am sobbing like a toddler. Something in me breaks, and my legs give out. We're sitting on the floor as he holds me, petting me on my back.

No. No. This is all wrong. Yes, I can admit that I'm in need of comfort provided by another person. I'm broken. But, the person who broke me is now the one trying to console me. I want to push him away. To lash out. To bruise him the way he has bruised me. But I know that that would not end well. So, instead, I place my hand on his shoulder, breaking our contact. I give him a half-smile before sliding away until my back is against the island.

"I'm okay now."

"I'm glad," Greg says, getting up from the floor. "What's for dinner?"

"I...um...didn't have time to..."

"No problem," he says, checking the time. We can order in for lunch. Figure out something later for dinner. You can have the day off. You deserve it."

He walks over and grabs the cordless phone from the kitchen counter. After dialing, he waits a few seconds before placing an order for Chinese.

I continue sitting on the floor and think about how a black eye is deserving enough to get me out of cooking dinner for the night. And I wonder what Greg's apology actually means. He did apologize for hitting me and for me finding the pictures, but he never apologized for cheating, and he never said it wouldn't happen again.

The food finally arrives, and the two of us sit at the dining room table, pretending this is a normal everyday meal. The fact that I keep dabbing at the fluid leaking from my eye makes it hard.

Greg lays down his fork and pushes his plate away, before steeping his fingers together in front of him and giving me a stern look.

I hate it when he does this. I feel as if I'm back in Elementary school, and my teacher is about to scold me for talking too loud in class.

I place my fork beside my plate and wait.

"I'm due to leave for my annual two-week Reserve Training next week."

I hadn't realized it was that time of year again. I continue focusing on him, trying to keep a neutral expression on my face as the smile I am feeling threatens to reveal itself. Two weeks without him watching my every move.

"And because of what happened yesterday, I put a thousand dollars in our joint account for you to use any way you like. And, by the time I leave, you should be feeling more like...Ahem," he stops to clear his throat. "Yourself."

Two whole weeks and some hush money. I feel as if I've fallen down the rabbit hole.

"I'm sure I will," I say as I catch myself about to reach for my eye. I timidly place my hand back on the table. "Thank you."

I manage out a feeble smile as my insides are doing cartwheels and jumping for joy. It's a second before I notice that Greg is still giving me that look that says this little meeting isn't over yet. I should have known it was too good to be true.

No good deed.

"Though I believe you when you said that you only said what you did to try and get back at me, I still think that the relationship you have with your friend Trudy is not a healthy one. And I hope that you would take this time when I am away, to try and begin to start cutting ties with her."

And there it is, the other shoe. Begin cutting ties. Was that the new speak for "Get rid of your friend?" Although it hadn't been easy to end all those other relationships that Greg had deemed to be unhealthy for me, those other women hadn't been Trudy. I've known her for over half my life. She is like a sister to me. My other half. How am I going to end the last tangible relationship in my life and still find a reason to exist?

I bow my head like the dutiful wife I am and wait to see if there are any more demands.

Greg nods his head with a flourish that announces that the meeting is over. He then stands up and declares, "I'm going to the gym."

After the events that unfolded yesterday, I have every right to doubt him, knowing the gym is probably an excuse to return to the arms of the woman he spent the night with. But I know that Greg's physique is the source of his pride—*that* he wouldn't lie about.

There are a few weights and a workout bench here, but they are mainly meant for me. To make sure I remain fit and look the part for those random times we are seen together.

“And maybe, we can have some alone time when I get back.” He looks at me like he's offered me my favorite dessert.

Alone time. Greg's words for sex. I often wonder why he calls it that when we are the only two people here.

“That sounds good,” I manage to say, even though everything inside me is repulsed by the idea of him touching me after he's been with someone else, and let's not forget that I am still nursing this bruised and swollen eye. I stop myself again as my hand instinctively moves to my face.

Happy with my answer, he goes back upstairs and returns a few minutes later, wearing a sleeveless shirt and tennis shoes, with a gym bag in hand. He grabs his keys from the table and gives me one last look before closing the door behind him.

I am still sitting at the dining room table, unable to will myself to move. My hands are in my lap as I wring them. He wants me to sleep with him.

I stare at the remnants of my lunch, and my stomach churns as it threatens to empty itself. I'm guessing one black eye is only equivalent to one afternoon of takeout. I'm not sure if I can do this. I shudder when I picture him on top of me. If this is how I am reacting now, imagine what will happen when it's the real thing. How will he respond knowing I am repulsed by him?

Placing my elbows on the table, I rest my face against my hands, wincing at the pain. Instead of pulling away, I lean further into it, welcoming the ache. Suddenly, I remember my prescription for Diazepam hidden away in the medicine cabinet. I had only taken it that one time, not liking the zombie effect it had given me. But to make it through tonight, I'm going to need them.

Now that I have a solution, I get up and begin clearing away the takeout containers and our dishes.

The kitchen is now clean. With nothing left to do, I look towards the top of the stairs. Sex with Greg is never spontaneous. Nothing in our marriage ever is. 'Alone time' requires preparations. I have to pick out something to wear for tonight. Again, I can feel bile rising in my throat. Going to need to take that Diazepam first.

Inside the bathroom, I open the medicine cabinet and begin moving around bottles of cologne and pain ointments, looking for my prescription.

What if I tossed them out?

My breathing becomes heightened, and my chest starts to constrict before I find it hidden behind an old container of moisturizing cream.

I close the medicine cabinet as I hold the bottle close to my chest, waiting for my breathing to calm. As my heart rate begins to settle, I stare into the mirror for the second time in twenty-four hours, examining the angry red flesh that used to be my eyelid.

It's grotesque.

I want to crawl back into bed, throw the covers over my head, block out the world, and just lie there. Forever. But I can't let Greg find me like that.

The label on the bottle says the dosage is 5 mg, and I can take it up to two times daily.

I shake two pills into my hand and examine the tiny yellow pills lying in my palm.

I read somewhere that although the color yellow can represent energy and happiness, that it also symbolizes jealousy and betrayal. *How appropriate*, I think as I toss the pills into my mouth and rinse them down with water from the bathroom faucet.

I return the bottle to the medicine cabinet, hiding it back behind the moisturizer.

A deep breath is required before I walk into the bedroom. I go to the dresser and slide open the top drawer. Inside are lingerie in every color and design one could imagine. All hand-picked by Greg himself.

Because I have no desire to be desirable, I select a black silk camisole with matching shorts. I lay the ensemble at the foot of the bed, then go back downstairs to the living room and sink into the couch. I open up a gaming app on my phone and begin playing as I wait for the Diazepam to kick in.

Chapter 2

Yesterday evening is a blur. The last thing I remember clearly was changing into my lingerie. There are these patches of memories of me wrapping my legs around Greg in some sort of wildless abandon as he grinds into me.

My vagina is sore, and my inner thighs feel as if they've been through an intense workout.

Greg's at work, so I will have to wait until later to find out his perspective on last night's events.

Then again, maybe not. There's a text from him on my phone. *You were a wild woman last night*, it says. *Reminds me of the old days*. Next to the text is a picture of an eggplant.

A groan escapes me as I curl into myself. The Diazepam was just supposed to dull my senses so I could make it through our "love-making session." Evidently, taking twice the dosage turned me into some sort of sex-crazed wild woman. What kind of message did that send? Does he now believe I am turned on by his abuse?

Another side effect of the drug, sleepiness. It is now eleven a.m. I've slept most of the morning away, and it's too late to thaw out something for tonight's dinner. Which means I'm going to have to go out of the house sporting my nice new shiny black eye.

Before I go anywhere, I remember that it's been two days since I last worked out. I need to get back on schedule. In fact, I need to stop feeling sorry for myself, period. I haven't even tried to do anything about this black eye. Instead of treating it with cold compresses to reduce the swelling, I've been choosing to ignore it.

I go down to the kitchen, put a handful of ice cubes inside a Ziploc bag, and place it against my eye. I feel the pricks of tiny needles as the cold bites against my skin.

While holding the bag against my eye, I walk over to the blender and use my other hand to measure out the ingredients for my protein shake. When the blender finishes its cycle, I pour the mixture into a tall glass, add a straw, and stare off at nothing as I sip my breakfast.

Even though a bag of ice and a quick shake are simple things, it feels good that I'm doing something for myself.

Back in my room, now dressed in my workout clothes, I find the latest exercise video from a YouTuber I follow. The video begins, and I pick up the weights lying at my feet and begin the strenuous workout. The video only lasts for thirty minutes, but by the end, I am covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

Like Greg, I'm proud of the body I've created, and I love the way I feel after a workout, but I wonder, if it were not for my need to please him, would I still put in the same amount of time and effort?

It is nearly one o'clock by the time I step out of the shower and finish dressing. I have chosen a pair of khaki linen pants and a tan short-sleeved form-fitting blouse that accentuates my arms and abs. I put on my sunglasses before grabbing my keys. No need to give the neighbors something to talk about.

Outside, it is a perfect spring day. I stand for a moment, taking in the sun's rays as a breeze moves across my face.

“Afternoon,” a voice calls out.

I open my eyes to see Angie, one of my next-door neighbors, smiling at me as she shields her eyes with her mail.

“Afternoon,” I say back as I begin making my way to my Range Rover.

“Dennis and I are having a little get-together this weekend with a few of the neighbors.”

“Sounds fun. Thanks for letting me know. But I’m sure you guys won’t get loud enough to disturb us.” I say as I jump into the driver’s seat and quickly grasp the door handle to try and shut her out.

“No, no. That’s not what I meant at all,” she says, moving a little closer. “I wanted to invite you and Greg over if you guys don’t have anything planned. It’s this Saturday—”

“Let me get back to you on that,” I say, cutting her off. “Greg’s leaving for the reserves next week, and he’s going to need some time to prepare.”

My hand is locked in a death grip on the door handle as I try not to appear agitated. But this is probably the twentieth time this woman has invited us over to her home and the twentieth time I’ve made an excuse not to come. You would think she’d get the message by now.

Granted, we did come over that one time when we first moved here. It had been a nice enough evening. Plenty of food and drinks. A total of eight of us hanging out on their back deck. But there had been a point in the night when Greg had got up and walked away, and I, not thinking about it, had continued my conversation with another neighbor from down the street. A few minutes later, Greg was announcing that we had to leave, and I, confused, got up and thanked Angie and Dennis for inviting us.

I trailed behind him as he stomped off back over to our house. As soon as the front door closed, Greg turned on me, seething. “You stupid ass bitch. You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

I stood in the foyer, even more confused and too afraid to say anything. What the hell was this about?

“Now you want to play stupid,” he huffed out a chuckle. “Let me make it clear to you, when I get up, you get up. Is that understood? I am your husband. Your job as my wife, is to follow my lead.”

His whole body shook with anger. With his thumb pointed at his chest, he stood waiting for me to answer.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Sure,” he spat out. That was the first night he had looked at me as if he wanted to hit me. But instead, he grabbed his keys and pushed past me, knocking me into the table on his way out the door.

I heard him outside talking to one of the neighbors.

“Everything okay?”

“Just going to the store to grab a few things,” he’d said, before slamming the car door and peeling out of the driveway.

He hadn’t come back home that night either.

“Okay, well, let me know,” Angie says, bringing me back to the present.

“I will,” I say, knowing I have no intention of doing so.

“And if Greg can’t make it, you’re always welcome to come alone,” she adds.

I look back at her, surprised by the offer. “Good to know,” I say, closing the car door.

As I back out of the driveway, I notice Angie is still standing there, shielding her eyes as she watches me leave.

Creepy.

At the grocery store, I get a few questionable looks from some of the employees who aren't used to seeing me wearing sunglasses. I smile and continue with my purchases, pretending that this is a normal day.

My mind is drawing a blank on what to cook tonight. There are signs advertising a sale on the ribeye and fresh shrimp, but that seems a little too extravagant for the first dinner after receiving a black eye. Greg is probably still thinking about our night together. I can only imagine what would be going through his head if tonight I were to serve him his favorite meal.

I opt for a pound of ground beef and pick up one of those complete meal kits to go with it. In the produce section, I grab a bundle of broccoli to steam. Greg hates broccoli.

I get in the checkout line behind another customer, trying to avoid the chatty cashier at register number six. There's some hold-up with the customer in front of me, and Ms. Chatty spies me when her last customer leaves.

"Hey. I can get you over here," she calls out.

I consider ignoring her, but I'm already getting enough attention, and the sooner I get out of here, the better.

Once at the register, I begin unloading my items onto the belt.

Before scanning my purchases, she seems to be closely eyeing each of them.

"Everything okay?" I ask as she places the meal kit in my shopping bag.

"You usually go all out when you come in here."

"Excuse me?"

"I was thinking that...I don't believe I've ever seen you purchase Hamburger Helper before. The stuff you usually get is always...something...fancy. You know?"

Yes, I did know. I just *didn't know* that my purchases were being scrutinized by the employees who work here.

“Decided to try something different today,” I say, giving her a half smile.

“Yeah. I can see that. I get it,” she says while handing me my last bag. “Kind of like the sunglasses.”

It takes everything in me not to let the deep sigh building inside me escape. I should have just ignored her. “How much is my total?”

For a second, she seems unsure of my question. “Oh, that will be \$11.83.”

I swipe my card at the pin pad and enter my number. Once I see approved appear on the screen, I put my card back in my wallet and go.

“You don’t want your receipt?” she calls after me.

I walk out the store without looking back.

It’s time I start thinking about how I’ll spend my time during those two weeks Greg will be gone. I wish I had a job. At least something part-time. That way, I would have something to keep me busy. Maybe I could talk to Greg again about one of those work-from-home jobs. Although, I’m not sure who would hire me. I haven’t worked in over fifteen years. And even then, I worked on the base where Greg was stationed in one of the mess halls, helping set up breakfast and lunch for the soldiers. With there being no military base here, those job skills are useless.

I decide to take a detour from my usual route home and see the new improvements made by the city government to our downtown area. The majority of the stores that used to be here when I was growing up are now gone. Most of the buildings are now occupied by restaurants, law offices, and banks. I turn down a side street and notice a sidewalk sign, sitting outside one of the newer hotels.

The sign says that there is ‘Live Music Every Evening at 7.’

That sounds like fun. Something I could invite Trudy to do with me or maybe even on my own. I make a mental note of the street I'm on and check to make sure there is sufficient parking before heading back to the house.

The Hamburger Helper and steamed broccoli were not a big hit at tonight's dinner. After placing the food on our plates, I set Greg's in front of him and carried mine to my place at the other end of the table and sat down.

Greg took one look at his plate, stared up at me with that look that said, 'Oh, you want to play games,' and then got up from the table. "I think I'll eat out tonight," he said as he smirked at me on his way out the door.

And you know what? I didn't care. I don't care if he's going off to share a meal with some other woman. I had shown him that he couldn't just do what he wanted to me without suffering any consequences.

Yeah, I had shown him, I thought, staring down at the yellow congealed blob of pasta on my plate.

I get up from the table and grab both plates. I rake the entire contents from Greg's plate and the blob of pasta from mine into the garbage disposal, leaving just the steamed broccoli.

Standing at the kitchen counter, I spear pieces of broccoli with my fork, before placing them into my mouth. As I chew each one thoughtfully, I wonder if the other woman he is visiting lives alone. Had Greg called ahead to let her know he was coming? Was she now standing in her kitchen, preparing his favorite meal, a ribeye with buttered shrimp?

You know what? It didn't matter. Let him have his other women. Wasn't like you could call what we had a real marriage anyways. Trudy had a husband, a job, and was raising two kids. She didn't have to discuss every purchase with her husband and wonder where he was every hour of the day. But it was also true that Trudy was struggling. That sorry-ass husband of hers worked for his family and barely got paid. I wouldn't call that a marriage either, but right now, anything seemed better than this.

I scrape the last of the broccoli into the garbage disposal and wash up the dinner dishes.

The sun has started setting, bringing with it the shadows that darken the corners of my living room. Another quiet evening at home. Too much quiet wasn't good.

My mind keeps drifting to what Greg might be doing. I picture him with one of the women from the photos. The one posing with her tongue against his cock. As soon as she opens the door, he pulls her to him, shoving his tongue down her throat. She moves into his embrace as she moans against him. When they finally come up for air, she whispers, "I've missed you."

He then picks her up and carries her to the bedroom.

"But what about dinner," she asks. "It'll burn."

"Let it," he says, throwing her on the bed.

I shake my head and curse my overactive imagination. I need to find something else to do that does not include me picturing my husband fucking another woman.

I walk upstairs to our bedroom and turn on the TV. I scroll until I find a Lifetime movie where one of those crazy women takes revenge on some poor loser who got in her way.

While the TV is playing, I look through my closet and try to figure out what to wear on my first night out when Greg is gone.

I still haven't called Trudy to see if she wants to come to the hotel with me. In fact, I haven't called her at all. We've texted a few times throughout the day, and she's sent me a few inspirational quotes that cause me to roll my eyes, even though I know it's her way of showing me she cares.

I'll call her soon, but I'm not ready for that conversation we have to have. I still can't wrap my head around the concept of telling my friend of over twenty years that I can't see her anymore.

I find the perfect dress. It's still hanging inside the bag from the dry cleaners. Greg has this obsession with taking things to have them cleaned. Even if it's only been worn once or even if it only requires machine washing.

This dress I've worn once. I know it was years ago, but where to, I can't remember.

It is tan with a long V-neck that shows off my cleavage, but just enough to not be distasteful. There's a cloth belt that ties at the front and a long slit on the left side that stops just below my hip.

A strappy sandal to show off my... Yikes. I'm way past due for a pedicure.

I go into the bathroom and stare into the mirror. I need to figure out how I'll style my hair. My eye has gotten better. Most of the swelling is gone. In its place is the black and red bruising that circles my eyelid.

After parting my hair at an angle, I plait my hair in two loose French braids on each side and leave a few loose hairs that frame my face. Looping the hair at the nape of my neck, I secure it into a bun. Once it's in place, I cover my eye to try and get a better effect. With a little eye shadow, mascara, and lip gloss, it'll be perfect.

Now that I know what I'll be wearing, I go back to the bedroom and flop down on the bed. I turn the volume down on the TV and then send a text to Trudy.

'Hey, want to meet next week?'

I hold the phone in my hand, waiting for her to reply. A few minutes pass, and nothing.

