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Prologue

Ten years ago

Justin Sterling wrapped his arms around the soft, slim body of Vanessa Pryce, relaxing in the afterglow. The top-floor hotel suite was dark, mirroring the desert blackness that floated beyond Vegas's garish lights. The AC was putting out cool air, and now that the lovemaking was finished, she shivered. He pulled a sheet over the two of them.

They'd been dating for almost five years. Justin had attended Stanford for his Masters in order to be close to Vanessa, even though his great-uncle had thought Harvard Business School would be a better option. Nobody knew they were seeing each other, though. She wanted to keep things low-key to avoid drawing attention to their relationship.

Justin didn't mind if it made her feel better. Also, he knew his status as the Heir Apparent to one of the richest and most influential men in the world could destroy the privacy Vanessa wanted. There was a reason she tried to keep a low profile despite her own family's considerable wealth and prestige, and she avoided talking about them as much as she could.

She pressed her cheek against his chest. "You know I'm going to start my job soon," she said quietly.

"L.A., right?"

"Mmm-hmm."

He pushed his hand gently through her silky hair. She always dyed it apple red, even though her natural black looked stunning. She took after her mother, who'd been a renowned beauty in her youth. "We can probably accommodate each other's schedules. Now that I have my MBA, I need to be in Chicago for awhile, but it's not that far."

"Justin..." She cleared her throat. "It's probably better if we break up."

His hand stilled. “What?”

She sighed softly. “Long distance relationships never work.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I think I do. We’ll both be busy with our careers, and you’re going to be surrounded by beautiful women in Chicago. You’ll want to date them.”

“Ohh, the women in Chicago. They’re the problem. I guess all the handsome actors in L.A. won’t be a factor.” Justin said, keeping his tone light, even though the idea sent a fiery jealousy blazing through his body.

She laughed softly. “No, I’m not really interested. Besides, most of them want to date people who can help their careers, and lawyers don’t really count. Not enough studio connections.”

“Not if the lawyer’s worth fifty million bucks.”

She pressed her mouth against his. “Justin. Stop arguing. We still have until morning.”

“Oh. So our breakup starts in the morning?”

“Yup. Let’s not waste the night.”

When she fitted her body to him, Justin let his annoyance go. She’d change her mind.

Except she hadn’t.

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* * *

November, one year ago

Ten years of on-and-off dating. No, you couldn't really call it dating. The more accurate term would be booty-calling. A week's conference in New York, a business trip to San Francisco, a secretly planned mini-vacation in the Bahamas. Two or three times a year, sometimes more, they'd find an excuse—or make one—to get together. Even though Vanessa's prediction about their careers seemed to be playing out, they couldn't really let each other go.

He stewed over that as he'd walked along the night streets of downtown L.A. after leaving his friend—and Vanessa's brother—Iain at a club. Vanessa had been so odd when he'd shown up at her firm, all uptight and aloof. Nobody, not even Iain, seemed to know what was wrong with her.

Instead of trying to figure out Vanessa's inexplicable mood, he needed to leave for Houston. His great-uncle Barron would kill him if he didn't show for Thanksgiving, especially since it was the first one he was celebrating with his girlfriend and her family...who also happened to be their in-laws now.

Then he heard the laugh that never failed to grab his attention. Throaty and full-bodied, it flowed over him, warming him from the inside out. He turned his head, and there she was.

Carrying a briefcase and a purse, Vanessa was striding along confidently in those crazy sexy stilettos of hers. Her red hair glinted as she tilted her head to look up at a man next to her.

Justin narrowed his eyes. The other guy was a bit too close to her for Justin's taste. He undoubtedly wanted to sleep with her. Given the man's conservative haircut and outfit, he was probably a lawyer. Maybe another associate at the firm where she worked.

Suddenly V

anessa stopped as though she'd felt something, then turned and saw Justin. Her eyes flickered for a moment, then a blank expression descended upon her face like she was looking at a stranger.

The persona-non-grata treatment scraped his already shot nerves. He could still hear her moans, smell the sweat and sex on her skin when she'd come with his cock buried deep inside her the last time they'd met for a hook-up. The memory of her sweet, baked-pear scent sizzled through him like a potent drug, and she was standing so close to the other guy that Justin knew her date could smell her.

