

Broken Girl Book 1

Chasing Caitlyn



MARNIE CATE

CHASING CAITLYN

BROKEN GIRL

BOOK ONE

MARNIE CATE

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Published 2023 by Next Chapter

Cover art by Lordan June Pinote

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

The following tale is a collection of experiences. It isn't about one particular person but a culmination of struggles our society faces. Different aspects of the story may resonate with each reader and provoke emotions.

The point of this book is not only to depict the ways in which we can be broken but also to highlight the availability of healing. You don't have to stay imprisoned by your mistakes, in servitude to your choices, or under the cloud of your trials. We all can push beyond where we have been and who we once were.

Find your strength and realize your worth. Then, and only then, will you be able to forgive and grow.

Remember, you are not alone. And, I believe you.

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(800) 787-3224 TTY For the Deaf

National Lifeline SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE

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www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT HOTLINE

(RAINN – Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network)

(800) 656-HOPE (4673)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to J.M. Northup for her editorial support. From our collaboration, I learned so much not only about writing but also about the editorial process.

PROLOGUE

“Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

ONE

Yes, darling. Keep clicking those buttons. You're giving me what I want. How kind of you to build my case for me. Not that I really need this additional indiscretion. I'll have our divorce papers sent to you very soon.

He could pretend he was working hard, but I knew Jeremy. Maybe he was answering a few work texts, but the ones where his eyes brightened, bringing out his devilish grin, were not work. It was her. I say *her* like there is just one. One woman is never enough for Jeremy.

Jeremy likes the chase. I was the last one...the one he finally caught. The one he decided was worthy of him. I was enough of a trophy to marry.

Jeremy sat on his monstrous leather chair while I chose a loveseat across from him. *Love seat...far from one.*

When Jeremy proposed to me, he told me he found his ideal wife. With me, his dream life would come true. I now wonder which meant more to him.

The penthouse we lived in was larger than most people's houses. Centered in the financial district of Los Angeles, Jeremy insisted it was the perfect home for us. It was lavish and excessive in my opinion. The view of the high-rise buildings, with their scattering of lit windows, irritated me.

By the time we moved in, Jeremy had already decorated it to his liking. Black leather furniture. The odd art deco sculpture. Dark wood floors. Grey walls with white accents. No wall hangings. The wall-to-wall windows with the view of the buildings were enough decoration for him. They showed success.

At least, he allowed me to put up an elegantly framed picture of us from our wedding day. *Good idea, babe. We want to remind our guests they are dealing with a power couple.* Still, no other evidence of life was in our home. That was his style – cold and impersonal.

My mother warned me a man like Jeremy would give me security, but he would never meet my needs for love. As much as I hated to admit it, my mother was right. I knew that when I agreed to marry him. In the back of my mind, I knew he was not the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Earlier in the evening, he had started his texting and continued through the night. Setting his fork down on his unfinished plate, he excused himself, “Sorry, babe. I’ve got to put out some fires. I’m still reeling from the San Diego fiasco.”

“Of course,” I said, forcing a smile.

Yes, another night where he claimed he had a bunch of work to do...that he needed to catch up...that he had so much that couldn’t wait. This was not business. It amazed me how stupid he must think I was. When it truly was a work issue keeping him from relaxing, he would complain about the overwhelming workload and threaten to quit. No, the twinkle in his eye told the truth.

Since the beginning of our marriage, there were signs that Jeremy was a womanizer. The blinders I put on allowed me to ignore it. At first, I could calm my mind and pretend it wasn’t happening, but tonight was different. The ding of each message was like a knife in my heart. The past didn’t matter anymore. It was time for me to put the final piece of my plan into action.

Like I said, for Jeremy, it was all about the chase, and he already captured me. How ironic he married me – Caitlyn Chase. He caught his prize, but not for long.

Closing my book and picking up my teacup, I decided it was best to leave the room.

“Where are you going?” Jeremy lifted his eyes long enough to meet mine.

“I’m going to bed. I’m tired, Jeremy,” I said with a fake yawn.

Setting the phone down, he watched me walk away. Calling after me, he said, “I’m sorry I’ve been ignoring you, babe. I have to keep those dollars rolling in,

don't I?"