I glance at the time. It's after seven. I remember that Trudy, like most people, has a job and kids, which means she is most likely preparing for tomorrow.

Tossing the phone to the side of the bed. I pick up the remote and aim it at the TV when my phone dings.

Her response is, 'YEAH!' accompanied by a smiling face making googly eyes with its tongue sticking out.

She's such a dork.

Yeah, but she's my dork. I think sadly.

I shake my head, trying to erase the thought. That's a worry for another day.

I reply with, 'I'll let you know when,' to which she replies with a simple, 'OK.'

Now that that is settled, time to focus on my movie.

Just as I'm snuggling under the covers, the woman in the movie is cracking some guy over the head with a brick.

"You go, girl," I say aloud.

I don't know what he did, but I'm sure whatever it was, he deserved it.

*

This house is too big for just two people. Why we needed a three-bedroom house is beyond me. We barely have any company, and no one ever comes to visit. And now with Greg gone, all this extra room does is remind me of how lonely I am.

Despite the fact that for the last three days before he left, he only came home to shower and eat dinner—no more meal kits—a small part of me misses him.

During these times when he's gone and I'm not imagining him in bed with another woman, I often think back to when we first met. I picture in my mind that easy-going boy with the soft lashes and bedroom eyes, who only had eyes for me.

I remember the first day he spoke to me. It was lunchtime, and Trudy and I were sitting on the stairs that led up to the hallway near our lockers, the same as we did every day. I had noticed Greg before that day, and I had noticed him, noticing me. But this was the first time he had approached me.

"Hey," he had said. "I'm Greg."

“I know,” I’d said back.

A few seconds passed as I sat gazing up at him, waiting for him to tell me what he had come there for, as Trudy sat beside me, poking me in my back, giggling. Eventually, he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of notebook paper. He held it out to me, and I took it.

“Here’s my number,” he’d said.

“Um...okay, thanks,” I said. The paper now squeezed inside the palm of my hand.

I wasn’t allowed to talk to boys. At least not boys who didn’t attend our church. But as he stared down at me with a mixture of expectation and awe, I knew I wanted to talk to him, and somehow, I would figure out a way.

He had walked away then, looking back over his shoulder a few times, before meeting back up with the group of boys that had waited for him down the hallway.

“What are you going to do?” Trudy had asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Your mom let you come by my house a few times. Maybe you could talk her into letting you come again. That way you could call him from my house.”

“Maybe,” I’d said. “You think you can hold on to this for me?” I asked, handing her the number. “Just in case?”

Trudy nodded, taking the paper from me and placing it in one of the outside pockets of her backpack. “So, you like him?” she’d asked.

“I think so,” I laughed sheepishly, knowing full well I did.

“He’s cute, huh? You think you two’d make cute babies?”

“Babies? Girl, stop talking crazy. We’ve got the rest of high school, then college, with no mommas to tell us what to do. Then we’re gonna start our business, where we’ll be millionaires

by the end of our first year. And after that, we build our houses right beside each other. How we gonna do all that with babies?"

I remember being so excited about the dreams Trudy and I had for our future.

Before the end of the day, I had gotten the number back from Trudy, and called Greg from home before my mother came home from work. By the end of the week, we had figured out a way to see each other. I had a male cousin who lived two doors down, and Greg began meeting me there.

And now twenty years later, no college, no business, and no cute babies. I reflect on the shy boy, who had once given me his number, and I miss him. If you were to let Greg tell the story of the first time we met, in his version he's the self-assured ladies' man, who walks up to me, tossing me his number, before walking away.

Enough with the sentimental feelings. The nail salon opens in thirty minutes, and I need to be there when it opens if I'm going to make my 10:15 hair appointment. Trudy and I are meeting for drinks after she gets off work, and she doesn't like it when I'm late.

I am checking our joint account again to make sure the thousand dollars is still there when my home phone rings. The display shows the business number for Dalsin & Son.

Why is Trudy calling me from work?

"Hey, girl," I say when I answer. "What you doing, calling me in the middle of the day."

"Is this a good time?" she asks cautiously. "I know Greg doesn't like me calling now that he's decided I seemed sneaky after the last time I came by to visit you."

"No, it's fine," I say, knowing that it's not. I'll have to delete the number from the call log before I leave. "You know how he gets. He's gone for his two-week deployment anyway."

"Okay, good. I mean not good for you that your husband's gone," Trudy says, stammering over her words. "But good—"

“Girl, please,” I say, cutting her off. “I know what you mean. “So, what’s going on, and why you stumbling all over yourself?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just sitting here at the office, acting like a fool. A guy that used to work here a few years ago came back for a visit, and I couldn’t even put two words together.”

“What’d he do, smile at you or something?” I ask, teasing her.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what that means,” I say back. “When was the last time James kissed you hello or looked in your direction?”

Like I am the one to talk. My husband is openly seeing other women.

“Well, regardless of that, I am still a married woman. The way I acted, you would have thought I’d been stranded on a desert island for the last ten years.”

“You may not have been on a desert, but I am sure parts of you are probably dry as one,” I say, laughing at my own joke.

“I said deserted island, not desert,” Trudy says, correcting me. “Anyways, are you still meeting me for drinks after work? I have to figure out how to get Cori from school and still meet you at a decent time.”

“You know I’m right,” I say, not wanting to let it go. “Just swing by here and pick me up. I’ll ride with you to pick up Cori instead of spending money at a restaurant. That way, I won’t have to explain to Greg where the money went when he comes back.”

Part of that was true. I mean, he would ask where I’d spent the money he left me when he got home, but a lunch out could easily be explained. To be honest, I had changed my mind about Trudy going with me to the bar. For some reason, it felt like something I should do alone.

“You know that would be better,” she says, sounding relieved. “You haven’t seen Cori in a while, and she seems to open up when you’re around.”

Cori was Trudy's teenage daughter, and it seemed no matter how hard Trudy tried, she could never do anything right in that girl's eyes. Cori was Daddy's little girl, and James could do no wrong. Even if he was a sorry excuse for a husband.

"What are friends for?" I say, giving her a little laugh.

"Got to go. This work isn't going to do itself," Trudy says before ending our call.

I find the call log on the phone, delete her work number, and then return the phone to its cradle. Looking down at my toes, I say, "Yeah, and these toes aren't going to paint themselves either."

*

By the time Trudy pulls up, my day of pampering is complete. My hair is styled in the two French braids, but it looks even better than anything I could have done on my own. Even though I am only going to be inside the car for the majority of our outing, I have chosen a tan, baggy jumpsuit with spaghetti straps and a white halter top. I am wearing just a touch of makeup to cover some of the bruising that is still showing.

I know that I am overdressed, but I couldn't help myself. With Greg gone, I feel like a bird that's been set free from its cage. A small part of me wonders how hard it will be when it's time to go back in.

A big, giddy smile spreads across my face when I see her sneaking a sniff at her armpits while she waits for me. Inside the car, I have an overpowering need to reach across the armrest and hug her. But for some reason, we don't do that anymore, so I don't.

As soon as I'm settled in, Trudy asks, "What are you all dressed up for?"

"What this?" I ask, feigning ignorance. "This is how I always dress."

"Yeah, right. I thought drinks were off the table," she says, eyeing me skeptically.

“They still are. I just haven’t had a reason to dress up lately and wanted to do something nice for myself. Just because we aren’t going out doesn’t mean I can’t look nice.”

I know she might take that last part to be a jab at her, but I don’t mean it that way. I know Trudy can’t afford to buy herself nice things right now. I would offer to take her shopping if she’d let me—I’ve been itching to try some new looks on her—but she’s too stubborn; she would just turn me down.

Instead of responding, Trudy only nods before putting the car in gear. As we leave the neighborhood, the speedometer registers that we are moving two miles above the speed limit. I love my friend, but sometimes I wish she would let loose, just a little.

I really am happy to see her. When I am around her, I feel more like the Shawna from middle school. The bossy, know-it-all who wouldn’t let anyone or anything stand in her way.

Hmmm...maybe that’s what Greg’s afraid of?

I know, as a proper friend, I should be asking Trudy about herself, but I can’t seem to stop myself from talking about how good it feels to have Greg out of the house for the next two weeks.

“It’s like I can finally breathe,” I say. “And talk to you without him always thinking you’re trying to put ideas in my head.” I can feel the catch in my voice, and I glance over to see if Trudy notices. But there is only a pained expression on her face that has nothing to do with me. She has just turned down the road leading to the front of the school, and there are like twenty cars ahead of us. Trudy’s daughter does not like to be kept waiting. “Guess we should have left earlier, huh?”

“Yeah, I forgot,” she says. “It’s been a while since I had to pick her up.”

“Hopefully, she won’t bite your head off when she sees me sitting in the car,” I say, trying to sound reassuring.

“Hopefully,” Trudy says, not sounding very confident. “I don’t know where that girl gets her attitude from. You would think, by the way she acts sometimes, that she’s had the worst childhood ever.”

“Maybe,” I say, trying to play devil’s advocate. “She’s stressed out about school, and you’re the easiest person to take it out on.”

“I suppose that’s possible,” she says, her voice softening. “But how would I know? She never talks to me.”

I don’t envy Trudy in these situations. I try to imagine myself with a teenage daughter. Between Greg and teen hormones, I would be ripping my hair out or locked away in a padded room. I don’t know how she does it. I’m thankful Greg and I never had kids. Thinking about things at home makes me wonder if Cori’s attitude could be something other than school.

“Or maybe...” I say. “She senses things aren’t right at home.”

There’s a look on Trudy’s face that says she’s been waiting for this line of questioning.

“Even if it were true, she’s not treating her father the same way.”

“Well, she has always been...Daddy’s little girl,” I say.

“Not so much these days,” says Trudy, sounding defeated. “He doesn’t seem to have time for anyone.”

“You ever consider that he may be cheating?” I blurt out.

Something’s wrong with me. Why did I say that?

James is not even the type to cheat. It would take too much effort for him to get involved in another relationship. He barely puts any effort into the one he has now.

“To be honest, no,” Trudy answers, looking ahead. “I think he’s just complacent. He’s got the American dream. A house, the wife, two kids, and a dog. I have come to believe that he is the type of person who is in love with the concept of being married. You know, one of those people who, when you ask about them, are always quick to show you a picture of their family.”

I nod my head. I agree.

“Ever think of shaking things up?” I ask, thinking that maybe I *should* invite her out with me tonight.

Trudy moves forward, filling in the gap made by the car in front of us before turning to look at me. “Shake things up? I’m done trying. He’s always tired.”

“That’s not what I meant. You said you think he’s the type that’s in love with being married. I bet if he thought there was a threat to his marriage, he would start noticing you again.”

“You know something I don’t know?” Trudy asks, one of her eyebrows lifted.

“I’m just saying. It doesn’t have to be real. You could make something up. What’s that guy’s name who came into the office today?” I ask.

“Who, Matt?” she responds.

“Yeah, you could tell James he came to town to visit you.” I offer as a suggestion.

“That’s not true.” Trudy corrects me.

“He doesn’t have to know that,” I say, pushing her.

I wait for Trudy to answer, but realize she is no longer paying me any attention. Her eyes are now focused on the angry teenager standing on the sidewalk. After a few more seconds, her eyes flick to me, and her mood has now dropped a few degrees.

Cori gets in the backseat, tossing her books into the empty seat beside her before slamming the car door. “Umm...you’re late,” she says.

“I know, honey. I got here as soon as I could.” Trudy casts me a guilty glance.

“Excuse me. What am I, invisible?” I’m hoping to alleviate some of the tension between these two.

“I’m sorry,” says Cori, actually sounding like she means it. “But I hate being at school longer than I have to be. Plus, one of my friends invited me over, and I need to get home to shower and change before she comes by to pick me up.”

“Oh really,” Trudy cuts in. “When were you going to ask me about hanging out, and who’s this friend?”

“God...mom. I’m asking you now, and it’s Tara.”

“You are not asking me now. You’re telling—”

I reach over and tap Trudy on her shoulder, shaking my head. She needs to let this one go. Yeah, Cori’s wrong, but that’s a conversation for another day. And if I remember correctly from our conversations, Tara’s a decent influence on Cori.

“Do I have to run everything by you? I’m practically eighteen, an adult.” Cori declares from the backseat.

Trudy takes a deep breath, then begins again. “So, what was the debate about?”

“What?” Cori asks, clearly thrown by this new line of questioning.

“You stayed over for the debate. What was it about?” Trudy asks again.

“Oh...it was about whether to allow cellphones in the classroom.”

“Were you for or against?” Trudy asks the question like she’s approaching a skittish animal that she’s worried will run off if she gets too close.

“We actually had to debate both sides, so I’m not sure which one I’m for.”

There’s a smile on Trudy’s face. I’m not sure if she’s basking in the aftereffects of a conversation with her daughter that didn’t end in an argument, or if she’s hoping that Cori is showing maturity by not rushing to judgment as she has done so often in the past.

“So, how are your classes going?” I ask. “I know the last time we talked, you were making straight As. Is that still the case?”

“Of course, you know me,” Cori says jokingly. “What have you been up to, Shawna? I see you’ve been shopping lately.”

Although it is like pulling teeth to get Trudy to talk about clothes, this is where me and her daughter have bonded. The rest of the car trip is spent with Cori and I talking about what is out of fashion and what is now back in, and the best makeup tutorials on YouTube.

As soon as the car pulls in front of the house, Cori has already gathered her things and is out before we've completely stopped.

"Bye, Shawna," Cori waves at me before running into the house.

I turn in time to see the hurt look on Trudy's face. "Girl, she's a teenager. Don't let it get to you."

"I know you're right." I can see the tears pooling in her eyes. "But it hurts when your kids start pulling away from you, and you don't even have the love of your husband to fall back on."

I can't relate to her about her kids, but I do know what it's like to feel like your husband doesn't love you.

I look at her, smile, and then lie through my teeth because it's what she needs to hear. "But you know you always have me. I love you."

Trudy simply nods her head at me. But something in her eyes says she knows I'm not being completely honest.

Chapter 3

It's been five minutes since I pulled into a parking space, and one minute since I checked my makeup for the umpteenth time, and I'm still sitting in the driver's seat of my SUV. "It's just one drink," I say aloud to myself.

Now or never.

I take one last glance in the rearview mirror and get out. The decline from the parking deck to the street outside the hotel is a little tricky in heels, but I manage to make my way down to level ground without falling on my face.

There is a small line outside the hotel entrance as people wait to have their IDs checked by the very sexy—too young for me—guy dressed in a tight-fitting black shirt and slacks.

When it's my turn, I am reaching inside the pocket of my jumper for my ID when I notice his eyes are raking over me. When they stop at my chest, I see a flicker of his tongue as he wets his lips. When he looks up at me, I meet his eyes, and it is clear he likes what he sees.

"Go on in," he says, ignoring the ID in my outstretched hand.

I give him a smile that I hope conveys that I like what I see as well, but I don't plan on going there, before stepping through the hotel doors.

Inside is your typical hotel lobby with marbled floors, a few potted plants, a couple of seating areas for guests, and a front desk. Two employees are behind the desk talking to each other. They stop for a second when I enter, but once they take in my attire, they go back to their conversation.

The sound of music makes its way to me, and I spy the band playing through the glass walls a few yards ahead. I follow a couple inside the lounge and find an empty seat in front of the bar.

While I wait my turn, I spin around and take in my surroundings. The band is playing some sort of slow-tempo music, which I can only guess is Jazz. I'm not much of a jazz fan, but as far as music goes, it's not bad.

Most of the tables positioned around the stage are occupied by couples. It appears that I might be the only single woman in here.

“Ahem. What can I get you?”

I turn around to see a young woman dressed in the same uniform as the guy out front. She appears to be in her late twenties. There are at least four piercings in each of her ears, and the locs of her hair are twisted in a tight, intricate pattern that frames her face, bringing focus to her light honey-colored skin.

She’s beautiful.

I wonder for a second if she would be Greg’s type, but something in her eyes tells me he wouldn’t be hers.

“I’m not really sure. I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” I answer.

She seems to consider me for a second, then says, “You know what? I’ll fix you my specialty.”

“You’re specialty?” I ask.

“Yes,” she glances up at me as she begins to measure several different liquours into a drink shaker. “And if you don’t like it, it’s on the house.”

I feel my brow creasing as I consider her offer. “Are you allowed to give away alcohol?”

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” she says, lowering her voice and winking at me.

I continue watching her at her craft. She tosses in a few ice cubes before placing a lid on top of the shaker, giving it a few good shakes, and then pours the mixture into a tall, thin glass. She tosses in a straw and toothpick with a pineapple on the end for good measure before setting my drink down in front of me.

The drink inside has a purplish hue, unlike anything I have ever seen before. But what the heck? Pulling the straw towards me, I draw the concoction into my mouth, and it’s pretty good. And

I'm glad it is. Because even though she said the drink would be free, if it wasn't good, somehow, I feel that a free drink, comes with strings.

"It's good," I take another sip. "What do you call it?"

"Right now, I'm calling it Kendra's Kocktail with a K. At least until I come up with something better."

"Yeah—" I begin, but I'm cut short when, I'm guessing, my bartender named Kendra takes off to help a guy who just seated himself at the bar and is waving his hands to get her attention.

Now that I have my drink, I turn back to search for a table near the stage, and I spy an empty one off to the side, away from the seemingly happy couples.

The band has just started playing something new with a slightly faster tempo. I find myself swaying to it as I navigate my way to my seat. Either I'm starting to like Jazz, or there's more alcohol in this drink than I thought.

My table allows me to be off from the crowd but still a part of it, giving me the opportunity to take in the whole lounge. The room is filled with a light murmur as people talk and order drinks. However, a handful of people appear to be here exclusively for the music. Leaning back in their chairs, they're eyes are completely fixated on the stage.

Although this is a relaxed atmosphere, I'm not sure if this is a place I will come back to again. Sitting off in the corner by myself in a room full of people only helps to remind me of how lonely I am. I don't know why I thought it was a good idea to come here by myself.

I would leave, but I've finished half my drink, and the way I'm feeling now, I have no business getting behind a steering wheel.

Pushing the glass away from me, I close my eyes and try to concentrate on the music. Maybe if I block out my surroundings and focus on its cadence, I can quiet my inner monologue and relax.

"Is this seat taken?"