The man next to her smiled at Justin. "Hello, Mr. Sterling. Fancy running into you here."

Justin gave him a warm, professional smile, while imagining breaking his nose. "Have we met?"

"No." The other man flushed. "But I saw you at the firm. I'm Felix Peck. An associate."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Peck."

"Please. Call me Felix."

Justin nodded once.

Felix cleared his throat, shifting his weight. Vanessa put a hand on his sleeve. "If we don't hurry, we're going to be late."

Justin reined in his temper. "Do you mind if I borrow Vanessa for a moment, Felix?"

"Sure."

Justin pulled her away, none too gently, breaking the offending contact between her and Felix. She glared at him, but he didn't give a damn right now. If they'd been in private, he might have done something far more glare-worthy than just moving her a few feet.

When they had a little distance from the associate, she hissed, "Stop. What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Justin almost snarled at her. "Don't you know?"

“No. I can’t read your mind.” She yanked at her arm, but he didn’t let go.

“It hasn’t even been a month since you and I were fucking like bunnies, and you’re clinging to this guy Peck? Do you think he can give you what I gave you?”

Even in the dark, Justin could see her cheeks flush. “Don’t be nasty and weird. And hypocritical. It’s not like you’ve lived like a monk since then. I’ve seen more than one picture of you with a model on your arm.”

“Only because you didn’t want to go to any of those functions with me.”

“Justin...” She squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. “I like you, but it’s complicated.”

It suddenly hit him. The clarity of the situation—this messed up relationship he had with Vanessa—it was so obvious.

She was his Siren—the seductive, irresistible being that would lead him to his doom. Because no matter how much he wanted her, he couldn’t really have her. And what she did to him wasn’t healthy. By indulging her, he was letting her screw with his mind.

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He slowly let go. “I understand how it is now.”

“Good,” she said, rubbing her arm. “Now if I can—”

“I’ve let you use me for far too long.”

She pulled up short. “Huh?”

“Because I liked you.” He swallowed a bitterness that threatened to suffocate him. “Good enough to fuck in private, but not good enough to be seen with in public? I get the message loud and clear.”

“What? No, that’s not it.” She took a step forward, her arm extending. “Justin—”

He pulled away, making sure they didn’t touch again. “Don’t even try. And don’t ever act like you know me.” The finality of what he was about to say burned his throat. “From now on, you’re dead to me.”

Then he spun and stalked away, blocking out Vanessa’s cry. He’d had enough of this emotional rollercoaster bullshit.

Chapter One

Present day

Vanessa let out a long breath as she and Felix walked out of the firm’s glitzy lobby to grab a latte from Starbucks. Her head throbbed, but she clenched her hands to avoid rubbing her temples. The client was guilty as hell, that was obvious, but she and other lawyers at the firm would spend endless billable hours to ensure a Desirable Outcome.

“You okay?” Felix lowered his voice. “You seemed really distracted in there.”

“I’m okay.” But she wasn’t. Her oldest brother Dane had texted her in the middle of the deposition: Parents are divorcing. And now the jerk wouldn’t answer her calls or texts.

“Miss Pryce!”

Vanessa stopped as two young girls ran toward her. Just like that the throbbing in her head started to dissipate, and she felt her mouth start to curl into a smile. They were clients from a previous case on which she’d worked pro bono. She turned to Felix. “Do you mind getting me a tall skinny latte? I’ll meet you back upstairs.”

He nodded and walked away, leaving her alone with the girls. “What are you two doing here?” she asked. “Does your dad know?”

The younger girl nodded. “Dad drove us. He was coming to downtown anyway.” She hugged Vanessa’s legs, her small hands sticky. “Dad’s so awesome.”

The older one, Suzy, added, “We wanted to see you and say thank you again.”

Vanessa grinned. She’d fought long and hard to get their no-good drug addict mom and her abusive boyfriend away from the kids. It hadn’t been easy to convince the court that the girls were better off with their father. The man was a gruff, blue-collar high school grad, while their mother had gone to community college and knew how to work the system.

