

Chapter 12

If Sera had not stood up that night. If she had stayed on her seat and let me catch the eye I had already caught. Would I be in a different bed right now? Would I be a different woman? Would the past two years have been mine instead of his?

I pushed the thought away.

It did not matter.

I was done loving men. Done trusting them. Done folding myself into the shape of whatever they preferred. Dominic was not love. Dominic was pleasure and revenge and the look on Julian's face at the end of it, and after that, goodbye. 1

I would take what I needed from him.

And when the time came, when Julian found out, I would make him feel as small as he had spent years making me feel grateful. 1

I almost laughed. 1

I was too tired to laugh. 1

I let my eyes close and the room go dim and the last thing I thought before I slept was the curve of Dominic's mouth, and the way he had said, "I will call you."

--- 1

I woke to evening light.

The window was orange. My stomach was loud. I had slept almost

the entire day and the body that had been used so thoroughly had finally gotten the rest it had been owed. 1

I got up. I stretched. I felt good in a way I had forgotten the shape of. 1

I made dinner and ate it standing at the counter and was surprised by my own appetite. Real hunger. The kind that comes after a body has actually been used. 2

I checked the phone after.

More missed calls. Three messages.

I rolled my eyes and called him back.

"Where have you been?" he asked. The wounded husband voice. Practiced. "I have been worried sick. I called all afternoon."

"I am sorry, baby. I was asleep. I have not been sleeping well and today my body just gave out."

A pause.

"Are you sick. Should I come home?" 1

"No, no. I am fine. Just tired."

"Let me see you. Let me see your face." 1

He switched the call to video.

He had stepped out onto a balcony to take it. White railing. A particular kind of palm in the corner of the frame. The angle of the building behind him. 1

I knew that balcony.

It was at that resort.

I made my face soft.

"I miss you," I said. "Hurry home. The bed feels too big without you."

"Soon, baby. I am almost done here."

"I love you."

"I love you more." 1

The call ended.

I lowered the phone slowly and stared at it for a long moment.

Then I rolled my eyes so hard it almost hurt.

— 1

I watched p**n after that. 5

Sue me. 1

I was warm in a way that hours of sleep had not put away, and the only thing I had on my mind was the next time I would see him, and the only thing I wanted to be in that next time was good. Better than good. The kind of good that wrecked a man who looked like he did not wreck easily.

I took notes the way other women took notes during cooking shows. 2

I considered calling him.

I did not.

He had said he had things to handle, and I was not the kind of woman who chased. I was the kind of woman who answered when called.

I called Pat instead.

"I am coming in tomorrow."

"Are you serious?"

"I am serious." 1

"Celeste." 1

"I know."

"Are you okay?"

"I am better than okay. I will tell you everything tomorrow. Or some of it. The clean version." 2

She laughed. She had not heard me laugh like that in a while. 1

I checked the phone before I went to bed. No message. No missed call. Nothing from him.

I told myself it was fine.

I checked again at midnight. 1

I told myself the same thing.

I fell asleep with the phone face up on the pillow next to mine and

felt, distantly, like a teenager. 3

→ 1

The phone woke me.

I scrambled for it.

Dominic.

I sat up too fast.

"Good morning."

"Good morning yourself." 1

The voice in my ear was lower than I remembered. Slow. The voice of a man who had clearly been awake for hours and had been thinking about whether to call.

"There is a delivery at your door," he said.

"What?"

"Go and see."

He hung up.

I sat in the bed for one full second before I was off it.

I ran to the bathroom. Brushed my teeth like a woman possessed. Splashed water on my face. Smoothed my hair. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, flushed and stupid and grinning, and I did not care. 3