I open my eyes to see a man standing at the seat in front of me. He's holding a glass with a dark liquid inside. His hair is styled in a way that lets you know he keeps it cut regularly, but he doesn't spend a lot on its maintenance.

He's not dressed like the rest of the crowd. The slightly wrinkled dress shirt and slacks, give him the appearance of someone who's just gotten off a flight, and is in town for business.

But the thing is, it's not the cheap haircut or the wrinkled clothes that give me pause. It's the smile on his face that says, 'I've just gotten lucky.'

I scan the lounge and observe the other empty tables he could have chosen to sit at, but then consider that maybe he's lonely too. I look back at him and shrug my shoulders, "No, it's not taken."

He flops down into the seat, keeping his head bowed as if he's afraid to make eye contact. The cheeky smile is now gone as he focuses on the glass he's holding in both his hands.

I want to close my eyes again and continue to try and meditate, but I think that might be rude. So, I decide to talk to him instead. It might make out to be an interesting story when I talk to Trudy again.

"So, you like Jazz?" I ask.

He raises his head, but rather than looking at me, he stares off at the corner of my head. "Not really," he gives a small chuckle.

"Me neither," I say back.

Something about my response seems to give him a boost of confidence, and his eyes turn to me. It is then that he reaches across the table and places his hands on mine. "How about we go back to my room? We could find something else to listen to."

I jerk my hand back as if I've been burned as I gawk at him. My mouth is sitting open like I'm some sort of idiot. I know it's been a long time since I've been out, but I'm almost positive it's not normal to ask perfect strangers back to your room, when you're trying to get to know them.

“Excuse me?” I ask as I cradle my hand against my chest.

“I mean, like you said, neither of us are here for the music.” He takes a sip from his glass and waits.

I don’t know what to say. I try to stand, but my head feels light when I do. Is it because of the alcohol, or am I in shock? It is then that I see Kendra walking towards me with what looks to be a bill in her hand.

“There was a problem with your card,” she says, looking directly at me.

“My card?” Now, I’m even more confused. What is happening here? I never gave her a card.

“Yes. When I ran your card,” she says, stressing each word like I’m slow. “It came back declined.”

“You can just add her drink to my room,” the man says. He seems delighted to be helpful.

“Sorry, sir,” Kendra says, never taking her eyes off me. “But we take situations like this seriously. If she’s ordering drinks knowing she can’t pay, then we have to take this up with the manager. You need to come with me.”

I get up slowly from the table, knowing I should be thankful to Kendra but not completely sure why.

The man starts to get up as well. “I can come if it’s—”

Kendra places a hand on his shoulder, lightly pushing him back in his seat. “Thank you, sir, but I’ve got this,” she says, giving him a tight smile.

I follow Kendra back to the bar, and she directs me to take the seat at the end. I wait for her to return to her station on the other side before asking, “What card?”

She starts waving the bill in her hand in my face, making exaggerated movements as she casts a glance at the guy still watching us. “I came to save you.”

“Save me?” I ask, confused.

“I saw that guy grab your hand, and the way you responded, I figured you weren’t into it.”

“Okay, but he was *just* hitting on me.”

“Really, and I’m guessing he didn’t ask you back to his room?” she asks, still waving the bill in my face.

“Well...yeah.”

“Girl, he saw you sitting over there all alone. He thought you were a prostitute,” she states bluntly.

“A pros...ti...tute?” My mouth is moving like I’m a fish out of water.

Even though it should, the thought does not offend me. Some random stranger saw me across the bar and found me desirable enough that he wanted to pay to have sex with me.

Kendra gives me a curious look before slamming the bill down on the bar in front of me.

“This really is your bill, by the way. I’ll be back. I’m going to get you some coffee.”

As she walks away, I reach into my pocket for the wad of bills inside. When I turn to look for the man at my table, he’s gone. All that is left of him is his empty glass sitting on top of the table.

I’m lying in bed as the TV watches me, thinking about my visit to the hotel lounge, when my phone rings.

It’s Trudy. It’s not normal for her to call this late.

“Hello?” I answer cautiously.

“Shawna!” Trudy wails in my ear.

I’m now on high alert. “Girl, what’s wrong? What happened?”

For a moment, the phone goes silent. When Trudy finally speaks her whole demeanor has changed. “I just called to say hey.”

I don't know who she thinks she's fooling, but it's not me. "You're not fooling anybody. Talk to me."

"Me... me... me, and James were finally connecting after all this time and, and...his phone rang."

That's good, I guess?

"Okay...and then...What happened?" She goes silent again. While I wait for her to answer, I figure it out on my own. "Don't tell me he answered it?"

"Yesss."

That's messed up, but that's not enough to make her call me. James has been doing stuff like this for years.

"I know that can't be everything. Something else must have happened to make you so upset." I say.

"It was his job, but I asked him to stay, and he said...he said that I cared more about the money than being with him."

I blow a gush of air out through my teeth. That sorry son of...Trudy's the only one in that house that seems to care if the bills are getting paid and he has the nerve to throw it up in her face? Seriously?

"If you weren't my friend, I would have some choice words to say about your husband, but I'm going to be nice. Do you need me to come by? I can help throw his stuff out." I offer heatedly.

"No, Shawna, nobody's throwing anybody's stuff out. I just needed to call instead of lying here feeling sorry for myself."

Trudy's now on the defensive, which puts me on the defensive as well.

"*Maybe* you should start to think about yourself for once. Nobody else is."

“I know. It’s just that...I was so happy when I came in tonight and saw that the whole family was here, everybody together. I thought that it was a sign that—”

Trudy’s a little calmer, but I’m still on edge. The way he treated her tonight and with the way Greg’s been treating me for years, I need to lash out at someone and the easiest person right now is Trudy.

“A sign that what?” I cut in. “That your kids were five again, and your husband finally noticed you were a human being with needs? When are you going to realize that your kids don’t need you like they used to, and your husband is an idiot?”

Trudy has been quiet for so long that I pull the phone away from my ear to check if she’s hung up. “Trudy, are you still there?”

“Yes.” She sounds more beaten down than when she first called. “I’m still here.”

“I’m sorry if I sounded harsh. I know you called me for a shoulder to cry on, but your life isn’t going to change until you work on the things that you have control over.”

What’s that saying my momma used to always say, ‘The pot calling the kettle black?’ I think psychologists call it *projecting*.

“You’re right, Shawna. I’m going to go now and try and catch up on some missing sleep.” Trudy says.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” I ask, knowing she has every right to be.

“No, and even if I was, it wouldn’t be for long. Love ya, bye.” Trudy hangs up.

What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I be the friend to her that she’s always been to me. She called me because she needed a kind ear, and all I ended up doing was making her feel even worse about herself.

It's been two days since my night out at the bar. Over the course of that time, I've picked up my phone several times to call Trudy and tell her about it. But I've only gone as far as pulling her number up before laying it back down.

Why don't I want to share my funny story with her? I'm sure we could both use a laugh right now.

Although I'm feigning naivety, deep down, I know why I don't want to tell Trudy. It's because one, the way our conversation ended the other night, and two, the big question that my story will cause her to ask, "What the hell were you thinking?"

Once that question is out there, I will have to come to terms with, that at that moment, the invitation to go back to a stranger's room, had excited me.

The thrill of being desired. The excitement of being someone else; the sexy, mysterious woman at the bar. The anticipation at the possibility of having sex with a stranger.

Does that make me a hypocrite? It's only been two weeks since I found those pictures of Greg with those other women, and now, I'm thinking about having sex with strange men.

No, it's not the same. One, I'm not having sex with anybody. I'm only excited by the thought of it. And two, the women in those pictures weren't just a one-time thing. The nights that Greg wasn't spending with me were not being spent with a stranger.

I need to find something to do. There's still at least a week and a half before Greg comes back home, and other than getting a mani-pedi, going to the hairdressers, and hanging out at the hotel bar for one night, I haven't done anything.

But then again, what is there to do when your only friend works all the time and rarely finds the time to hang out? I could always try going over to Angie's and knocking on her door and see what she's up to.

Yeah, right.

If Greg found out I'd been getting cozy with the neighbors while he was away, he'd probably try to break my neck.

"Google," I say out loud to my phone. "Things to do near me."

Don't want to tour the city I grew up in. Don't want to go to the museums I took a hundred field trips to in school. I have little interest in eating brunch by myself. The next suggestion gives me pause. The hotel is hosting a cover band tonight. I've never heard of the band, which doesn't say much— they could be playing anything from rock, R&B, or country, but almost anything is better than jazz.

It wouldn't hurt to go back and check out the band. And it might be fun to see Kendra again and try another one of her drinks. Preferably one less stronger than that last one.

I'm going there to see the band and have one drink. That's what I tell myself, although I can feel the excitement already building inside of me.

If I'm going out tonight. I'm going to need something new to wear. Yes, there are a hundred outfits in my closet upstairs, but I still have guilt money to blow, and a little retail therapy never hurt anybody.

I'm walking out the door when Angie is just closing her mailbox. Okay, what's that saying? Once is a coincidence, and twice is...something...I don't know, something else. However, the saying goes, I feel like I'm involved in some sort of stakeout.

"Afternoon," she says, smiling at me.

"Afternoon," I say back.

"Headed out?" she asks.

I glance at the keys I'm holding in my hand and think about saying something smart, but I stop myself.

"A quick trip to the mall," I say, trying to make my voice light.

“I’m guessing Greg’s off on his assignment?” Her eyes fixate on his car sitting in the driveway.

How sad is that? The only way people know that my husband isn’t home is when his car *is* in the driveway.

“Yep, just left a few days ago.”

Usually, I’d be in my car by now, trying to avoid this conversation. But I’m still standing in the same spot since this conversation began. I must really be lonely.

But if you really think about it, Angie isn’t that bad. I mean, the constant invites are a bit annoying, but she seems nice enough. I did enjoy myself that one time we visited, before I had to leave, and she is the only neighbor who stops to speak.

“Well, I won’t hold you up any longer,” she says, turning back towards her house.

Now, she’s the one blowing me off. Touché.

“Have a nice day,” I say.

She turns back to me, seemingly surprised at my pleasantries.

“You too,” she says in return.

When I get to my SUV, I call back to her, “Thank you.”

I’m not sure what I mean by that or why I felt the need to say it. But when Angie turns back, she simply smiles at me, but something about the way she looks at me says she knows what it means.

There’s a different guy checking IDs this time. He only gives me a cursory glance to make sure I match the photo on my license before motioning for me to go in.

Everything is pretty much the same as before, except this time, the music flowing out of the lounge is more my speed. Judging by the tempo, the song they are covering must be a rock song from the late eighties.

Manning the bar, are two different bartenders than the ones from the night before. I had not considered that Kendra might not be here.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

I'm about to leave when I see her walking away from one of the tables near the stage. Tonight, her locks are loose, hanging down around her shoulders. I hurry to take a seat at the bar before she returns. I can't have her thinking I was checking for her.

Kendra comes to stand in front of me. She begins wiping the countertop with a cloth, in a circular motion. The look on her face says she is not happy to see me. "You're back." It's a statement, not a question.

"Yeah, I heard there was going to be a cover band tonight." I give her a weak laugh.

Kendra stops wiping the countertop and leans in closer to me. "I was hoping after not seeing you here for two days, you had learned your lesson."

"My lesson?"

"Yeah, not showing up at random bars alone."

I pivot my head over my shoulder, from left to right, giving the lounge a full sweep. "This isn't a random bar. You guys advertise."

She purses her lips and looks at me like I'm some errant teenager. I've seen that look before, on Trudy. "You know what I mean."

"I know," I say, conceding. "I just need to get out of the house, and there aren't a lot of options. And besides, I have you to protect me." I try pouting my lips at her, hoping it makes me seem contrite.

Evidently, it does not because she rolls her eyes at me. “Not in my job description.”

“But you looked out for me the other night.”

Kendra takes a deep breath and is about to answer when the guy at my left gets her attention. “Can I get two beers?”

“What brand?” she asks, now ignoring me.

“Whatever’s on tap.”

I watch as Kendra fills two mugs and places them in front of the guy. He hands her his card without asking how much. She turns to the register and runs it, and I wait as she hands him a ticket and a pen to sign it.

He draws a line through the tip section and signs it at the bottom before placing a twenty-dollar bill on top. “Thank you,” he says and walks away, carrying a mug of beer in each hand.

“You must make out pretty good here,” I say, watching her place the twenty inside a decanter already full of bills.

“I looked out for you the other night because I could tell you didn’t know any better, and it looked as if you needed someone to step in. But now you do know better. So tonight, you’re on your own.”

She gives me one of those ‘This is what tough love looks like’ looks to let me know she’s serious before asking, “You want something to drink, or you just hanging out?”

I consider again that maybe it wasn’t a good idea to come here. I’m excited by the idea of a random guy trying to hit on me, but if he takes it too far, I like knowing there is someone who will step in.

I scan Kendra’s face, looking for a hint that her bravado is just for show, but I don’t even know her, so how could I tell? Anyway, it’s just a few drinks at a lounge, listening to a cover band, at a hotel located in the nicer side of town. If a guy wants to ask me back to his room and

doesn't like my answer, I'm sure he wouldn't make too big of a scene with all these people around.

Besides, I don't need a protector. I'm Shawna; I can protect myself. I square my shoulders and look Kendra in the eyes to convey that I don't need her. "Other than the Kendra Kocktail, what other drinks you got?"

*

I've been sitting at this table for about twenty minutes with at least half my drink left—because, again, Kendra has been heavy-handed with the alcohol—listening to the band sing songs that are vaguely familiar, wondering why I'm even here.

I'm about to get one of the waiters' attention to bring me a glass of water when a guy wearing a business suit, places a frozen drink in front of me before taking a seat at my table.

I'm focusing on the drink, which I believe is called Sex on the Beach, when his light baritone voice cuts through me. "It's supposed to be a popular drink with the ladies."

I bet it is. I'm pretty sure Kendra is responsible for this drink of choice, and I cut my eyes towards the bar. She quickly turns away when I catch her looking at me.

"No, thank you," I say, returning my attention to the man sitting in front of me. I push the glass away. "I think I've had enough."

He simply shrugs and leans back in his chair. His focus is now on the band.

While he's fixated on the band, I take him in. He appears to be like the man from the other night. In town for business. Except everything about this man screams success. His hair is cut in one of those expensive styles that's made to look messy on purpose. The suit he is wearing costs three to four thousand dollars easily. And the blue dress shirt—that matches the flecks I

saw in his green eyes, is unbuttoned, exposing the fine hairs on his chest—is not just your simple cotton blend.

What is a man like him doing sitting beside me?

Once the song is finished, he turns back and extends his hand to me. I reach mine out and allow him to shake it. His hands are soft but firm, and I feel goosebumps rising up along my arm.

“Hi, I’m Patrick.”

“Shawna,” I say as I slide my hand out of his.

“You come here a lot, Shawna?”

I love the sound of my name as it vibrates against the back of his throat. “It’s only my second time.”

He raises his eyebrow as if he had been expecting a different answer.

I pull the drink I paid for towards me. The way he is looking at me makes me feel anxious. The buzz I was feeling earlier has now worn off. Hopefully, a few sips will be enough to calm me.

“What about you? You come here often?” I ask in between sips.

“In town, yes. But no, this is my first time staying at this hotel.”

“The lounge is pretty nice. I can only imagine what the rooms look like.”

It’s a second before I realize how what I said sounds like. And another second before I’m gagging on the drink that’s just got caught in my throat. I try to swallow, which only makes it worse, and now I’m trying to hack up my insides.

Patrick jumps up from his chair and begins lightly patting me on the back. I’m now drawing looks from people sitting at the nearby tables. I know how unladylike this is, but I can’t stop myself. In between hacks, I catch a glimpse of Kendra staring at me. It appears she wants to step in, but true to her word, she doesn’t.

My coughing fit has subsided, and Patrick's hand is now moving in a calming circular motion against my lower back. It feels nice. A little too nice, if you know what I mean.

"Are you okay?" He sounds genuinely concerned.

"I think so." I give him a small smile to reassure him. "I should have stopped while I was ahead."

He squats down until he is close to my ear. "If you want, you can come up to my room and lie down until you're feeling better. And maybe check out the room?"

I know I should say no. Turn him down. Get that glass of water and call me an Uber. But the proximity of his mouth to my ear, is sending chills down my neck. And it's not helping that his hand is still against my back.

My head is screaming, No! But every other part of me is saying, why not?

"I think that would be okay," I say, avoiding eye contact.

Patrick reaches for my hand again. This time, to help me to my feet and I follow him out of the lounge. When we step into the elevators, I turn to see Kendra standing in the lobby. Other than her bare-knuckle grip on the bar rag in her hand, she shows no emotion.

I stare back at her, daring her to stop me. She doesn't move, and eventually, the elevator doors close, ending our standoff.

The hotel room has its own seating area with two armchairs, an end table, and a nice plush couch. Other than the dark oak tables, all the furnishings are a tan-creamed color.

It's to the plush couch that Patrick guides me. Once I am seated, he reaches down to remove my shoes and places my feet on the sofa.

I lean into the cushions and take a deep breath of luxury. I need to start asking what type of business these guys are in, where their companies are willing to front the bill for such a lavish room for a few nights in town on business.

Patrick walks away and, within minutes, is back with a wet washcloth. “May I?” he asks.

I cautiously nod my head, unsure as to where this is headed.

He then places the cold washcloth across my forehead.

If I wasn’t sober before, I am close to it now.

“I have a few phone calls to make. I’ll let you settle in.” He goes towards two double doors, and when he opens them, I catch a glimpse of the bedroom inside, before he steps in and closes the doors behind him.

I lean further into the cushions, smiling to myself before a thought occurs to me.

What if Patrick’s business is sex slaves? But then again, did people who ran sex trafficking operations dress in business suits?

What if he’s in there now choreographing my kidnapping while I’m out here on the couch?

You’re being silly.

I’m sure there are easier ways to get sex slaves than picking up women in hotel lounges. Besides, Kendra saw me leave with him. Other people saw me leave with him.

Sitting up, I place my feet on the floor and search for something to use as a weapon. There are a few knick-knacks placed around the room, but nothing heavy enough to do any damage.

I am still trying to find a weapon when Patrick comes back. “You’re not a sex trafficker, are you?” I blurt out.

He stares at me for a second as if he’s trying to find out whether or not to take me seriously. “Um, no.” he gives a light chuckle. “Where did that...”