“Aunt Sally said you didn’t get paid. Is that true? I brought some money.” The younger one reached into her pocket and pulled out a small change purse.

Vanessa put a hand over the girl’s. “I’ve already been paid, just to see you guys this happy.”

Their father rushed over and gathered the kids around him. “I’m so sorry they’re bothering you. I told them they weren’t going to be able to see you again, but they just wouldn’t listen,” he spoke fast, his face flushed.

“It’s all right. I was on a coffee break. It’s great to see them doing well.” When she’d first met them, they’d been skinny, dirty and wary. Now they clung to him, their gazes certain of his love.

He sniffed. “Couldn’t have done it without your help. Thank you.”

“I’m just glad everything worked out.”

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time. I know you’re a busy woman, helping people like me.” He turned to his daughters. “Hey, say thank you to Miss Pryce, real polite now, and then we can go have ice cream.”

The girls crowed, their faces flushed, then thanked her again in a loud chorus. Chuckling, the man started herding them across the street. Something warm and sweet unfurled inside Vanessa as she watched them

laughing and joking around. She blinked away sudden moisture in her eyes. Now that, she thought, was a Just and Proper Outcome.

It sort of sucked that her paying clients rarely fit into the same category.

She started to turn away, then stopped when she saw her mother climbing out of her car. She was dressed as elegantly as usual. Nothing about her hinted that something as disastrous as divorce was about to impact her life.

“Mom!” Vanessa started marching toward her mother at a rapid pace.

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Ceinlys’s face relaxed into a smile. “Hello, dear,” she said when Vanessa was close enough to hug.

Vanessa searched her mother’s expression, looking for any signs of distress, but Ceinlys looked perfectly composed. Still, Dane wouldn’t have sent a text like that for no reason. “Is it true?” She’d kill him if he’d only done it to make her ask stupid questions.

“Is what true, dear?”

“That you and Dad are divorcing.” It couldn’t really be happening. Both her parents were in their sixties. Why now?

Ceinlys hesitated for half a second, then said, “Yes.”

The answer hit Vanessa like a hammer to the base of her skull.

“Where did you hear that?” Ceinlys asked.

“Dane told me.” Bitterness bubbled. “Why is Dad doing this?”

A wry smile twisted her mother’s mouth. “You have it wrong, dear. I am divorcing him.”

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his time it was like a sledgehammer. “Why? The prenup—”

“If you wish to talk about my divorce, call my lawyer.” Ceinlys’s diction was proper and precise. “Her name is Samantha Jones, and as it happens I’m late for our appointment.”

Something cold and hard fisted around Vanessa’s chest. Samantha was one of the most well-known divorce attorneys in California. Nobody hired her unless they were serious, and she was exactly the kind of lawyer her mother needed if she wanted to leave her father. Vanessa forcibly drew air into her tight lungs. “But—”

“Don’t you have to go back to the office? It’s only four thirty.”

As if to prove her mother’s point, Vanessa’s cell phone started ringing.

“Nice chatting with you, dear.” Ceinlys walked away. She didn’t look back.

* * *

Hands steepled together, Justin watched the man on the other side of the executive desk. In his mid-forties, he looked starkly white against the dark, supple leather of his seat. His fish-like mouth moved, and words kept pouring out in an unrelenting stream, but Justin had tuned him out. It was too late for excuses.

“Have you heard anything I said?” the man said finally.

“Unfortunately, I have. Nothing you said can change my mind. The children’s hospital is no longer under your directive.”

“But—”

The muscles in Justin’s jaw tightened. This was getting tiresome. “Furthermore, as of now, you are no longer employed at Sterling & Wilson.”

The construction manager's eyes bulged. "What? You can't do that!"

Justin gave him a bland look. "I just did."

"But Barron—"

"Is no longer in charge." Justin put some steel behind his voice. People kept looking for Barron even though he hadn't been in the office in months. It was getting old. "He's retired."

Sweat beaded on the other man's forehead. "Look. I know I made a few mistakes. He wouldn't like you firing one of his longest-term managers over some minor errors."