"Yeah," I said, laughing half-heartedly. I didn't bother to turn around, or he would have seen me roll my eyes.

I hated it when he called me *babe*. Confronting him would not be helpful. He'd tell me I was crazy. Then, if I didn't apologize for my insanity, he would threaten to take everything away from me. I had no plans to be penniless at the age of thirty-two. Marrying badly shouldn't be a sentence of poverty.

Soon, everything would change. His house of cards would come crashing down. The plan had been put into motion, and there was no turning back.

I set the cup in the sink and was jolted out of my bitter reverie by Jeremy's touch. I let out a small gasp of surprise as he wrapped his strong arms around me. I eyed the knife block. It would be easy enough to stab him. I could claim it was an innocent mistake as I drove the blade into his femoral artery.

Once again, I rolled my eyes. I had one shot at the blowing strike, and realistically, I knew that wouldn't satisfy me. I wouldn't like prison. Orange was not my color.

"You smell so good," Jeremy purred in my ear. My body reacted to his warm breath on my skin. Irritated, I reconsidered the idea of stabbing him as he began to kiss my neck. Chills ran through me. My body and my mind were in a battle. I needed to block out the spell he was putting on me. I forced myself to focus on the words I had been telling myself for the past year.

**Be the good wife.
Ignore the fact he is probably imagining
he is with someone else right now.
Sixteen hours, twenty-three minutes.
Then, you're free.**

Turning me around to face him, he kissed me on the tip of my nose. "Don't be mad, babe. You know I'm doing all of this for you." Lifting my chin with his finger, he asked in a firm voice, "You know that, right?"

"Of course, Jeremy," I said, leaning in and kissing him.

Best actress in an unhappy marriage goes to Caitlyn Chase Whittaker. I want to thank everyone who made this possible, especially my lying cheat of a husband. This is really for you, Jeremy.

He interpreted my silencing kiss as an invitation and scooped me up into his arms. I laughed in mock irritation and demanded he put me down. With a grin, Jeremy set me down and took my hand. It felt like the last walk as he led me through our home.

I stared at the familiar bare walls, forcing myself to focus on the big picture. I could endure. It wasn't like he was a fat, sweaty businessman. At one time, I loved when he dropped everything to lead me away to a quiet place. But that was before reality hit. That was before I knew who he really was.

When we reached the bedroom, Jeremy wasted no time peeling my clothes off, and then his. If the sight of him didn't make me want to murder him, I would have enjoyed the view of his athletic body in the soft glow of the hallway light. Jeremy was, if anything, an attentive lover, and he had been equipped with the tools to satisfy.

Lying on the bed, I stared at the ceiling, pretending I had run away to meet my lover. I imagined spending the day on the beach, being massaged with oil by this delicious man. Then, when he finally took me, I would cry out as I reached climax.

"Does it feel good, babe?" Jeremy asked.

If you didn't speak, it would feel better. No, it would feel better if it wasn't you. If it was him.

Tonight, I was unable to even feel the sweet release of pleasure from Jeremy's touch. Not even with thoughts of the one I wanted to be with racing through my mind. *Tonight, you fake it*, I warned myself.

"I need to feel you, Jeremy. Come to me, baby," I writhed and moaned.

With a satisfied grin, he slithered up my body. Closing my eyes, as if I was still reeling from the pleasure he gave me, I focused my mind back on the object of my fantasy. Don't get me wrong, Jeremy was gorgeous. His tan, rock-hard body made it easier to picture my imaginary lover.

Despite myself, I rocked against each of his thrusts. Each movement

reminded me I was a liar. I hated myself for enjoying even one second of it, especially since this time, I didn't need to fake it. My body exploded from the pleasure of his skilled lovemaking.

When he finally reached his peak, he slipped off of me and rolled over. I didn't need to look at him to see his pleased face. But to be fair, Jeremy was a selfish husband, but a giving lover.

Rolling away from him, I let out an audible sigh as I stared at the alarm clock.

Jeremy snuggled up behind me and kissed my shoulder. "I hope this time we made a baby. We would make the most beautiful children," he whispered in my ear.

Not a chance in hell, I thought smugly. The white pills I had been popping each day ensured there would be no little Whittakers brought into this world by me. Jeremy was right though. We would have beautiful children.