Patrick walks over to a briefcase that's lying open on top of a table, along with a laptop that I had not noticed before. He pulls out a few papers. After choosing one, he brings it over to me. "This is my business."

It's a document on company letterhead about next year's earnings for Dickson's Mines. It looks real enough, but I'll make sure to research the company later, if I'm not sitting in a dark room with a bag over my head.

As if reading my mind. "If you want, I can grab my laptop, and you can read about the company yourself. We have several social media accounts, several write-ups. We're actually about to go public."

Although Patrick's trying to sound indifferent and make fun of me at the same time, I can tell that he's proud of his company and how far it has come.

"How long have you been in business?"

Patrick takes the document from me and places it back inside the suitcase. "About two years now."

"Must be exciting to have something that makes you happy."

Patrick starts to make himself comfortable. The suit jacket is now lying across the back of one of the armchairs, and he's started removing his shoes. After tucking them under the table, he walks over and sits down beside me. Reaching down, he retrieves my feet, places them on his lap, and begins massaging them.

It feels strange to have his hands touching me on such an intimate area. The only places Greg touches me is a light pat on the butt to let me know he's in the mood and the usual spots, my breast and between my legs, just long enough to get me ready for him.

He's never held my hand. And the only massage he's ever given me ended after about thirty seconds, with him complaining that his hands were cramping up. Then going on to criticize me for even wanting a massage because it wasn't like I did anything anyway that would warrant me needing one.

I lean back and let him, enjoying the sensations that are moving through my body.

“Why do you think my company makes me happy?” A smile tugs at the corner of Patrick’s mouth.

“Just by the look on your face when you talk about it,” I say lazily.

“It does,” he admits. “It’s been a dream of mine for a long time, that for a while, did not seem was ever going to come to fruition. And now, well now,” he looks around at the hotel room. “I can afford nice hotel rooms that can be written off as a business expense.”

I follow his gaze. It is indeed a nice room. A little posh for my taste, but still, as far as luxury goes, this room would be considered top-of-the-line or somewhere close to it. And I could imagine the sense of accomplishment that would come with creating something that would allow you to afford the nicer things in life, instead of having to depend on someone else to give them to you.

One of the hands that was kneading my feet has slowly worked its way up my shin. The way his fingers are moving sends tingles up the insides of my thighs, and a moan escapes me before I am able to snatch it back.

Is this some kind of acupuncture?

“You feeling better?” Patrick asks, as his other hand is now following suit.

I’m moaning again.

I know I should be trying to stop him. Tell him no. I don’t even know him. But it’s because he’s a stranger that’s turning me on. And the fact that he’s very good with his hands makes me want to find out what else he’s good at.

Instead of answering him, I close my eyes and draw my foot to me, bending my knee, causing the sundress I am wearing to draw up, revealing what’s been hidden underneath.

Patrick’s hand moves further up my leg, and I squeeze it between my thighs.

Before I know it, his hands are on my lower back, pulling me down, and he's on top of me. His mouth comes crashing down on top of mine. There's still a tinge of alcohol on his lips, and I suck at them, wanting to be intoxicated.

Now *he* is moaning, and the vibrations are sending shivers through me.

I reach down and begin loosening the last few buttons on his shirt. And he leans up to help me, pressing his cock against my pelvis.

I want him.

Once the last button is loose, he takes the shirt and tosses it over the back of the couch. My hands instantly find his chest, and I rub them across his pecks. I feel them flex beneath my palms.

From what I can see and feel, he is fit and in shape. But not overly done like Greg. Patrick's definition is more subtle.

I wrap my arms around his neck to bring him in for another kiss, but he pulls back, shaking his head. "Not here."

"Okay," I say, surprised.

He hops off the couch, then reaches down to pick me up, and carries me to the bedroom door. Somehow, he manages to open it while still holding me in his arms.

When we get to the bed, he deposits me near the edge. Kneeling down, he takes the hem of my dress and pulls it over my head. I lay back and watch as he tosses it on a nearby chair. He quickly removes his slacks and places them beside it.

Within seconds, he is on the bed, hovering over me.

Reaching down, he tugs at the fabric of my bra that's covering my nipple. When it pops out, he licks his thumb before rubbing it against the nub, causing it to harden even more.

I watch him as he stares at it, a ravenous look in his eyes. And it's not long before his mouth has replaced his thumb. As he sucks and teases one nipple with his tongue, he strokes and flicks the other between the fingers of his other hand.

I can't take it. I have to come out of this bra. I cautiously turn to the side, not wanting to break contact, and I reach behind me, unhooking it. I toss it in the direction of the chair, hoping it makes contact.

Now that my bra is gone, his assault on my nipples is whole and divine. I reach down and feel the fabric of my panties, and it's wet.

I want him to touch me. I need him to touch me. I find his hand and replace it with mine. I feel the intake of his breath against my nipple as he realizes how wet I am.

Sliding his hand down, Patrick positions his palm against my clit, lightly pressing down.

I press back, an involuntary reflex.

Is this foreplay? What is he doing to me?

The tips of his fingers are now at the lining of my panties. He slips them inside and places two fingers against my clit.

“Fuck.”

He begins flicking his tongue across my nipple as he slides his fingers in and out of me, circling my clit, back inside and out, the circle, now stroking.

I grab his head, smashing it against my chest, as the most prolific orgasm of my life rocks through me.

It's a while before I realize I am still holding Patrick's head in a death grip, and I quickly let go. “I'm sorry.”

“It's fine.” He twists his neck like he's making sure it's still intact. “Do you need a break, or can we continue?”

Although I could leave right now, happy and completely satiated, no one has ever made me feel the way he just did. And if I can make him feel a tenth of what he has done to me, I want to at least try and return the favor.

I put my hand against his cock, still trapped beneath his boxers, to show him I want to continue. I feel it move as if answering me back, as it grows harder against my palm.

I start to rub my hand outside the fabric, but Patrick takes it and places it inside, skin to skin.

Wrapping my hand around the silky appendage, I stroke my hand up and down.

“Yes,” he growls.

I smile, knowing I did that.

I draw the head of his cock out and lean down and begin circling my tongue over the tip of its head. I lick the precum into my mouth.

“Shit.”

Patrick pushes me back against the bed and yanks my panties to one side. He quickly removes his boxers while my hand is still holding his cock. He’s now straddling me, and I let go. As soon as I do, he rams it inside of me.

“Fuuuck!”

My breath is coming quick as I try to match his pace. He drives deeper and deeper into me, his cock reaching places I didn’t know existed. And it’s not long before I am cumming again, and again, and again.

It’s not soon after that I feel his cock pulsating inside me, letting me know he is about to cum. As quickly as he was inside, he is now out, his seed spilling onto my stomach.

He falls back onto the bed beside me, breathing hard. “Oh, my god. That was...that was...Oh my god.”

When I finally catch my breath, I lean up. “Where’s the bathroom?”

Before I can get up, Patrick jumps from the bed and goes into one of the doors located inside the bedroom. I lie back and listen to the sound of water running and a washcloth being rung out several times.

Eventually, he returns holding a soapy wet rag, but rather than handing it to me, he places it on my abdomen and wipes away his semen.

“There,” he says, admiring his handiwork.

“Thank you.” I reach for the washcloth. “Can I get that?”

He gives me a quizzical look but hands it to me anyways, and I get up from the bed and head into the bathroom.

The bathroom is a home designer's dream. There is a separate tiled shower enclosed in glass. One of those soaker tubs I would sell my soul for, marble countertops, chrome fixtures, and the toilet is off in its own room.

Once my bladder is empty, I grab a new washcloth and take a quick washup in the sink, removing the last remnants of my sexual escapade.

I stare at myself in the mirror, waiting for the guilt I know I should be feeling to surface, but nothing happens. Other than feeling a little more peaceful than I did when I woke up this morning, I’m still the same. But I guess now, I am no different than Greg.

Leaning in closer, I search my eyes. Shouldn’t I be feeling some sort of validation?

“I fucked another man,” I whisper to the woman looking back at me.

I guess I’m now deserving of that black eye.

I wait a moment longer. Should I at least feel ashamed of what I’ve done?

No shame.

I shake my head at the woman in the mirror, and she shakes her head back at me.

It's been a long time since I felt wanted and I like it. The excitement of actually sleeping with a stranger far exceeds the thrill of just thinking about it. I want more. But right now, I need to get out of this man's hotel room.

Back in the bedroom, I find Patrick in bed, under the covers.

I wonder if he sleeps in the nude.

I go to the chair to retrieve my dress.

"Are you leaving?" The look on his face says he doesn't want me to.

"Well, I mean. I thought we were finished for the night." I've stopped midway from pulling the dress over my head.

"If you don't have anywhere to be, I wouldn't mind some company tonight." Patrick pats the vacant spot beside him.

My options are to drive back to an empty house, lie alone in my empty bed, and stare at the ceiling, or stay here with this very handsome stranger, who could be anything from a sex trafficker to a serial killer.

I toss the dress back over the chair and climb back in bed, but I position myself near the edge. I'm unsure of the proper protocols I should be following in these situations.

Patrick grasps me around my waist and pulls me to him. "I don't bite," he says, nipping at my earlobe.

Yes, he sleeps in the nude.

I can feel something stirring inside me again. Just as I'm wondering if we're about to go for round number two, I hear the sound of light snoring against my ear.

I guess not.

Turning just a smidgen, not wanting to wake Patrick, I lie flat on my back and settle in. For the first time in a long while, I feel content.

I lie there and stare at the ceiling until I fall asleep.

*

“Um,” I immerse myself a little further under the covers. I smell coffee.

I crack one eye open. It’s a little darker in my bedroom than usual.

I jump with a start, suddenly realizing I’m not in my bedroom. Both of my eyes are open, and as they adjust to my surroundings, I remember where I’m at.

The breath I didn’t know I was holding comes out in a whoosh.

Patrick.

The events from last night reappear in a whirlwind, and I stretch my hand across the bed beside me and find it empty. He did say something about leaving out this morning. I check the clock on the nightstand. It’s 9:45. Checkout time must be soon. If I’m not mistaken, it’s usually around 11?

Near the clock is that cup of coffee I smelled when I woke up. I turn on the lamp and see that underneath the cup is a note and a handful of bills.

I pick up the cup and take a sip—supposedly, the coffee from these high-priced hotels is some of the best in the world—and I immediately spit it back out, remembering why I don’t drink coffee. “Yuck.” High-priced or not, it’s disgusting.

Setting the cup back down, I unfold the note and read it aloud. ‘Thanks for an amazing evening. Hope to see you again. Call me anytime. Patrick.’

As I am trying to relay his number to memory, there's a knock at the door.

"Housekeeping!"

Maybe checkout time is 10?

"One moment!" I yell through the open bedroom door.

Hopping up from the bed, I grab the note and the money, folding them together before stuffing the wad into my bra. I yank on my sundress while searching for my shoes.

Patrick took them off by the couch.

I pat the pockets of my sundress, making sure my house keys and fob are inside.

Good, they're there.

In the seating area, I find my shoes on the floor beside the couch. I slide them on and make sure again that I have everything.

Keys, fob, ID. Check. Wish I had time to brush my teeth.

"Housekeeping." The voice on the other side is getting impatient.

I rush to the door and open it to a woman wearing a maid's uniform. She's holding the master key in her hand, as she is about to let herself in. "Checkout's at 10."

"The room's all yours," I say, squeezing past her supply cart.

There's a strange look on her face as she peers up at me, and my hand goes immediately to my hair.

Oh, God. I must look a hot mess.

I do a quick search of the hallway before removing the hairpins that are dangling free from my hair. I run my fingers through the twists that have come undone from the sides of my head, hoping to achieve one of those crinkly flyaway looks.

I cast a glance at the maid, and she gives me one of those sideways looks that says ‘It’s better, but not by much.’

Without a mirror, it’s going to have to do.

The elevator is right in front of me, but I think better of it. With my hair looking like God knows what, I want to run into as few people as possible. There’s a sign for the stairs off to my left. I push the door open and begin my descent down the fifteen flights.

I make it to the first floor without running into anyone. My little trek downstairs raises my heart rate a little, but not by much. Peeking through the little window in the door, I check the lobby. It appears to be empty for the most part.

I push through, keep my head down, and head straight for the front doors. I cast a quick glance over my shoulders at the lounge. It’s dark and empty.

Not sure what I was looking for. Maybe to see Kendra still standing there, this time looking at me with her face full of reproach.

“Have a nice day, ma’am.” One of the receptionists from the front desk calls after me.

I toss my hand up behind me. “You too.” I step out into the street, hoping to blend in with the foot traffic and make my way to the parking garage.

Chapter 4

I'm guessing three times in so many days makes me a regular. One of the girls at the front desk said, 'Welcome back,' when I walked into the lobby.

With my drink in hand, I head over to what I am now calling my table. The perfect vantage point, giving me a full view of everyone who walks in.

I take a sip from my drink. It's not great, but it will have to do. I tried getting Kendra to make me one of her specialties, but she's ignoring me, which is fine. I didn't come here for her anyway.

When I got home this morning, I stood in the bathroom and stripped out of my dress, causing the money inside my bra to fall out. I'd forgotten all about it. I picked it up and counted out twelve one-hundred-dollar bills.

I sat down on the toilet and considered what Patrick leaving me money on the bedside table meant. Did it make me a prostitute? I quickly dismissed the idea. I had not asked him to pay to spend the night with me. In fact, other than him showing me the earnings statement for his company, money had not come up at all.

I placed the money on the bathroom counter. I knew I would need to figure out what to do with it. I couldn't keep it at home. Greg would eventually find it. And how would I ever be able to explain it? But there was an option: a separate bank account. I knew twelve hundred dollars wasn't much, but it was a start.

After a quick shower and a protein shake, I made a trip to a nearby bank and opened up a savings account. Once everything was signed, the bank associate helping me handed me a stack of papers with all my account information. I walked outside and tossed them into a dumpster out back. No way I was bringing any of that home.

The rest of the day was spent trying to figure out what I was going to wear when I came back here today. I finally settled on the sundress I am wearing now. Easy access, as they say.

It's a Thursday night, and there's barely anyone in here, and the band is playing what sounds like jazz again. But that's okay. I didn't come here for the music either.

I'm back because the thrill and excitement from last night has faded. Once I decided on what I was going to wear, I had the rest of the afternoon to be reminded of how lonely I am.

I tried visualizing my evening with Patrick, how it felt when he touched me, when he entered me, when I came. And although snippets of it began to stir me, the thrill of how I felt in that moment had already begun to escape me.

I thought about calling Trudy and telling her about my evening, but "Hey girl. Guess what? I cheated on Greg last night" doesn't roll off the tongue so easily.

And even though I don't feel guilty, at least I didn't last night, I'm not ready to deal with the judgment that may come from telling her.

So, because I've come down off my high and I have no one to share it with, I'm sitting here in this secluded corner like some drug addict looking for their next fix.

Two men dressed in business casual attire step in from the lobby. One gives a half-glance around the lounge while the other goes straight to the bar. Once the guy who's searching for a table, lands on an empty one that's nowhere near me, he goes to sit with his friend at the bar.

The time on my smartwatch says it's ten after eight. And although I've been sitting here for almost an hour, getting no more than a cursory glance from a few customers, the night is still young, as they say.

I'm slurping up the last few drops of my drink when I hear. "Ahem."

I look up to find the guy who was scouting out seats from earlier. "This seat taken?"

I cast a glance around at the three empty seats at the table. A smart remark is on the tip of my tongue, but I stop myself. He's the first guy to approach me since I've been here. I don't want

to run him off—or maybe I do. Something about him irks me—it could be that self-centered smirk on his face.

“It’s not taken.”

Half a second later, he’s in the seat beside me. He scoots the chair over close enough that I can smell the undertones of the cologne he put on hours earlier.

I find the table, I saw him choose when he walked in and see his friend looking back at us. He’s got a look on his face that says, I can’t believe he did it.

“Can I get you another drink?”

I regard my empty glass for a second. I think I’m good. I’ve got a feeling I’m gonna need to keep my wits about me. “No, thank you.”

He nods.

“I’m Todd, and that guy over there is Dave.” He points a finger over at the other table. “And we’re in town on business. And after a long day of meetings, we were hoping to wind down and have a little fun.”

The word ‘*we*’ in that sentence does not go unnoticed. Todd and Dave look like a couple of Frat boy rejects, and I’m guessing they want me to help them fulfill some gang bang fantasy. No thanks.

“Hope you find what you’re looking for.” I start to stand, but he puts his hand on my arm to stop me.

“Sorry,” he says, giving me a sheepish look. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Gone is the entitled preppy schoolboy demeanor, and in its place is the sweet boy who’s just somehow always misunderstood. Maybe I had him pegged all wrong.

“We’re new…” he stops. “I’m new to all this. I saw you sitting over here all alone and just thought…”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’m kind of new here too.” I give him a smile that says I get it.

Todd leans in. His mouth is a few whispers away from my throat. “How about we go up to my room, and I try to make it up to you.”

Todd’s not really my type. He’s at least six years younger than me, and I’ve never been into those prep boy types. But his mouth near my throat is starting to do things to me. And that thrill of being desired by a guy that I most likely won’t see after today, makes me want him.

“You can try.” I flirt back.

“We’ll try if nothing else,” he says, a sly grin on his face.

He gets up from the table, and I follow him out to the lobby. I turn back, thinking that maybe Kendra will be there, but she’s still behind the counter. Her attention is elsewhere.

Todd pushes the button for the elevator, and when the doors open, we step inside. Once the doors close, he pushes me against the wall, and his hand is between my legs in an instant. He grabs my hand and crushes it against his cock, and begins grinding his hips into my palm. It’s about as big as I was expecting. Or maybe a little smaller.

“You want this, don’t you?” he asks, a sneer on his face.

The cheeky asshole is back. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

The elevator stops on the tenth floor, and Todd quickly backs off of me and moves to the opposite side of the elevator like we’re strangers. Which we are, but still.

When the doors open, he goes into the hallway without looking back, and I follow.

I’m a little thrown off by his abrupt change in behavior, but maybe he’s married or something. I didn’t see a ring, but you never know.

We get to the room, and he holds out his key card and waits for the light to turn green. He pushes the door open and walks inside, barely acknowledging me. I come inside and close the door behind me.