"Your 'minor errors' are going to cost the company at least five million dollars. You're not worth anywhere near that much money."

"I've managed hundreds of projects!"

"With an acceptable level of competence, for which you were compensated accordingly. But frankly, you aren't as good as you think you are. If you don't walk out of here in the next three minutes, I'll have you thrown out. The choice is up to you."

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With that he dismissed the manager from his thoughts as he focused on the papers in front of him. The Ethel Sterling Children's Hospital had been Barron's pet project, something he wanted to build in his late wife's name. It should've been completed two years earlier, but somehow it was still on-going. Barron hadn't really given it the attention it required, what with the return of his granddaughter Kerri from self-imposed exile and her wedding, plus Barron's own newly minted romance. And Justin had had other things demanding his attention since he'd taken over as well.

Justin glanced at the desktop clock. The round face was set in an elegant miniature silver statue featuring two swans with necks entwined. Their diamond eyes sparkled. Vanessa's eyes had sparkled the same way when she'd given it to him as a birthday present six years ago. They'd been in Paris on a secret vacation. He'd even booked separate hotel rooms to maintain the ridiculous façade she'd wanted.

He kept thinking he should throw it out, especially after their nasty fight in November, but somehow in the ensuing three months he hadn't been able to do so. He told himself the clock was useful, and it was true that it was the only timepiece in his office.

Almost six o'clock. He should have his assistant order him something quick to eat. It was going to be a long night.

His personal mobile rang, and he scowled at it. Fewer than twenty people had the number, and the last thing he needed was another problem. A frown creased his brow when Iain Pryce flashed on the screen. He was one of Justin's closest friends and Vanessa's older brother.

What could he want?

"Hi, Ia—"

"Thank god. Are you in Chicago?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"It's Vanessa."

Justin's mood instantly darkened, then turned to something that felt suspiciously like worry. He cursed himself and kept his voice even. "What about her?"

"She's on a flight to O'Hare."

Justin pressed a finger against the spot between his eyebrows as his idiot heart thumped. She couldn't possibly be coming to visit him. "On business?"

“No. Can you get her off the plane and keep her there until I can go get her?”

“Isn’t she flying private? Just have the pilot turn back to L.A.” Unlike three of her brothers, she didn’t have her own jet. She was probably on one of her brothers’ toys.

“She’s on United.” Iain rattled off the flight number and arrival info.

I should just say no. He wasn’t Vanessa’s keeper, and he really needed to forget her and move on. On the other hand, what was making her to come to Chicago? The moronic part of him spun a ridiculous fantasy: maybe she was coming to apologize and change her ways. Toxic hope. He didn’t buy it.

“Justin, can I count on you?” Iain was saying. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Don’t bother. It’s late, and I’m sure you have better things to do,” Justin said. “I’ll send her back to L.A. as soon as possible. If not, I’ll call. Is that cool?”

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

Justin hung up and leaned back in his seat. Yeah. You and everyone else.

* * *

Vanessa rubbed her temples as twin hammers pounded inside her head. Maybe she shouldn’t have had so much to drink on the flight, but this was a special situation. The cabin started to hum with activities as soon as the plane reached the gate.

The purser’s calm voice came through the PA system, saying the usual about thanking the passengers blah blah blah. Then there was something different. “Please resume your seats for a few moments until we’re cleared to deplane.”

There was a general murmuring, but the passengers slowly sat back down. Vanessa frowned, taking her seat again with her purse clutched in her lap. She wanted to get off as soon as possible and then...what? She

closed her eyes. Coming to Chicago was a mistake. She and Justin didn't have the kind of relationship where she could just show up unannounced for support. She'd systematically discouraged him from starting the type of deep conversation that she wanted right now. Her fingers tightened around her purse.

There's probably another flight leaving for L.A. soon. O'Hare was a huge airport. If not, she'd just check into a hotel and catch the first flight out.

A few moments later, the cabin door swung open and three men in uniform entered. TSA or ICE, she thought, her tired eyes bleary and unable to focus. She should sleep and eat better, but she hadn't been able to do either since November.