The room is nice enough by hotel standards, but it's not as nice as the one I stayed in last night with Patrick. There is a separate seating area that's smaller than the ones in the suites above. There's one armchair and a sofa that looks to have been recently pulled out into a bed. And just like the other room, there's another bedroom.

Just as I'm realizing that there are two sleeping areas in this room, the door opens, and Dave walks in wearing the smile of a cat that's just caught the canary.

I make a run for the door, but Todd has just wrapped his arms around my torso, pinning my arms to my sides. And he's naked. When did he get naked? "Where are you going?"

"Yeah. The party's just getting started." Dave's walking towards me, unzipping his pants.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Luckily for me, because Todd is undressed, it makes him vulnerable. I bring my knee up, slam my leg down, and grind the heel of my shoe into his foot. He lets out a loud yelp and releases me, grabbing his foot instead.

Seeing his friend injured catches Dave off guard, giving me enough time to duck past him. I'm almost to the door when I feel a hand closing around my wrist. "Bitch, get back here."

I grab the door handle, jerk my wrist from his grasp, and propel myself into the hallway. As I'm heading for the stairwell, I look over my shoulder and see Dave standing at the door with his mouth open and Todd sitting on the sofa bed, nursing his foot.

Assholes.

Not wanting to give these guys time enough to catch up with me, I'm moving down the stairs so fast that I almost trip several times, but I can't afford to slow down. By the time I reach the door to the lobby, I am out of breath. This time, I don't bother to check to see if anyone's there. I fly through the door and run right into Kendra, who appears to have just stepped off the elevator.

"Woah," she says, holding up her hands to steady me and herself. "Are you okay?"

I'm about to tell her that, no, I am not okay. Those two assholes upstairs were about to gang bang and do who knows what else to me. But I can't give her that satisfaction. From the way she is currently sizing me up, I know there's no way she's going to side with me.

Hell, I can't even side with me. I knew something was off when Todd first approached me, and like a dumbass, I followed him right into the lions' den.

"Yeah. I'm okay." I try standing a little taller to show her everything's on the up and up.

"You sure? When I saw you leave," So, she *was* keeping an eye on me. "I was going to mind my business like the last time, but when I saw that guy's friend get up and follow the two of you out, I knew something was up. I came to warn you, but I couldn't find you."

"Thanks, but I handled it," I say, puffing out my chest. "When the friend showed up, I got out of there."

"I didn't think you'd be down for that. I mean," Kendra breaks eye contact for a second. "I'm not sure what you'd be down for, but I came just in case."

I appreciate that Kendra was looking out for me. I really do, but if I don't get out of here now, they are going to be picking me off the floor. My knees are about three seconds from giving out on me.

"Like I said, thank you. I mean it. But if you don't mind, I've got someplace I need to be." I look down and tap the screen on my smartwatch, not really seeing it. "Oh wow, it's that late already?"

Kendra doesn't look like she wants to let me go, but it's not like she can hold me here. I'm not intoxicated, at least not in the legal sense of the word.

"Okay." She backs away, allowing me to move past her.

"Thanks again," I say, almost running to the door.

I make it as far as my Range Rover before collapsing against the back passenger side door. My back is pressed against the tire, and my head is between my knees as I sit here gasping for air. It's like an invisible hand is pressing down on my chest, trying to keep the air out.

All that shit I've put up with from Greg over the years and two fucking strangers got me out here in the damn parking garage having a panic attack. This can't be me.

I try to stand, but it's no good. The dizziness and nausea put me back on my ass. I'm just going to have to sit here until this plays out.

Several minutes pass, and I try my legs again. I'm still sick to my stomach, but most of the lightheadedness is gone. I know I probably need more time and some water, but I can't keep sitting here in this parking garage. Eventually, someone's going to walk by and see me, and I don't need to feel any more embarrassed than I already do.

Once I'm in the driver's seat, I roll down the window and take a couple of deep breaths. The air is getting in. That's better. I do a quick check in the rearview mirror, making sure to avoid looking at myself. I just can't right now. Other than a lone figure a few rows over, it's clear. Either way, I don't trust myself, and I back out of the parking space at a snail's pace. My ride home is much the same, as I remain at least five miles under the speed limit the whole way there.

I'm laid out on the bed with my arms and legs stretched out like I'm some saint about to be nailed to the cross when my cell phone rings. I lean over and answer it without checking to see who it is. I'm in desperate need of human contact.

"Hello?"

There's a moment of silence before that Bloink sound that lets me know it's a telemarketer.

"Hello. How are you today, ma'am?"

“Not so good. You?”

“I am doing great. Thanks for asking. Ma’am, I am calling you today to offer you a better rate on your health insurance. Do you have health insurance, ma’am?”

“Thanks to the good ol’ US of A, I sure do.”

“That’s great, ma’am. Could you tell me who is your current provider?”

I want to ask, ‘If you’re all ready to offer me a better rate, shouldn’t you already know who my current provider is?’ But I don’t. Even though I’m desperate, I’m not this desperate.

“No, thank you,” I say, ending the call. “Uuughhh!” I need a life.

I’ve been lying in this bed for the better part of the day. Other than getting up to blend myself breakfast and use the bathroom, I’ve been here going over and over the events from last night, wondering what the hell is wrong with me.

I knew better. I know better. But I went anyway. And if I want to be honest, I went mostly because it’s a nice hotel. You don’t expect, at least I didn’t, things like that to happen at a nice hotel. Some no-tell-motel off the skirts of town somewhere near the airport, yes. But...but I guess I know differently now. Next time, I’ll trust my instincts.

I sit up in bed with a new determination. Any guy from here on out that gives me the creeps, I let him know I’m not interested. I refuse to allow the Todd’s and the Dave’s of the world to keep me from having a little excitement in my life. There’s still nine more days until Greg comes back, and no way am I spending them sitting in this house like some caged animal. The cage door has been set opened and I’m walking out like I own the place, not like some beaten down animal afraid of its own shadow.

Even though I have this new resolve, I need to make a change to what I plan to wear tonight. Before last night, I was going to keep some sort of spandex dress in rotation, but my instincts are telling me that maybe being easily accessible isn’t the way to go.

I know we're in the middle of spring, but part of me is opting for a long-sleeved turtleneck, jeans, and a pair of ankle-high boots, but I refuse to give those two jerks any more power over me than I've already allowed them. I settle on a pair of tan slacks, a cream-colored sleeveless blouse, and some open-toed sandals.

*

Tonight, the guy outside waves me in without checking my ID, and I say hello to the girls behind the front desk before they have a chance to speak to me.

I'm going to miss coming here once Greg comes back.

Inside the lounge, I take a seat at the bar, and this time, Kendra doesn't ignore me. "I would say I'm surprised to see you back, but that would be a lie."

"You know what they say...you can't keep a good woman down."

Kendra gives me a look that says she's still trying to figure out what kind of woman I am. "If you say so. You drinking tonight or what?"

Before I can answer, a hand falls on my shoulder, squeezing it possessively, sending chills crawling up the back of my neck. "Whatever she's having, put it on my bill."

I turn to find Patrick standing behind me, wearing a smile that says, 'I've seen you naked.'

I imagine the smile on my face mimics his. "You're back in town?"

"I'm back in town," he concurs.

I know he gave me his number, but I never dreamed I'd ever see him again. I take in his face for a second longer before turning back to Kendra.

She's currently sizing Patrick up like she's trying to figure out if he's safe or not. But when she looks at me, I can tell she's decided that he's not her problem; he's mine.

"What are you having tonight, Miss?"

Oh, now I'm Miss. That's fine. I get it. She's staying out of it. But that's okay, I don't need her to save me tonight, it's Patrick.

I steal a glance back at Patrick. "Because it's a special night, I'll have a Kendra special."

Kendra rolls her eyes at me but starts mixing the drink.

While we wait, Patrick lightly runs his hands up the back of my neck, toying with the fine hairs at the nape.

Although we have only spent one night together, he feels so familiar to me. Like I've known him half my lifetime. And it doesn't feel strange to have him touching me in a room full of people.

"Hope you enjoy." Kendra sets an orangish-yellow concoction in front of me, breaking the spell.

"Thank you." I lean in and take a sip, and it's as good and as heavy on the alcohol as expected. "It's good," I say, looking up at her.

The look on her face says I know it is. "Anything else?"

As I'm shaking my head, Patrick leans down to whisper in my ear. I need him to stop. I can't imagine he knows what he's doing to me, or maybe he does. "Why don't we head over to our table?"

I go to grab my drink, but he's already got it, leaving me with nothing to do but follow.

I can't believe Patrick's back. I was so worried about having to figure out what guy or guys I needed to stay clear of, and now I don't have to. I am so excited to see him that I have to stop myself from throwing my arms around him and pulling him in for a kiss.

I'm still unsure of the proper protocols for this situation.

So, instead of PDA, I sit down for some small talk. "What brings you back in town so soon?"

He gazes at me for a while before answering. "To be honest, I came back hoping to run in to you."

Run into me? He's here because of me. Why? "Why?"

He looks at me like I'm crazy. "Why not?"

"I'm not saying we didn't have a good time the other evening, but you could have a good time with—"

Patrick places his hand on top of mine, stopping me. "You're beautiful and sexy as hell. And the way you felt when I was inside you...I never known anything like it." He trails off as if remembering. "But I don't want you to think this is what I do. I don't spend time picking up women in hotels. It's only happened with you. It's...it's not my thing."

But it's mine. It's my thing.

I wonder if he knows this. Or does he think it's just a coincidence that we've met twice in the same hotel lounge? Maybe he thinks I'm here for the music. Either way, he doesn't have to know why I come here.

He thinks I'm sexy. I wonder if he can tell that I'm blushing. I've never been told I was sexy in my life. But there must be some truth to what Patrick's saying because the look he's giving me right now says he could sop me up with a biscuit.

"You believe me, don't you?"

Patrick's mouth is moving, but his words aren't getting through. All I can think about is the way his eyes are undressing me and how much I can't wait for him to do it for real.

Patrick cups my chin and directs my eyes towards him. “Shawna, you believe me, don’t you?”

I shake my head, trying to break the spell I’m under. Patrick’s hand drops reluctantly, and he slides his chair back as if to leave. “I’m sorry.”

“Wait. Wait. Where are you going?” I panic. I reach out to stop him.

“I thought...”

“I believe you. I’m sorry. You just kind of threw me. No one’s ever thought I was sexy.” I dip my head, breaking eye contact.

Patrick’s hand is on my cheek again, lifting my head. His eyes search my face. “I find that hard to believe. It’s taken everything in me not to pick you up out of that chair and carry you upstairs to my bed.”

If I didn’t want him before, I want him now.

“What’s stopping you?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He gives a small chuckle before glancing around the lounge. “All these people, for one. I’m not one for putting on a show.” He turns back to me. “But I will if that’s what you want?”

If I wasn’t wet before, I am now.

He doesn’t need to carry me, but if we don’t get out of here soon, I might find that I’m not just into having sex with strangers but that I’m an expeditionist as well.

“As tempting as that sounds, I think I can make it on my own two feet. At least until we’re inside your suite.” After that, he can do whatever he wants to me.

Patrick doesn’t say another word. He stands, grabs my hand, and pulls me from my seat a little too aggressively. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I say, and it is. I’m actually hoping things get a little rough.

Although it is fine with me, I see Kendra out of the corner of my eye. She's stopped drying the glass in her hand to stare at us. She looks like she's about to intervene.

I mouth the words 'it's okay' at her. Her shoulders relax, but not by much.

As Patrick and I make our way to the elevators, I'm praying Kendra doesn't come looking for me this time. I really don't want to be disturbed. And I'm pretty sure someone like Patrick, who's occupying one of the more expensive suites, will be easier to find than someone like Todd and Dave.

I catch myself cringing as I think of them.

"Everything okay? You haven't changed your mind, have you? Because it's okay—"

This time, it's my hand on his cheek. "I haven't changed my mind." I run my hand against the stubble, wondering what it would feel like to have it against my inner thighs.

The elevators open, and we step inside. As soon as the doors close, I place my arms around Patrick's neck and pull him closer. Once he's near enough, I stroke my tongue across his lips. Before I know it, my tongue is inside his mouth, and he's sucking it gently.

Now I'm wishing I'd worn that dress.

Patrick's hand makes its way up to my chest. His thumb is circling the fabric above my nipple, causing it to harden. It feels good, but not good enough. These damn clothes are getting in the way. He's just ended our kiss and is about to replace his thumb with his mouth when the elevator jerks to a stop.

Great, I think, a few more feet, and we'll be in his room.

Unfortunately, we're not on his floor. The doors open, and an elderly gentleman steps inside with a woman around the same age, who I'm guessing is his wife.

"Evening," the man says.

"Evening." Patrick and I say back.

The older woman's eyes are fixated on my blouse for an unusual amount of time for someone simply admiring it. I look down to see my blouse is askew, one of the buttons is undone, and the top of my breast is exposed. I give the woman a small smile and straighten my top.

She smiles back, glances up at Patrick, then gives me a nod and a wink.

I guess I'm not the only one who approves.

When we reach the top floor, Patrick and I wait for the couple to get off first. As soon as we step into the hallway, Patrick is practically dragging me to his room. Unfortunately, we are deterred again when we get to his door. The blasted thing won't open. The light keeps turning red.

I hold my hand out so I can try. He hands it over. I place the card against the reader, and it still flashes red. I try the handle for good measure, but still nothing.

Patrick's on the phone, I'm assuming to call the front desk, when a strange look comes across his face. He looks up at the room number on the door, his ears turn red, and he ends the call. "This isn't my room."

I can't help it. Patrick looks like a child who's just been caught doing something naughty, and my emotions are currently all over the place. I burst out laughing. I try covering my mouth, but there's no point. I can't stop myself.

Patrick looks around the hallway until he finds his room and pulls me with him. Once we're inside, I take my hand from my mouth and laugh unhindered. There are now tears streaming down my face. For a minute, Patrick watches me, but then he is laughing too. It's a moment longer before the fit has passed, and we are both trying to catch our breath.

Now that I'm calm, I turn to find Patrick giving me that look again, and he comes to me, pulling me in his arms. He kisses me, and just like that hand on my shoulder, it's a kiss that says he's claiming me for his own.

A mix of emotions are flooding through me as to what this kiss means, but I don't want to think about that now. At this moment, there is only him and me. I fervently return the kiss, letting him know that I am his.

He bends down, implants his arm behind my knees, and lifts me from the floor. I give a small chuckle against his lips as he carries me to the bedroom.

After tossing me onto the bed, he begins to undress. I match his movements to see which of us will get naked first.

It's a tie.

He's naked, and I drink him in. I think about the older woman on the elevator, and she just doesn't know how good I've actually got it.

Patrick doesn't give me too long to admire him. Within seconds I've been flipped, pushed to my knees, and mounted from behind as he drives his cock into me.

Sweet God.

His cock drives into me faster and faster. Its ridges stroking back and forth against my sweet spot. I'm cuming. And I'm cuming. And I'm cuming. I think I'm going to black out.

Patrick shoves his cock into me one last time and holds it there, filling me. I feel it throbbing against my stomach. Suddenly, he yanks out.

"No!" I feel as if something precious has been stolen from me.

Patrick falls over onto his side of the bed, taking me with him, narrowly avoiding the wet spot on the bed. "Where have you been all my life?"

Stuck in a loveless marriage for most of it, probably, I think.

I don't want to think about that. I flip over and kiss him, taking his tongue deep into my mouth. I moan against his lips. He really is a great kisser.

I feel his fingers between my legs, parting my lips, the tips rubbing against my nub.

“Mm,” I moan again.

My hand moves down, searching for his cock, but he’s gone. I find him with his head between my legs, smiling up at me. “I want to taste you.”

I place my fingers against my lips and spread them for him. The smile is gone, replaced by a look that can easily be described as pure lust.

Patrick flicks the tip of his tongue across my clit, wetting my fingers as he does, sending a delicious shiver throughout my whole body. He does it three more times, and now, I think I’m speaking in tongues.

He moves further down, placing his tongue inside me, lapping at my juices, tasting me. Dipping his tongue in and out. He’s driving me crazy. I grab his head and bring him back up to my clit. I need him to finish this now. He attacks my clit, like ants on a bread crumb, sucking the nub into his mouth. I press my hips up as I press his head down.

“Yes, yes, yes. Fucking yes!”

I feel Patrick’s head twisting beneath my hand, which is still gripped tightly in his hair. I loosen my grasp and let him go. However, the rest of me is still locked and frozen in position. He lays beside me; his hand reaches out to touch me.

“Don’t touch me,” I bark out.

“Okay?” He draws his hand back.

“Just give me a minute, and I’ll be all yours.”

He makes one of those okay gestures with his hands and lies back.

A moment passes. “Can I touch you now?” he asks.

“Noooo.”

Half a second later. “Now?”

“No.”

We lie there in silence, and eventually, I begin to feel a semblance of control over my body. I turn and place my hand on Patrick’s chest, lean up, and give him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Patrick says. There’s a slight pause. “However, if I have to wait this long before I can touch you after...I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not.”

I swat my hand playfully across his chest. “Oh, It’s a good thing, alright. Don’t you even consider holding back.”

He hesitantly reaches for me. I nod, giving him the okay. He draws me to him and pecks me on the lips. “No holding back.”

I get the feeling that those words have more to do with just the sex.

Patrick begins lazily, running the palm of his hand up and down my torso. Stopping to circle the mound between my legs, then trailing back to my breast, circling each nipple.

If I could stay here for the rest of my life...

“So, what do you do for a living, Shawna?”

I feel myself tense beneath his caress. Okay, Patrick’s told me about his business. Even showed me an earnings report, but I never considered I might have to share things about myself.

“Me? Nothing really. I’m just a bored...” I’m about to say housewife, but I catch myself. “Soul, looking for a little excitement.”

“So, how often do you come here?” Patrick asks, still continuing his path up and down my body.

I’m not sure I like this line of questioning. Yeah, I came to the hotel with the intention of having sex with strangers; well, not at first, but even so, he doesn’t need to now that, does he?

“I ran across the hotel about two weeks ago, saw the advertisement for live music, and thought it might be a fun place to hang out.”

“No other hotels before that?” His hand stops just below my navel.

“No, no other hotels,” I answer.

“Any other men before me?”

“No, no other men before you.” I shake my head as I focus on the ceiling.