They came down the aisle and stopped at her seat. "Vanessa Pryce?" one of them asked.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind coming with us?"

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That had an instantly sobering effect. "What's this about?"

"We can't say."

She narrowed her eyes. "Won't say" would be more precise. The men's expressions showed zero emotion, nothing she could use to figure out what was going on.

"Can I bring my purse and laptop bag?" she asked.

"Yes, of course." They stepped back.

She pulled out her bag, her mouth set in a tight line. Curious stares from other passengers burned her like a brand, and she suppressed a sigh. The one time she flew on impulse, and this was what happened. She pushed down her irritation and embarrassment. It was probably a mix-up. They were probably looking for another Vanessa Pryce, one who was probably some sort of dangerous fugitive.

The men escorted her all the way through the concourse. Many people didn't even pretend to look away. Why should they? It wasn't every day you got to watch a woman get dragged away by a team of uniformed government men.

"Do I get a phone call?" she asked finally.

"You can call whoever you like."

There was no one else to call except Rosenbaum, McCracken, Wagner and Associates. They were her family's lawyers, and they'd know what to do. She didn't feel comfortable representing herself, especially not while she was drunk and tired.

They led her to the other side of the security line. She was getting her phone out when they said, "Have a nice evening."

She turned back toward them. "Wait. Aren't I under arrest?"

One of them cracked a small smile. "What gave you that idea?"

She raised both of her eyebrows. They had to be kidding. All that humiliating display for this? "Can I have your names?" She'd sic the family lawyers on them.

"Vanessa."

She stilled at the familiar voice, then turned, the three men forgotten. Justin watched her, his eyes hooded. A long black coat covered his lean body, and his mouth was set in a tight line, not a hint of softness or welcome in his expression. It made her feel small and uncertain. Why had she thought it would be such a great idea to fly out to Chicago? It

would've been better if she'd stayed in L.A. and gotten drunk with her friends instead.

Except she didn't want to talk about her parents with anybody in L.A.

"What are you doing here?" Vanessa asked. "You aren't..." She stopped, taking a quick glance around the arrival lounge. No one in Justin's family flew commercial. The Sterlings had more money than they could spend in ten lifetimes.

"I'm here to pick you up."

Then it hit her; he was the one who'd sent those men. She waited for anger to surge, but instead resignation pooled in her belly. He'd made it clear how furious he was with her. "You're dead to me" was pretty final.

Now his gaze was raking over her. "If you were going to come to Chicago, you could've at least dressed for the weather."

"Oh." She looked down at her dark navy skirt suit and open-toe stilettos, perfect for February in L.A.

"Do you have anything warm in your luggage?"

She shook her head. "I didn't really, you know. Pack."

The muscles in his jaw bunched, but he came over and draped his own coat around her. It was toasty and smelled of winter and chocolate and Justin. In his Italian suit, Justin's shoulders looked so wide and comforting. Before she could get a hold of herself, tears sprang to her eyes, and she blurted, "My parents are divorcing."

Something shifted in his expression, and she could swear she'd glimpsed a hint of softness underneath the hard mask. And it only made her want to cry harder because he'd been such an amazing friend and support to her, and she'd pushed him away.

"I'm sorry." She wiped the tears. "I shouldn't have come."

There was a long, agonizing moment, and she wondered which way it was going to go. “No, it’s okay,” he finally said. “We can talk in my car.”

“Where are we going—?”

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“Where else? To my place.”

Chapter Two

It didn’t take much time for them to reach his penthouse. Justin’s driver maneuvered the black Bentley through the wintry streets of Chicago, while Justin settled next to her. She started to raise her hand to reach for him, then stopped. He sat with his back unnaturally straight and stiff, his eyes contemplating the glittering city. His usually neat, dark hair was mussed like he’d just rolled out of bed, and it brought back memories of their times together.

Vanessa looked down at her expertly manicured hands. She still didn’t know why she’d gotten on that flight to O’Hare. She and Justin had ended things. No...he’d ended it because he’d been furious with her. She’d never seen him so angry before, and she knew she’d ceased to be a part of his life since November.

And yet here they were.

When the elevator door opened on the top floor, Vanessa peeked at the place she’d made sure never to visit. She’d also ensured he never came over to her places either. They’d done everything at hotels, resorts...once or twice out in nature on camping trips. It wasn’t that difficult to arrange a clandestine hook-up. After all, she’d learned from watching the best—her parents.

Justin’s home was surprisingly inviting, with comfortable-looking couches and earth-toned furniture in sharp green and silver accents.

Given how immaculate everything was—not even a speck of dust—he probably had housekeeping.

Justin brought her inside and gestured at a seat. As soon as she took it, he poured himself a finger of whiskey from his bar and downed it in one near-violent tilt of his head.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

“No,” she said, surprised at the realization that she hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast.

“No wonder you look so pale. Chinese or pizza?”

“I’m not hungry, but I can use some liquor if you have any.”

“You’re not touching a drop of alcohol until you have some food.”

The hardness of his tone penetrated her misery and confusion. He was still furious with her. Why was he doing this then? “Justin, I don’t... This was a bad idea. I’ll check into a hotel.” She got up and blinked as dots swam in her vision.

Cursing, he caught her. “Sit down and don’t even think about it.” He dialed a number and ordered two dinner specials.

She covered her face in her hands and breathed in Justin’s scent on the coat. It was still around her, its presence comforting. She should take it off—it was quite warm in Justin’s penthouse, but she loathed to give it up. Why was she even there? She knew how bad this thing with Justin was. When he’d finally ended it, made it clear how much he hated her, she should’ve left it at that.

“If you eat, I’ll let you have a Mouton ’45,” Justin said finally. The couch dipped under his weight.

“Thanks,” she said without looking at him. She must look awful for him to offer one of his prized Moutons.

“So. Is it really true? Your parents are divorcing?”

She nodded. “Dane told me.”

Justin let out a long sigh. “All the brothers you have, and it had to be him.”

Her mouth twisted. “I thought he might have been kidding, but when I spoke with Mom, she told me she’d hired Samantha Jones.” Vanessa clenched her hands and blinked away tears. “And if that wasn’t bad enough, Dad said it wasn’t up for discussion.” Doesn’t concern you, Vanessa. You aren’t my attorney.

No. She was just their daughter. Two of her brothers—Iain and Mark—had been confused about the news, Dane as usual had nothing illuminating to add, and Shane...she didn’t even know where Shane was.

Justin leaned back. “Who would’ve thought? The Eternal Couple.”

“Guess nobody’s going to be saying that anymore.”

“I’m sorry. But maybe this is better for them.”

“But how can they?” She finally turned to look at Justin. “I can’t believe it. No matter how miserable they made each other, no matter what people said, they always stayed together. Why are they doing this now? If they wanted to divorce, they should’ve done it years ago while they still had time to start fresh. What’s the point?”

“Who knows what they’re thinking? Maybe they were waiting until you guys were all grown. Maybe they decided it’s better to live freely now than never.”

She turned away and wiped away a tear. Justin handed her a box of tissues. “They still should’ve done it years ago.” Before the whole family lived through decades of misery. Before she found all those letters in the vanity drawer in her mother’s bedroom.

Justin silently put a hand on her shoulder. When the delivery guy came with the food, he paid and came over to spread the Chinese all over the low coffee table. He served the beef and broccoli and Peking duck—her

favorite. She didn't think it was a coincidence given how much he disliked broccoli.

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She tilted her head, trying to figure him out. There was something matter-of-fact about the way he moved and talked, like everything that had happened between them in November didn't even exist. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

A beat of silence, then Justin answered, "Iain asked me." He pushed a plate her way and handed her a pair of chopsticks. "Eat."

She pushed the food around, then finally nibbled on a broccoli floret when Justin gave her a cool, steady stare. It tasted great, and she realized she was actually quite hungry. "He called?"

Justin nodded and started eating. There was something very methodical and driven about the way he ate. He didn't shovel his food down like some men she knew, but he didn't take his time either. It reminded her of somebody trying to eat an entire elephant without making himself sick—one bite at a time, chew, swallow, repeat at a steady speed until he was finished.