“Good,” Patrick says, as his thumb and forefinger close around my nipple. “I’d like to keep it that way.”

As his fingers tease my nipple, Patrick moves over to my neck and begins planting kisses along the sensitive parts.

“Sss.” I suck the air between my teeth.

“I want you saving yourself for me,” Patrick whispers against my ear.

His fingers are now between my legs, and as he pushes them inside me, he says, “Only for me.”

I grab his hand and push his fingers deeper. “Only for you,” I moan back.

Only for you.

He pulls his fingers out of me.

No...not again.

But they’re quickly replaced with his cock, mollifying me. He grabs my ass and pulls me up, submersing himself within me.

I don’t know where to put my hands. They’re in my hair, grasping at the sheets. My hand grazes against a pillow. I take it and place it over my mouth. I try to muffle myself as every curse

word known to man escapes me, as Patrick sends an endless cadence of orgasms rocking through my body.

“Only for me,” I hear him saying as I feel his orgasm mounting. “Only for me.”

He falls on top of me. This time, I feel his seed spilling into me.

I know I need to get up, run to the bathroom, and try, try what I don't know, but something, but instead of leaving, I wrap my arms around Patrick, pulling him to me.

“I'm sorry,” he says.

“It's okay,” I say back.

It has to be.

*

The sound of light snoring soothes me. I'm lying with my head on Patrick's chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating. The room is dark, and I only have the glow of the moon, peeking in through the thick curtains to see by.

I move my hand beneath the sheets and place it on top of Patrick's cock. It's flaccid, but there's a slight awakening in response to my touch. We've gone three times already. Two in this bed and once in the shower, but I still can't seem to get enough of him. But I'll let him sleep.

I remove my hand and roll over onto my back. What am I going to do? I'm in lust with a man that's not my husband. Patrick's told me he wants me to save myself for only him, and I'm sure I can do that, at least for like another week. But after that? After that, things go back to the way they were.

Shawna the sad, lonely, sheltered housewife, who spends her days working out and trying to avoid making her husband angry.

Well, at least I'll have the time I've spent with Patrick to fill my days. And maybe, after some time has passed, I'll feel confident enough to share a little of it with Trudy.

I wonder what she's been up to. I really haven't been a good friend. Greg's been gone almost a week, and it's been days since I've called her. Not only will my evenings at the hotel with Patrick be over when Greg returns, but so will my friendship with Trudy. I should have been spending time with her, but instead, I've been hanging out at a hotel, trying to get laid.

Not that it wasn't a good thing, I think as I move closer to Patrick.

I'll make it up to her. I promise I will. But it will have to wait another day or two. Patrick's staying in town to spend the day with me.

I know, right? I can't believe it either. Not only does he enjoy putting his cock inside me, but evidently enjoys my company as well. Other than Trudy, I can't remember the last time anyone's wanted to hang out with me. If there was a time that Greg did, it's faded from my memory.

Only problem is, we can't be seen together in the city. Most likely, we wouldn't run into anyone who knows me as Greg's wife. Other than my neighbors and Trudy, nobody has really ever seen us together. But it's better to be safe than sorry. Can you imagine if Greg came back and someone told him they had seen me with another man? He'd kill me. Hopefully, I can convince Patrick to take me someplace out of town.

After that, I couldn't care less where we go. It could be a haunted Native American burial ground for all I care. I would go just about anywhere Patrick wants to take me.

One of these days, I may have to consider what I'm willing to do and give up for the men in my life. But not today. Right now, I'm lying here wide awake at the anticipation of what tomorrow's going to bring.

However, I need to get some sleep. I have no idea what time tomorrow's festivities are set to begin, but I can only imagine what I'll look like with very little sleep.

Breathe in for four seconds. Hold it for seven. Breathe out for eight. This breathing technique is supposed to slow down my heart rate to help induce sleep. I'm not sure if it works, but concentrating on my breathing stops my mind from racing.

Breathe in for four. Hold it. Breathe out...

Chapter 5

Once again, I'm awakened by the smell of coffee. This time, I know what to expect when I open my eyes. At least, I thought I did.

Instead of a cup of coffee waiting for me on the nightstand, Patrick is sitting beside me on the bed, holding it.

I hate to do anything that's going to remove that smile from his face, but I'm not drinking that coffee again.

"Morning," I say, sliding up in the bed, resting my back against the headboard. My hair has got to be a mess. After patting my hair down, I take the coffee from Patrick and place it on the nightstand beside me. "Got any juice?"

I follow his eyes to the tray lying behind him. There's a glass of orange juice and a plate with eggs, bacon, and a buttered croissant. Patrick scoops up the tray and places it on my lap.

Breakfast in bed? Something else I could get used to.

"So, not a coffee person?" he asks.

I stop drinking the juice to shake my head. "Can't stand the stuff."

"Duly noted." Patrick points at the cup of coffee. "Mind if I?"

"Knock yourself out," I say.

Patrick's drinking coffee, and I'm drinking OJ and eating a croissant. And even though it's all taking place inside a bedroom located in a hotel, it's kind of nice.

"I went down to the front desk to find out what there's to do around here, and they mentioned there's a botanical garden about an hour's drive out of town. Thought it might be nice." Patrick shrugs. "If you're into that sort of thing?"

I'm not sure if I am into that sort of thing, but it's out of town, and that's all I could ask for. Unfortunately, with the light of day comes clarity. And as I take in Patrick's attire, a pair of casual slacks and a thin V-neck cotton shirt, other than my clothes from last night, I have nothing to wear.

"I think a visit to the botanical gardens sounds great. Unfortunately, I just realized, I have nothing to wear."

"Oh, about that." Patrick takes off into the other room and returns carrying three outfits on hangers. He holds them up so I can see them. "I also asked around about a women's clothing store nearby."

I look at the clock. It's a little after ten. Someone's been busy this morning. When I turn back to Patrick, he's all a blur. There are literal tears coming out of my eyes. He went and bought me clothes. Who does that?

This is crazy. I'm in bed crying, and Patrick has come over to hold me, and he's trying to console me. "It's okay if you don't like the clothes. You can pick out something else."

He thinks I'm crying because I don't like the clothes. That just makes things worse.

"That's not it," I say through my sobs. "It's just...just that you're being so nice and thoughtful."

Patrick leans back and wipes the tears from my eyes, using the napkin from my tray. "But it's just clothes. You needed something to wear, and I know I could do that for you. So, I did. No big deal."

No big deal, he says. He doesn't know how big of a deal it actually is.

And wait a minute. This man just went out on a whim and bought me three outfits from a shop located in downtown. I think I should have taken a closer look at that earnings report.

I pull him in for a hug. "Thank you, Patrick. It really does mean a lot to me that you took the time to go shopping for me. You're so generous. I don't know what I'm going to do..."

I've said too much. I'm starting to wonder what it would be like to have a man like Patrick in my life on a forever basis. But I'm being stupid. He's only buying me things because he slept with me. No different than the \$1200 he left for me the other morning.

I let him go, dropping my arms to my sides. "Thanks," I say, sounding congested.

Patrick gives me a curious look before tossing the napkin at me. "Here, wipe your nose."

He goes back to the outfits and holds them up again, wearing a big grin on his face. He's enjoying this. "Which one?"

One of the outfits is a straw-colored sleeveless dress, the hem stopping well above the knees. The second is a multi-colored sleeveless top that's a mixture of blues, greens, and tans, matched with a pair of light-blue mid-length shorts. The last outfit is a belted yellow dress (sleeveless, of course) with a wide flaring skirt and a matching large, yellow-brimmed hat. All of which I can see myself wearing. He's got good taste.

“The yellow dress,” I say.

“I was hoping you picked that one.” Patrick smiles at me, and I can’t help but smile back.

*

Thirty minutes later, I’m dressed and standing on the curb outside the hotel, waiting on Patrick. I’m glad the lounge is closed, and I don’t have to face Kendra. Although I am happy to be spending the day with Patrick, something about seeing things differently in the light of day makes all this seem more real.

At night, I can hide under the dim lights inside the lounge as I sit off in the shadows tucked away near the stage. There’s no hiding out here on this street corner. Anyone can drive by and see me standing here. I pull the brim of my hat down to try and shield my face.

Patrick pulls up in a matted-black G-Class Mercedes SUV. I’m guessing it’s a rental, but it would still cost an arm and a leg to rent one of these. Before I can even get near the door, Patrick is already on the passenger side, opening it for me. He takes my hand, then helps me inside, closing the door behind me.

I place my hat on the back seat and marvel at how spacious it is inside. The interior is decked out in black leather seats and a display to kill for. This SUV makes my Range Rover look obsolete. Considering it has 40,000 miles and is over seven years old, it probably is.

I’m locking in my seat belt just as Patrick is getting in on the driver’s side. “Our journey awaits,” he says, manipulating a dial in the center console.

“Starting route guidance,” the lady in the car says.

Patrick puts the car in drive, maneuvers into traffic, and we’re off. I sit back and watch as we navigate the city streets, making our way to the highway, grateful for the tinted windows.

“Do you want to stop off for snacks or anything before we leave the city?” We’re waiting at the stoplight, and Patrick is focused on a convenience store across the street.

“Still full from breakfast.” I pat my stomach for emphasis.

“Really,” he chuckles. “A glass of juice and a croissant?”

“It was a really large glass of juice,” I chide. “Besides, I only saw you drink a cup of coffee.”

“I get that,” Patrick says as he pulls away from the intersection, making his way onto the ramp leading to the highway. “My fresh-out-of-bed look can throw people off. But I’ve actually been up since eight o’clock this morning. Meaning not only have I eaten before you even thought about waking up, but that was most likely my third cup of coffee.”

“Oh,” I say, casting my eyes away. Patrick had already been up for two hours while I lay in bed, sleeping the day away. I can only imagine what he must be thinking of me.

Patrick places his hand on top of mine. “I wasn’t complaining. If I didn’t have this trip planned, I would have let you sleep longer. I understand...you women need your beauty sleep, whereas we men just wake up looking—”

Smartass, I think as I push his hand away playfully.

“But seriously. If you’re hungry, we can stop. I don’t want you passing out on me or anything. That would make things a little awkward.”

As if this situation wasn’t already awkward enough.

“Seriously, I’m fine. If I get hungry, I’m sure there’s food at the botanical gardens. I’m sure they don’t make all their money off of ticket sales.”

The look Patrick gives me says he’s not sure he believes me, but he’ll let it go for now. He focuses back on the highway and gives the car a little more gas.

As I watch the cars flying past us, I consider the fact that other than my travels as a military wife, Greg and I have never gone anywhere together. No zoos, amusement parks, resorts, nothing. The closest we've ever come to a vacation is that one weekend—which coincidentally was the weekend of our anniversary—when we went to visit his mom. We had to end up getting a room at the Hilton because the house was so full of junk from her hoarding.

And because Greg's mother never cared for me (the feelings mutual), seeing that I was never good enough for her son, I spent most of the weekend alone in the room by myself. Much like our marriage.

I've always thought Greg kept me hidden away because he was ashamed of me, but now, with Patrick taking me out (albeit it is somewhere on the outskirts of town), I'm thinking that maybe it's for a different reason. Maybe it was so he could live two separate lives. One of the married man with the dutiful wife and the other of the single bachelor.

And I made it easy for him. Giving up my family and any friends I made along the way. And now I'm ready to give up Trudy, the closest person to me in my life. And for what? A man that barely treats me like a person.

And it's because I've given up so much that I could never leave him. I haven't worked in over a decade, and other than what's left of the thousand dollars Greg gave me before he left and fifteen hundred sitting in my new bank account, I have nothing to my name.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't even realize that we've stopped.

"We're here," Patrick announces.

Across the parking lot is a sign that reads Jeremiah Botanical Gardens and a ticket booth. Other than a few shrubberies and Carpinus trees, there is no other foliage to be seen. The rest must be hidden behind the tall wooden fences branching out around the border.

Patrick's at my door in a flash. I grab my hat and place it on my head before I allow him to help me down from the SUV. He holds my hand until I'm safely on the ground. He keeps my hand in his as we walk together to the ticket booth.

“Afternoon.” The woman behind the ticket booth smiles at us. Judging by the lines around her mouth and the crinkles near her eyes, she is in her early sixties. A pair of spectacles sits at the tip of her nose, and she’s wearing a polyester peach sweater even though it’s seventy degrees out here.

“Afternoon,” Patrick says in return. “We’d like two tickets, please.”

Patrick lets my hand go long enough to retrieve the wallet in his back pocket. He pulls out a Platinum American Express business card and hands it to the woman.

Is this a business expense? I wonder.

The card is swiped, the receipt is signed, and Patrick is putting his wallet back into his pocket. The woman behind the counter tells us to have a nice day, and we tell her the same. Patrick’s taken possession of my hand again as he guides us through an archway that leads us into the botanical gardens.

Because it’s spring, everything is in bloom, and I’m not sure what I want to take in first.

One of the paths leads to a garden where every flower or bud is either white or silver. There’s another garden with benches. In the center is a square fountain bordered by a brick pathway. The plants of choice are perennials, dwarf trees, and flowery shrubs with blooms of mostly red and yellows.

A canal garden stretches over one hundred yards. From where I stand, I can see several fountains, as well as banana and elephant ear palms, off in the distance. Up on the hill is a stone wall bordered by Himalayan fir trees. It’s a children’s garden with its own little forest, a sunken pond, and a tiny castle for them to play.

There’s a garden where the water forms an arch over a footpath, an orchid conservatory housing orchids and other tropical plants, as well as a walking trail that moves along the wooden fence bordering the gardens.

And although I am a grown adult, I find myself drawn to the children’s garden. “Can we go there?” I point to the stonewall.

“Well, of course,” Patrick says. “Where you lead, I will follow.”

I give him a quick peck on the cheek before dragging him up the hill with me.

When I reach the top, I see that the garden is more magical than it appeared from below. I can imagine myself as a small child pretending to be a princess who has found herself lost in an enchanted forest. Her only hope of escape is the handsome prince who has been sent out to rescue her.

I turn to Patrick, who has a look of child-like wonder on his face. He can be my prince.

I release his hand and make my way down a small slope to the sunken pond. The circular pond is man-made with a copper lining. Lily pads are floating on top of the water. The croft of land is tapered off by manicured hedges, giving it a secluded effect, like I’m the only one in the world. And yet, I don’t feel lonely.

Patrick comes up behind me and worms his arms around me, and begins swaying from side to side in a rocking motion. “This is beautiful.”

“It is,” I say. “I see why the children love it.”

Patrick pulls away, surveying the area around us. “What children?”

“I mean, if there were children,” I correct myself. “I could imagine them caught up in a world of make-believe.”

Patrick moves back to rest his chin on my shoulder. “You like it here.”

It’s more of a statement than a question, but I answer him anyway. “Yes, I like it here.”

“I can tell. You seem at ease. It looks good on you. In fact, I want to gift it to you!”

I guess I’m not the only one into make-believe. “Why, sire, surely you jest,” I place my hand across my chest in an exaggerated motion. “You cannot mean what you say.”

“My lady,” Patrick says as he moves to stand in front of me. “It is with the utmost sincerity,” he takes my hand and brings it to his lips. “That I would do everything in my power to

not only bequeath you this small plot of land. But if you would let me, I would give you the world.”

He’s staring into my eyes, and I can’t look away.

I want to stay here, in this world of make-believe, for as long as possible. He is the knight who has come to rescue me from the ogre that has held me prisoner in his den, since he stole me away from my parents all those years ago. He has now brought me to this hidden forest where only peace exists, and no one can ever hurt me again.

I close my eyes, thinking to lose myself in the moment, but it only breaks our connection, bringing me back to reality. I open my eyes and find something else to focus on other than Patrick. It’s time to move on. Today is only a fairytale, and soon, I will be back in the real world, and I need to remember that.

“How about we check out the conservatory?”

Patrick looks like he wants to say something but lets it go. “Why not?”

It takes a full hour to visit the entire gardens, with the exception of the walking trail. And by now, I’m a little hungry. Before we leave, I suggest stopping by the gift shop, where unless you consider gummies shaped like flowers to be food, there is nothing there to eat.

I can admit when I’m wrong, at least to myself.

We’re about to leave the gift shop empty-handed. Patrick wanted to buy me something to memorialize the day, but I don’t want to have to explain any new knick-knacks to Greg when he comes back. And besides, I don’t need a trinket to help me remember today; I’ll never forget it in a million years. And maybe I’ll come back by myself one day.

“What about you?” I say, “You don’t want anything?”

“I’ve got the only souvenir I’ll need.” He’s looking very pleased with himself, and I smile, thinking he means his memories, the same as me, when he whips out his phone and opens up his photos.

He shows me a picture he took of me standing by the pond, lost in thought.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “The photo is beautiful.”

“And so is the subject. You’re beautiful, Shawna.” He gives me a smile before looking back at his phone. “I’m going to print this out. It’s too nice to be stuck on my phone. I’ll bring you a copy the next time I’m back in town.”

He’s coming back, and he’s bringing me a photo. And it is something I want to remember of this day as well. That photo captures a side of me that I didn’t know existed. I look so at peace with myself. I’ll have to figure out a place to hide it. And I’ll have to do a better job than Greg did.

“Thank you,” I say. “I would really like that.”

“Well, okay. Let’s get out of here so we can find some real food.”

I guess I wasn’t being as stealthy as I thought.

“Thanks for visiting. Come back soon,” the woman behind the ticket booth calls out as we’re leaving.

“Thanks for having us,” I say back.

Patrick’s helping me into the SUV again. Thankfully, he started it before I got in. I’ve tossed my hat into the backseat, and I’m trying to cool off from the A/C. He gets in and turns to me. “What do you say we go for burgers?”

I’m not really into fast food, but if that’s what he wants, I can deal with it for one day. “I can do burgers.”

He looks something up on his phone and then types an address into the navigation system. “Starting route guidance,” says the lady in the car. Patrick pushes the button for reverse, and soon, we’re back on the main road. It’s not long before we’re pulling into a restaurant parking lot. Not fast food. Patrick’s brought me to a diner called ‘The Burger Joint.’ This is different. I’m curious.

Inside, the diner is as one would expect. Near the back, there's a jukebox that runs on credit cards instead of coins. Booths line the walls, and there's a long service counter that runs the length of the building.

Near the hostess stand is a sign that says 'Seat Yourself,' so we do. We take a seat across from each other at a booth set against a large picture window with a view of the parking lot. We each grab a menu tucked away behind the salt and pepper shakers and ketchup. The menus are a bit greasy, but that's to be expected.

A waitress dressed in a white uniform, with a black collar and matching black apron, introduces herself as Lana and sets two glasses of water down in front of us. "Afternoon. First time here?"

I'm sure it's a rhetorical question. I can bet that Patrick and I aren't their typical customers.

"First time," Patrick answers.

"Well, as you can see, we have a decent selection of burgers." Glancing at the menu, it appears to be the same burger, dressed up fifty different ways. "They're all cooked to med-rare unless you specify different."

Patrick's still looking at his menu, so I go ahead and order. "I'll have a cheeseburger with a single patty, medium-well, with a side of onion rings."

Lana makes a few notations on her pad. "And to drink?"

"Water's fine." I tap the glass in front of me.

"And you, sir?"

Patrick ponders over the menu a moment longer before he seems to make up his mind. "The Helter Skelter," he says. "With an order of fries and..." He's looking at the menu again. "A vanilla malted shake."

Lana makes a few more notations on her pad. "I'll have that out to ya as soon as possible."

Before she turns to leave, I ask her where the restrooms are located. Lana points near the back, past the jukebox. “Mister and Misses,” she says. Walking behind the service counter, she tears off our ticket, places it on a silver service wheel hanging down from the top of the kitchen hole, and swings it around. She rings the call bell on the counter. “Order up.”

“Excuse me,” I say, getting up from the table.

The bathroom is cleaner than expected. I walk over to the faucet, turn on the cold tap, and splash some water on my face. I hold my hand under the paper towel dispenser. The motor turns, shooting out a sheet barely big enough to dry my hands. I pat my face dry, toss the wet towel into the trash, and then run my fingers through my matted hair. Wearing a hat all day comes with consequences.

The more time I spend with Patrick, the more I want to be with him, and it appears he feels the same way. Things may be getting a bit murky. Should I just go back out there and tell him I’m married and that after today, we can no longer be together?

But if I do that, what does that mean for me? I don’t think I can go back to sleeping with random men at the hotel after experiencing this little piece of nirvana. The thought sickens me.

I search my eyes in the mirror.

What should I do?

I don’t have to tell him today. Today has been too nice to ruin it with such ugly news. I won’t tell him today.

Back at the table, I find Patrick spooning vanilla malt from a sundae glass into his mouth. He looks like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Is it good?” I ask, taking my seat.

“Yes,” he nods. “It is. I took one sip, and all these memories of when I was younger, of me and my dad stopping off for malts after our fishing trips, came flooding back. It was kind of our ritual.”

“That must have been fun. Do the two of you still do things like that now that you’re older?”

A solemn look passes over Patrick’s face. “No, my parents died in a car accident, my junior year of college.”

“Oh, Patrick. I’m sorry.” I feel an ache forming in my chest for the young man who endured such pain. “Both parents?”

“It’s okay.” He sounds like he’s trying to console me. “I’ve had time to deal and process.”

I nod as I dab my eyes, using a napkin from the dispenser at the table.

“I’m not saying I don’t miss them, but I’m able to deal with it better now than I did back then.” Patrick’s eyes go dark as if he’s remembering something unsettling. He shakes his head as if to clear away the memory.

I want to know more about that time in his life—more about the young man who lost both his parents on the same day—but I’m too scared to ask. Too scared of stepping over a line that I’m not even sure where it’s been drawn. So, because I’m too chicken, all I do is offer him a smile.

Lana places our burgers on the table. A cheeseburger for me and a monster burger for Patrick. Lying open-faced on his plate are two thick beef patties covered in mushrooms, bacon, grilled onions, jalapeño peppers, and some sort of red sauce.

I look at my burger, then back at Patrick’s. Is he going to eat all of that?

“Let me know if I can get you anything else.” Lana places the check on the table and walks away.

I pick up an onion ring and begin to nibble on it absentmindedly as I wait to see what Patrick’s going to do. He places the top bun over everything and smashes it down, causing red sauce, mushrooms, and peppers to pool over the sides. He searches the table, looking for something.

“No silverware?”

I raise my hand to get Lana’s, who’s now attending to customers who just came in, attention.

Patrick shakes his head. “I got this. He picks up the burger, opens his mouth as wide as it will go, and takes a bite. The meat and most of the toppings slide to the other side of the bun, and Patrick’s mouth is dripping with red sauce.

I tear away a handful of napkins and hand them to him. “No thank you.” He manages to mumble out while chewing, then waves me away. I shrug. I suppose there really isn’t any point. He has only begun. Wiping his mouth after every bite would just be silly.

I eat my meal in silence as I watch Patrick finish his. Ingesting the entire burger and fries. Even consuming the stray peppers and mushrooms that have fallen along the way. He leans his head back and tips the last of the milkshake into his mouth, then sets the glass down. “I’m stuffed.”

I arch my brows. *Really?* I think. I would be feeling beyond miserable right now. I look down at my own plate, where I still have half an uneaten burger and a handful of onion rings. Where is he putting it all?

I take in Patrick, slouched in his seat, his mouth and cheeks covered in red sauce, satiated and so unapologetic. So comfortable in his skin, not caring what anyone thinks. I wonder what that feels like to not always have to feel on guard.

Patrick grabs a wad of napkins and finally wipes his face. “Excuse me,” he says, getting up from the table and heading back towards the restrooms.

Lana comes by the table, eyeing the check that has yet to be paid. “Need a to-go box?”

“Nope.” I shake my head, feeling famished myself.

“Dessert?” she asks.

“No. Nothing else.” I say.

She stands there for a second longer. “Order up.” The cook calls from the kitchen. She turns, and she’s off.

Patrick is on his way back. Pulling the platinum card from his wallet, he places it on top of the check without looking at it before falling into the booth. "I thought I saw Lana walking over here before I left?"

"You did."

"She didn't clear away the table?"

"I think she was more worried about the check getting paid."

Patrick picks up the check and skims it over. Looking back in his wallet, he counts out several bills and exchanges them for the credit card. "Ready to go?" he asks.

"Um, sure," I respond, sliding out of my seat.

I wait for him to stand. He takes my hand, and we leave the diner.

*

We spend most of our trip back to the hotel stuck in traffic. The sun has already begun to set, and Patrick has a plane to catch tonight. When we pull up to the hotel, a luggage porter is already wheeling out Patrick's luggage on a cart.

Patrick leans over the armrest and pulls me in for a deep kiss. "I wish we had more time together," he says after letting me come up for air.

"Me too," I say back.

"You do still have that card with my number on it?"

"Well, no. I threw it away. But I do have it memorized." I tap my finger against the side of my forehead. "Got it all up here," I say, trying to sound clever.

“Not saved in your phone? Do you even have a phone?” Patrick asks, eyeing me tentatively.

I’ve been leaving my phone in my truck and hadn’t realized my not having it was something notable. I thought I sounded cute, telling him I had his number memorized when all it did was make him question me.

“Yes, I have a phone, silly,” I say, trying to make light of everything. “I just leave it in my truck when I come to the lounge. I come here to relax and listen to music, not take phone calls.”

“But your phone’s been in your truck for almost twenty-four hours.”

“Well, yes.” I scrunch my forehead, not sure where this is going.

“There’s not anyone that might need to reach you?”

I think about Greg off in a field running drills with his unit and Trudy, most likely at home cooking dinner for her family. “No, there’s no one.”

Patrick’s mouth is open, ready to respond, when there’s a tap at my window. “Sir, where can I put your bags?”

Patrick pushes a button that opens the trunk and hops out. I get out as well. I wonder if I should just walk away while he’s helping the porter. Get in my Range Rover and never look back?

I watch Patrick help the porter load his luggage into the trunk. No, I couldn’t do that to him. He deserves better.

After his suitcase is loaded, Patrick closes the gate, grabs a garment bag hanging from the cart, and holds it out to me. “I had your clothes cleaned.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking it from him.

Now we’re just standing here, neither one of us saying anything. Patrick’s the first one to speak. “Look, I’ve got to go. But I want you to know that I’ve really enjoyed spending time with you, and I want to continue to for as long as you’ll allow me. I know there are things you’re not ready to share with me yet. And I’m okay with that. For now.”

He steps to me and pulls me in, embracing me. “Only for me,” he says against my ear.

I hug him back. “For you,” I say back.

Patrick lets go and turns to hand the porter a few bills and watches as I walk away.

Once I’m out of eyesight, I run. Up the incline to my truck. The fob’s in my hand, and I’m pressing away, needing to get in. I’m inside, and I start it up before I’ve put on my seat belt. I need to keep moving. I can’t stop. If I stop, I will think. Thinking leads to trouble. I ease out of the parking garage, and I see that Patrick is gone.

“Safe travels.” I should have told him that before I left.

My hand goes to my center console, where my phone is buried. For a second, I consider sending it to him in a text.

Don’t Shawna.

As soon as the street is clear, I pull into a lane. I’m trying to drive the speed limit, but it feels nearly impossible. My foot seems to have a mind of its own. I’m driving so fast I have to slam on the brakes to avoid rear-ending the car that slowed down at the yellow light. My fingers are tapping away anxiously on the steering wheel as I wait for the light to change. I’m glancing in the cars beside me, trying to concentrate on anything else other than the thoughts trying to evade my head.

“Thanks,” I say when the light finally turns green.

Unfortunately, the car in front does not go. I’m about to smash my hand against the horn when they decide to pull forward. But now, they’re driving at well below the speed limit. I can’t take this. I put on my blinker and cut in front of the car to my left, inciting a loud honk from them. By the time they’ve finished cussing me out, I’m half a mile up the street and turning on the exit that leads me home.

I pull into my driveway and look to see if Angie or any of the other neighbors are outside. I don't feel like explaining where I've been. Once inside my house, I slam the door and begin to bang my fist against the hard wood.

"No, no, no, no, no." I shout into the empty house. "No," I say, as I am consumed by an emotion likened to grief.

I'm an idiot. I raced home believing that if I ran away from the hotel, from Patrick, putting some distance from it all, I could put a stop to the realization that was slowly making itself known. But I'm a fool. At home, I'm always alone, with only my thoughts to keep me company. So, it is here that I finally have to face what I thought I could run from. I'm in love with a man I've known for less than a week. A man who is not my husband.

I'm in the kitchen, staring into the trashcan. I've pushed the contents inside down as far as they will go. I'm going to have to take the trash out. And not only that, tomorrow's trash day. As much as I've enjoyed my freedom with Greg out of the house, I do not enjoy having to take out the trash.

I shove the contents down one last time in an attempt to keep them from flowing over the top, draw up the strings of the bag, and tie them into a knot. Pulling the handle, I watch as the yellow ties strain away from the plastic bag. The box says Ultra Strong. *You better not rip.* I tug harder, and the bag barely moves. It's as if the trash can doesn't want to let go.

Thankfully, one last tug and the bag comes free. I carry it outside and toss it into the trash bin. I eye the green bin for recycling and wonder how many trips I'm going to have to make. Placing my foot on the lower part of the bin, I tilt the handle back and start wheeling it behind me as I make my way down the driveway.

It's a nice day out. In the lower seventies. A man and a woman jog up the sidewalk on opposite ends as I walk to the curb. There was a time when I wanted to take up jogging—actually, I still do—even mentioned it to Greg. He shot me one of those looks that shut down any conversation. A look that says. 'Really, Shawna. I don't think so.'

But he ended up surprising me a few days later. I had been awoken by loud noises coming from the garage. By the time I came downstairs, Greg was standing at the garage door with a big grin on his face. He'd opened the door with a flourish, and behind it was a new treadmill.

"Oh," I had said.

"Oh?" he had responded, a look of disappointment on his face. I suppose he had been expecting me to run to him with open arms to show how grateful I was. But I couldn't even muster up a thank you. I didn't want to be stuck in the house, like I was every day, running while I watched scenery on a monitor. I wanted to be outside, pounding the pavement, taking in the fresh air.

"Don't you remember? You wanted to run?" It was as if he thought reminding me would trigger the response he had been hoping for.

I turned to him then with a big fake smile on my face. "You shouldn't have."

Satisfied with my reaction, he grinned and kissed me on the forehead. "I knew you'd love it."

"Can't wait to use it," I'd said, but never did.

I cast my eyes back at the garage door, where behind it sat the treadmill that I refused to use as a statement of defiance. But the sad part was, Greg never even realized that I never used the thing, making my statement futile.

But maybe Greg wasn't all bad. I mean, he did buy me a treadmill, and leave me money before he left. It was because of the black eye, but still, there have been times during our marriage that he's made an attempt at trying.

After planting the trash bin on what I believe to be the perfect spot, I look to see if I need to go back for the recycling bin. But I don't see any other green bins in front of the neighbor's houses.

"Don't you just hate trash day?"

I turn to see Angie wheeling her own trash to the curb. “Starting to,” I say back.

“Will forgot to take ours out this morning. Figured I go ahead and take it out myself.”

With trash day being tomorrow, I’m sure it could have waited until Will got off work tonight. I’m pretty sure this was just an attempt at Angie trying to catch me in a conversation. Even still, I decide to wait until her bins on the curb.

“How’ve you been?” she asks, coming over to me.

“Pretty good,” I answer. I can feel my cheeks growing warm as my thoughts stray to Patrick.

“Have you?” Her brows raise as she studies my face. “You seem different.”

I wonder can she see the color drain from my face. Can she tell from just looking at me, that I have been unfaithful?

“Is it your hair?” She tilts her head from side to side and places her finger against her lips. “No?”

I shake my head. Stop being crazy. You can’t look at someone and tell they’re a cheater. Can you?

“No, nothing new.” I say, “Just been getting out of the house a little more.”

Angie nods her head slowly up and down. “Yeah, that’s probably it. You seem...happier.” The smile on her face begins to fade. “I’m sorry. Is that okay to say? Sounds kind of rude now that I think about it. With your husband being gone and all..I didn’t mean to compare your being happy to him—”

If only she knew how right she is. “Oh, no,” I say, trying to reassure her. “Sometimes, we can use a little break. You know what I mean?” I say conspiratorially.

“Not really.” Angie scrunches her nose at me. “If Will left me for two weeks, I’d probably lose it.”

Her response catches me off guard. Even though I know my marriage doesn't set the standard, I'd imagined that over time, all marriages start to become stale, and spouses fell out of love and prayed for a break from their partners from time to time. But here Angie was telling me she couldn't bear to be without her husband.

I wonder if things would be like that with Patrick. If, by some strange chance, I'd have ended up with Patrick instead of Greg, would Patrick, like Greg, have eventually grown tired of me by now? Or would I be standing here with Angie commiserating about how much I missed my husband while he was away on his business trip, instead of dreading the day he came back home?

"Well, I'll let you get back," I say, heading back up the driveway.

"Okay?" Angie says.

My hand's on the doorknob when I hear Angie call to me. "Oh, Shawna."

"Yes," I look over my shoulder.

"Let me know the next time you're going to be gone all night. That way I can keep an eye out."

Damn. She has noticed I've been gone.

"Oh, okay. Um...thanks."

"No problem. That's what neighbors are for. We got to look out for each other."

Did she just wink at me?

I go inside and close the door behind me. Leaning against the frame, I say a small prayer. "Please, God. Don't let her mention it to Greg."

The TV is turned on to one of my favorite talk shows, but I haven't heard one word that's been said. Instead, I've picked up my phone and put it back down a dozen times.

Half were to call Trudy, and the other half to text Patrick. Every attempt has remained unsuccessful.

I want to call Trudy, but I'm scared. I want to message Patrick, but I'm too scared to do that, too. Scared to call Trudy because even though I'm desperate to talk to someone about what's been going on in my life, how do I tell my married best friend that I'm cheating on my husband and fallen in love with the other man?

I know Trudy and I have the sort of relationship where I'm always in her business, telling her how she should be living her life—ironic, right? Who am I to give anyone advice—while she keeps her mouth shut about mine? But I'm not sure she'll be able to keep her thoughts to herself this time, and I'm not sure I'm ready to hear what she may have to say.

The reason why I'm afraid to message Patrick is because, one, that means I'm giving him access to me. And what happens when Greg comes back and checks my phone? Even if I delete the messages, he can request a copy of my calls and texts from the phone company. He's done it before. And two, if I message Patrick, knowing that I've fallen in love with him, aren't I just making things harder in the long run? The more time I spend with him, the more of my heart I give away.

How will I survive that? I don't think I'm as strong as I thought I was.

Today's talk show guest is here to give us the low-down on what's new in fashion for this summer. Normally, anything about fashion would pique my interest. But today, even the thought of seeing myself in something new and trendy can't hold my interest.

I pick up the remote and start scrolling through the guide to see what's in store for my night. Reality show. Cooking show. Movies from twenty years ago. Maybe there's something new to watch on one of the streaming services? I'm just about to push the button on the remote to open one of the apps when I end up tossing it onto the coffee table.

It's Monday and Greg's due back in six days. I don't want to be sitting on the couch binge-watching shows until he gets back. I pick up the phone to call Trudy. I did promise myself I would call her. But instead of scrolling through my recent calls, I find myself typing a number

into the keypad. When the last number is entered, I quickly press the call icon before I have time to reconsider.

The phone is pressed against my ear, while I watch the woman on the screen hold up a very cute handbag, while the show's hosts 'ooh and ah' over it. When I hear it ring four times, I pull the phone from my ear, ready to end the call before it goes to voicemail.

"Hello?" He sounds out of breath.

"Um...hello?" I say back.

"Yes, this is Patrick. Can I help you?"

"Hi, Patrick."

"Shawna?"

"Yes, it's Shawna," I respond awkwardly. The phone goes silent on the other end. Maybe this wasn't a good idea. "It's okay that I called you?"

"No. I mean, yes. It's okay. I just...it's just...I didn't think I'd hear from you. I never thought you'd call."

"I didn't think I'd call either. But I was sitting here thinking about you, and I figured, what the hell? What's the worst that could happen?"

The worst that could happen is Greg coming home, finding out I've been with another man, beating me to death, and burying me in the backyard. But that's still six days away.

"I don't want you to think that I'm not happy to hear from you, because I am. But I was on the treadmill when you called. Is it okay if I call you back once I'm done and showered?"