They ate in a silence that wasn't too awkward. "You should've told him you were too busy," she said after the final piece of duck.

He poured two glasses of claret and pushed one her way, and she let herself smile a bit while rolling the stem. This was so like him—keeping his promise without her having to prompt him. She breathed in the wine—the luscious black currant scent—and took a small sip, unable to wait.

"The real question is: why did you come to Chicago? You don't have any friends here."

The priceless vintage turned bitter in her mouth, and she forced herself to swallow. “Would you believe me if I told you the flight to Chicago happened to be the earliest one out of L.A.?”

He snorted, swirling the wine in his glass. “Are you really a successful attorney? Hard to imagine, when you lie so poorly.”

They’d dated on and off for over ten years. Somehow he seemed to know everything about her, while her family seemed clueless about what she was up to half the time.

Vanessa finished her wine. She didn’t know what made her keep coming back to him. They should’ve quit each other after she’d finished law school. She’d told him so. Even broken up with him. But then that wasn’t how it’d happened. They’d kept calling, kept seeing

each other, kept having sex.

And that wasn’t like her. She’d never once clung to a guy she’d decided to break up with, but with Justin she was unable to control herself.

“I came to Chicago because I had nobody else to turn to.” She drank more of the wine and laughed a sad laugh. “That didn’t sound as pathetic when I thought it in my head.”

Placing his empty glass on the table, Justin leaned forward. “It doesn’t sound pathetic. It actually sounds lonely.”

Vanessa bit her lower lip. This was what made him so difficult to ignore...and impossible to be with. He could see through all the smiles and outer shells and artifices. Nobody understood her the way he did, and he made her want things that would only bring her misery in the end.

She drained her glass. She no longer felt cold, but she kept his coat around her anyway.

“You’re so contradictory and unpredictable,” he said. “If I didn’t know you so well, I would’ve thought you were playing games.”

Her face heated. “I’m not...” She cringed as the argument from November flashed through her mind. “I’m sorry about all this.” She waved her hand vaguely. “I know you’re angry with me.”

“Angry isn’t quite the right word.”

She winced. Most assuredly not. More like furious...maybe even murderous. She doubted any other man would have come pick her up at the airport, even as a favor to one of his closest friends.

Tilting her chin up with an index finger, Justin lowered his head until their breaths mingled. “‘Angry’ is simple. One dimensional. What I’m feeling right now is a little more complicated than that.”

Her mouth dried, and her heart beat harder and faster against her ribcage. Justin smelled amazing, like pine forest and man, and his dark eyes seemed to suck her right into him.

She didn’t know why she wasn’t pulling back from him. If nothing else, pride and self-preservation should’ve made her get the hell out of Justin’s condo. Hadn’t she been glad when he’d broken things off? She’d told herself he was being unreasonable and melodramatic, and that she wasn’t going to go to him first.

But right now she wanted to be close to him. All through her adult life, Justin had been an anchor that never changed. If she clung to him, nothing would be able to sweep her away.

She closed the distance between them. His lips were firm under hers, unresponsive. She pulled him closer, both hands on the back of his head, and opened up, tracing her tongue over the flat line of his mouth.

The longer he remained passive, the more aggressive she became, channeling her pain into the desperate act of kissing him. She didn’t want him to remain angry with her. She wanted him to know how sorry she was for being unfair to him and how much she appreciated his support. Just being there for her was huge. Her parents’ divorce was really unsettling, and she couldn’t even say why. She felt like one of those helpless kids she represented pro bono.

She rested her palm over his heart and felt its movement, like a fish caught in a net. Forgive me, Justin. Forgive me...

Finally some of the tension went out of him, and his hands traveled up her sides as he began to kiss her back. Relief and exhilaration flooded her. She shed his coat, let it glide over her and pool by the couch.

He pulled her into his lap and dug a hand into her hair, ruining the way she'd set it. She deepened the kiss, adjusting herself so she was seated with her sex flush against his erection.

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He licked the small mole on her neck. "I don't know why I can't say no to you." His breath was hot against her skin. "It should be easy to say no."

"I'm glad you can't. Because I can't say no to you either."