"Oh, okay. Yeah, sure. No problem." My thumb presses the end button before I'm done speaking.

Now my mind's racing. Maybe I shouldn't have called. Was he trying to blow me off? I mean, he did sound out of breath when he answered, but then again... Then again, what? He's either going to call you back, or he's not. No big deal.

I check to make sure the ringer is turned up as high as it will go and place the phone back onto the coffee table. Now, I need to find something to keep me busy.

Spinning in a small circle, I search the house for something to do. In reality, there's nothing. Most of my mornings are spent picking up after only me. Which isn't much.

“Oh!”

I run upstairs, grab a handful of laundry out of the hamper, run back down, and toss it into the washing machine. It's been three days since I mopped the kitchen floor? I shrug my shoulders. Why not?

I'm emptying the dirty water from the mop bucket into the toilet when I hear my phone ring. I drop the bucket to the floor, spilling the murky water all over it, and make a mad dash into the living room.

“Hello?” Now I'm the one out of breath.

“Is this a good time?” Patrick asks.

“Yeah. Just doing a little house cleaning.”

“Cleaning *your* house?”

I'm scrunching my forehead. “Um...yes?”

“So, you own a house? Good to know.”

My name's not on the deed, but yeah. “Why's that good to know?”

“Learning a little more about you. Other than knowing your name is Shawna, you like hotel lounges. You look good naked, you're amazing in bed, and now you own a house. I know nothing about you.”

I'm about to ask a question that's going to get me in trouble, but I have to ask it anyway.
"Do you want to know more about me?"

"Yes, Shawna." Patrick sighs. "I want to know everything there is to know about you. If you'll let me."

I guess it's what I wanted to hear, but I don't know what to say.

"I have a few things to tie up here, but I can...catch a flight out late this afternoon and possibly...meet you at the hotel...or maybe at your house?"

Oh, God. He definitely can't come here. And as much as I enjoy sex with Patrick, I think that maybe tonight it would be best if we spent time away from hotel rooms and loud music.

"There's a restaurant I've been wanting to try. I'll text you the address. Can you meet me around seven?"

"If that's what you want, I'll meet you there." Patrick answers.

"See you then."

This time, he ends the call.

*

The restaurant is about an hour away from my house, located in a lesser-known city that's usually only frequented when there's a festival in town. Luckily, the Kite Festival isn't for a couple of months from now.

The restaurant, From Scratch, is known for its fresh vegetables and seasonings sourced from local farmers and merchants. Trudy and I have talked about coming here a dozen times, but it never happened. Now I'm here without her. Another reminder that I haven't called her yet.

I got to the restaurant at 6:45 and have been sitting inside for ten minutes. I wanted to get here early enough to scout out the place. I'm pretty sure no one who knows me comes here, but you never know. Luckily for a Monday night, the place is pretty empty. The few customers seated at the tables don't appear to be from out of town.

"Still waiting on your party?" The hostess, who's already told me her name is Trina, has just made her way back to the front of the house. She's young and blond, and a little too perky for me.

I check my smartwatch. It's 6:58. I glance out the window as a car's pulling up. I suck in my breath, hold it, then let it out when I see another young girl dressed in a waitress uniform step out. I turn back to Trina. "Still waiting," I say, creasing my lips.

"Let me know when you're ready. Okay?"

I nod my head, and she takes off, going to a table in the back where some of the staff are keeping busy rolling silverware inside of napkins. The girl from outside steps in and walks by me without even seeing me.

It's now seven o'clock, and no Patrick. I'm deciding how much longer I should wait when I see a dark blue Mercedes SUV pull into the parking lot. The door opens, and Patrick hops out, slamming the door behind him.

He's wearing dark-washed jeans and a tan V-neck linen shirt that clings to his chest, emphasizing the cut of his torso. I can almost smell him through the window. I no longer want to sample a meal from inside the restaurant, I want to dine on what's outside of it.

And we don't even have to go far. We can drive to a secluded area, and Patrick can have his way with me in the back seat. Is it Patrick making me feel this way, or is it the newness of it all? Did Greg ever make me feel like this in the beginning?

I shake away the thoughts. Tonight's not about me getting naked; it's about Patrick getting to know me. Unfortunately, the thought of revealing who I am and what I've been hiding makes me feel more vulnerable than if I were standing here naked right now.

But it's what Patrick deserves. So, when he walks inside the restaurant, I let him pull me into his arms rather than try and coax him back outside.

"You smell nice," he says against my ear.

I draw the scent of him in through my nose. So does he—even better than I imagined. "So do you," I say. My voice thick with wanting.

Patrick pulls away from me, shoves his hands in his pockets, and steps away. I arch my brow at him but say nothing.

"Ahem," Patrick clears his throat. "Is our table ready?"

As if on cue, Trina is back. She grabs two menus from the hostess stand, looks at me, and then at Patrick. "Ya'll ready to be seated?" She turns on her heels and heads into the dining room without waiting for an answer. She stops at a table near a window, and I suddenly feel exposed. If I'm going to reveal myself to Patrick, I need some sort of shelter.

"Can we get a booth?" I ask.

The smile on Trina's face wavers for a mere second, almost undetectable, before it reappears. "Sure," she says, taking off again. We follow her to a booth in one of the corners, where the light is dimmer. Perfect.

I slide so far into the booth I'm almost against the wall. I'm praying Patrick doesn't slide in beside me. He takes the booth facing me. Maybe side-to-side would have been better.

Trina hands us the menus. "Sandy will be your server. Enjoy." She spins, and she's gone.

"So, what's good here?" Patrick opens his menu, blocking me out.

"From what I understand...everything."

Patrick is still hidden behind his menu. I pick up mine and scan it over for something to eat. When Sandy, the girl who was getting dropped off earlier, shows up, we are both ready to order.

I have settled on the grilled shrimp with spaghetti noodles, squash ragu with sweet potato fingerlings, and chard. Patrick orders a pan-seared flatiron steak with smashed confit fingerling potatoes, pole beans, and butter cabbage.

Sandy takes our menus with the promise to be right back with our drinks. Now that the menus are gone, Patrick is staring at me rather intently. I want to look away, but I force myself to maintain eye contact.

I sigh, then ask. “How was your trip?”

The corners of Patrick’s lip curl up, and he gives me a small smile. “It was okay.”

“So—”

“Look—”

We both give a small chuckle. And I wait for Patrick to continue.

“Look. I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting since I got here. It’s just that...that I know we came here to talk, but after seeing you when I walked in...all I wanted to do was take you out of here and...and well...fuck you senselessly in the back seat of my rental car.

My whole body grows warm as I watch Patrick’s eyes cloud over with desire.

“I get it,” I say. “I was kind of thinking the same thing when I saw you pull up into the parking lot.”

Patrick’s hand begins to inch its way across the table to mine.

“We can always get the food to go,” I offer.

He jerks his hand back like he’s been singed. “Ahem. As good as that sounds, I think we should talk instead.”

I place my hands in my lap. I guess he’s right. I’m not so sure anymore. But really, what’s the point? I’ll tell him that the reason why we met is because I’m a sad, lonely housewife who decided to hang out at a hotel trying to get laid. Even though I was excited at the beginning of

this escapade, now, when I think of saying it out loud, it sounds sad and pathetic. *I'm* sad and pathetic.

And then what? Patrick either decides he wants nothing more to do with me, or he sleeps with me one last time out of pity. All of a sudden, I'm tired, and the thought of farm fresh food doesn't seem so appealing anymore.

Sandy's back with our drinks, and I wait for her to set them down and leave. "What do you want to know?" I ask, sounding dejected.

Patrick gives me a quizzical look, evidently noticing my change in demeanor. "What are you afraid of?" he asks, searching my face.

I give a small laugh. "That after tonight, you won't like me so much."

The look on Patrick's face is one of childlike naivety like he doesn't believe that's possible. I hate to have him look at me any other way, but all at once, I'm overcome with the need to tell him everything, so I spill it. Starting with my marriage, the years of abuse and manipulation, and then the black eye.

Sandy has brought our food and left, and yet I've only stopped long enough to take a breath or two. I end with meeting Patrick at the hotel and my purpose for being there in the first place. "But there was only you," I say. "There has only been you."

I drop my head and let the tears I felt building pour from my eyes. I feel so ashamed. I am about to tell him that I should go when I feel him slide into the booth beside me. He's pulling me to him.

"Shhh," he says, rubbing his hand on my back in small circles. "It's okay. I'm here now."

He didn't run away.

When it feels like the last of my tears are spent, I wrap my arm around Patrick's waist and lay my head on his chest. "You don't hate me?"

"No, I don't hate you," he mouths against the top of my head.

“I would,” I say back.

“For what? Not being happy?”

“No,” I sniff. “For not being honest.”

Patrick pulls away from me and begins dabbing at my tears with a napkin. “But I never asked for you to be. At least not until now. And now you have been. Unless there’s something else, you need to tell me.”

I shake my head and take the napkin from him to wipe my nose. “That’s all,” I say. “Shoot, it’s more than enough. The sad pathetic housewife, seeking out strangers to make her feel better about herself.”

Patrick grabs my chin and pulls it sharply towards him. “Don’t do that. I haven’t known you long, but from what I do know, there’s nothing pathetic about you.”

I try to pull my head away. He doesn’t know me. Like he said, it’s only been for a short time. He doesn’t know the real me.

Patrick won’t let me look away. “You’ve allowed someone to make you feel less than. That’s not the same as *being* less than. You’re special, Shawna. If not to yourself, you’re special to me. And if you’ll let me, I’ll show you how much.”

He leans in and places his lips on mine. At first, the kiss is gentle as he uses his tongue to urge my lips apart. But it quickly becomes more demanding as we both seek something deeper from the other. It’s not until we hear Sandy back at the table that we remember where we are.

“How’s everything?” she says, dragging the words out.

Patrick and I both eye the untouched food sitting on the table.

“It’s great,” I say, picking up a fork, spearing one of the sweet potatoes, and placing it in my mouth.

“Everything’s great.” Patrick slides his plate across the table, picks up his knife and fork, and cuts into his steak. Puts a piece into his mouth and begins to chew. “Delicious.”

Sandy eyes us both skeptically. “Okay. Well, let me know if y’all need anything else.”

As soon as she walks away, I start laughing so hard I almost choke on the piece of shrimp in my throat. Patrick hands me a glass of water while patting me on the back.

“Oh, God,” I say between breaths. “Can you imagine what she must be thinking? Catching us like that?”

“I imagine she thinks we like each other,” Patrick says, smiling. The thought of having sex with me still clouds his eyes.

The time for laughter has passed, and I need to figure out what this all means. This time, I’m the one to put some space between us. I slide back to my spot against the wall.

“So where do you want this...us to go?” I say, sweeping my hand through the air. “What are you asking from me? Now that you know I’m married. Are you—”

Patrick grabs my hand and lowers it to the space between us. “Right now, I’m willing to take whatever you’re willing to give me, but eventually...” Patrick looks away. “Knowing what I know right now, I know I have no right to say this, but...I can’t imagine sharing you with another man.” He turns back to face me. “Shawna, I want you for me. And only for me. I can give you everything you deserve. I can be everything you deserve. What I said to you at the gardens, I meant it. I would do anything in my power to give you the world.”

I don’t know what to say. Greg has been gone a little over a week. I’ve met Patrick, fallen in love with him, and now he’s asking me in so many words to leave my husband for him. And as good as it sounds, what is the correct response one should have in moments like this?

So, because I don’t know what to say, I place my hand on Patrick’s cheek, lean in, and give him a light kiss on the lips. “Thank you,” I say. “Thank you for wanting to give me the world. And thank you for making me feel worthy of it.”

I release Patrick, pick up my fork, and resume eating my lukewarm meal. He does the same, and we continue our meal, both in deep thought.

Once we are finished, the dishes are cleared away, and the bill is paid, Patrick walks me outside to my SUV. I give him a hug and a peck on the cheek. I am hesitant to let him go as I turn to get in and drive away.

Patrick catches my hand and turns me back to face him. “I know what I asked for was a lot. And I don’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for. So, just give me the next few days. Until your...until he comes back, spend them with me.”

I’m standing in the parking lot, tongue-tied and dumbstruck. I thought, I assumed when I didn’t give Patrick an answer earlier, that this was it. That after dinner we would part ways and never see each other again.

“Shawna, please. I’m supposed to be in meetings for the next couple of days, but I’ll cancel everything if you’ll just say yes.”

“Yes,” I hear myself say. It’s as if I’m listening to someone else speak.

“Thank you,” Patrick says as he crushes me against his chest. “Thank you.”

He dips his head down to give me a slow and tender kiss. Although I’m kissing him back, it doesn’t feel real. Is this real?

Thirty minutes later, I’m in my car and halfway home, with no memory of how I got here. Why did I say yes? I mean, of course, I want to spend the last few days I have with Patrick. I would be a fool not to want to, but that’s my heart speaking. My head is telling me to get out while I’m still intact. If this ends up breaking me, I’m not sure if I’ll ever recover.

Chapter 6

After a restless night, I've decided to spend the days I have left with Patrick. He makes me feel wanted, and as much as I'm going to miss that when he's gone, I deserve it. If only for four more days, I deserve it.

I've sent him a text telling him as much. He replied to say that he's glad and that he's reserved us a room at our hotel. The thought of him including me in the reservation makes me smile.

I am currently filling up an overnight bag, that's starting to look as if it's not going to be big enough, to take with me to the hotel room, when my doorbell rings.

Who the hell?

I toss on my robe and run downstairs. When I open the door, I find Trudy standing with her fist in the air as if I've caught her in mid-knock. "Trudy?"

The sun is at her back, blinding me. I raise my hand to block it out. But from what I can tell, Trudy seems a bit frazzled. And she must be to have shown up here unannounced.

"Sorry. Did I wake you?" she asks.

"Just taking an afternoon nap." If she thinks I've been asleep, let her. I'm not telling her that the real reason I look tired is because I've been up all night tossing and turning over a man who's not Greg. Or that I was in the process of packing a bag to go and spend a few days with that man.

Nope, not doing that.

Staring at Trudy standing outside my door, I suddenly realize I don't want her here. Seeing her here makes what I've been doing a reality, and I don't like it. The dreamscape I've been living in has been shattered.

"Why didn't you call first?" I ask.

"I know I should have, but I needed to talk, and I wasn't sure if I could drive at the same time."

Sounds serious. I wonder what James or Cory has done now. I gesture for her to come in. "Well, have a seat. You want something to drink?" I ask, and I don't mean water.

"Tea if you got it—" Trudy's stomach suddenly lets out a loud protest. "And maybe something to snack on," she adds sheepishly.

In the kitchen, I turn on the Ninja so it can start heating the water from the reservoir. While it heats, I go in search of snacks. I find a package of shortbread cookies in the pantry. Once the water is ready, I pop in a black tea pod and place a mug underneath to catch the liquid when it's ready.

When I return to the living room, I discover Trudy submerged deep inside the pillows on my couch. I place the mug and tray of cookies on the coffee table and take a seat beside her.

"So, what's got you so crazy, you'd show up without calling first?" I know I'm being abrasive and that my friend wouldn't have taken a chance on coming here if she didn't need me, but I can't seem to help myself.

Either Trudy didn't notice my tone, or she doesn't care, because a story that I could never have dreamed up on my own, comes spilling out of her. She's been going on lunch dates with this guy Matt, she told me about a while back. Her boss has accused her of meeting with Matt behind his back to give him information about the company. And on top of all of that, she and Matt shared a kiss, which is what has brought her to my doorstep.

I thought my life was in shambles. Now I know why I haven't heard from her either.

Now that she's gotten that off her, Trudy extricates herself from the pillows to take a sip of her tea, and immediately starts choking. "What's in this?" she gasps.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention my little addition. "Just a little rum," I say as I'm pounding on her back. "Guess I should have warned you first."

Trudy places the cup back on the coffee table, "Yeah, I think so."

I take in Trudy's demeanor, and I can see that she's upset, but even more so, I can tell there's more to that kiss than she's letting on. She's interested in Matt.

"So, what you going to do about it?" I ask.

"Do about what?"

"The kiss. Are you going to finish what you started?"

Trudy eyes me a bit skeptically. "You mean, am I going to take things further with Matt?"

I nod my head, anxiously awaiting her answer. I know it's wrong, but part of me wants her to say yes. That way, I have a partner in all of this. That way, I don't feel as bad about what I've been doing.

"Aren't you supposed to be telling me how stupid I've been and ask me how I could do something like that to my husband and kids?"

She's right. Those are the things I should be saying, but I don't.

"I'm sure those are all the things you've already been telling yourself. You don't need me for that. I'm just saying. What would be the harm if something more were to happen? You deserve a little fun."

Trudy's been staring at me with her mouth open since I said, 'What would be the harm.' I reach over and close it for her. Now she's looking at me like I've lost my mind.

"Listen, what do you think I do when Greg is gone?" I say, trying to sound nonchalant.

“From the looks of you, I would think you sleep all day.” Trudy looks me up and down.

“Oh, this,” I say, pulling my robe tight around me. “I went out last night, didn’t get in until early this morning.”

I don’t know why I’m lying. The words are just coming out of me.

“And what do you do when you go out at night?” Trudy asks me hesitantly.

There’s the judgment I knew would come if I told her. If she wants to judge me, let her.

“Sometimes, I meet men. Sometimes, they buy me drinks. Sometimes a little more happens. It’s harmless.” I say, laying it on thick.

Trudy begins tugging at her hair, and she has a strange look on her face, like she’s trying to make sense of what I’m saying. “And why is this the first time I’m hearing about this?”

“I’d thought about inviting you out with me a few times…” Another lie. I considered asking Trudy out to the lounge with me for like half a second, then quickly dismissed the thought. “But like you said, you have your husband and your kids.”

“Does Greg know about this?” Trudy whispers as if Greg’s nearby and might hear her.

I look at her and laugh. “Yeah, right. Girl, he would kill me.”

Trudy regards me with concern. And I know as much as she may be judging me, she also cares about me. Maybe more than I care about myself. I can’t keep goading her like this, trying to get a rise out of her. It’s not fair.

“He’s just so controlling. I guess this is a way to get back at him. To have some control of my own, and it’s kind of fun.” I say, thinking of Patrick.

“This is a lot, Shawna,” Trudy says, shaking her head as she looks off.

“What, you gonna stop talking to me now?” I snap at her.