Jeremy was the perfect 'Cali Boy' – blond hair, blue eyes, athletic, and charming. As for me, he often complimented my dark hair and hazel eyes. He said he had never seen a porcelain doll come to life in the body of a stripper, but I had mastered it. I should have left him then.

I felt the cold air on my back as he left the bed. "I need to go back to work. Thanks for the distraction, babe."

Babe. I concluded that this term of endearment was a way to ensure the wrong name was never called out...never spoken. Once again, I was reminded Jeremy would never change, and that I needed to protect my heart, as well as my future.

The plan was in place. I would hit Jeremy where it hurt. It had taken patience and cunning, but now, I would be the snake in the grass waiting to strike.

Fourteen hours, forty-two minutes.

Then, you're free.

A single tear streamed down my cheek. *That'll be the last tear you shed for any man*, I scolded myself as I drifted off to sleep.

DADDY'S GIRL

Two

How did I let myself accept the life Jeremy offered? Looking back, there were so many things I could pinpoint as the building blocks that made me the woman I am. However, none of it mattered. I chose to wear the blinders during the beginning of our relationship. Even if I wanted to go back and make a different choice, I couldn't.

When I was young, I was strong and fiery. I thought the world was mine to grab and take hold of, but that feeling of strength died slowly. The first blow came when I was seventeen years old and my father died.

Gregory Chase was not only a prestigious pediatric surgeon but an amazing man. Anyone you asked about my father would say, "he was the perfect man." He was so handsome that he was frequently told he should model. Besides his appearance, he was acknowledged as being the ideal husband and father. He doted on Mother and me, providing us with a dream lifestyle.

His love – for us and for the children he saved – drove him. His long hours away were accepted as we basked in the rewards from it. A fine home, all the creature comforts one dreams of, and fabulous vacations.

My mother, Hillary Chase, was the cookie cutter, stay-at-home wife. She was beautiful, refined, and the envy of the other mothers. I was proud of my family.

When I was a little girl, I watched my mother put on her makeup, and I remember vowing to be as beautiful as her. If I was, I could have my own loving husband and children. However, unlike my mother, I would have a career.

I was raised with the idea of having it all. Nothing would stop me. I would be

able to achieve my dreams. The man I married would be just like my father, who had been a superhero in my eyes. To me, my father was invincible. And then, it all changed.

A mighty deity reached down from the heavens and said, “You’re having too good of a life. It is time to play.” My father was taken from me. The drunk driver who smashed into his car not only killed my father but shattered my world, my goals.

My mother was not equipped for our sudden loss. My father had handled everything, which left the composed woman a disheveled mess of tears and sorrow. The rage inside me had to be shoved down. I couldn’t show my emotions. She couldn’t handle it.

Still, she was the parent. Why did she not keep her mask of perfection? The one I saw her put on whenever she was disappointed. Guilt filled me for the anger I felt towards her, but I needed my mother. Not the mess of a woman falling apart in front of me.

One evening, a few days after the funeral, I found my mother sitting alone in the kitchen. She was writing in a notebook, which she shut quickly when I walked into the room. She had heard my entrance but disregarded the phone ringing behind her. I waited to see if she would even move towards the obnoxious sound. Nothing.

Sighing, I answered, “Chase residence.”

“Oh good,” a gruff man’s voice said. “May I speak with Hillary Chase? Tell her it is Winston Charles on the line.”

“Let me get her for you.” I held the phone to my body to muffle my voice. “It’s Winston Charles.”

She shook her head madly.

“I’m sorry Mr. Charles. My mother is not available.”

“I must speak with her. I know it has been a very painful time for your family, but there are things we must discuss.”

“If you tell me what is going on, I can relay the message,” I offered.

“I’m sorry, but that will not do. There are financial and legal issues to discuss,” he said, not hiding his irritation.

“You would be surprised how much they teach us in high school these days. I have a very strong understanding of how money things work,” I said, wishing he would just tell me what was going on.

“I’m sorry, Miss Chase, I must speak to your mother, and it must be *soon*,” he insisted.

“I’ll have her call you,” I promised before saying goodbye.

I put the phone back on its cradle.

My mother was crying. Again.

“Mother, you have to stop this.” I handed her a tissue from the pocket of my sweatshirt and sat down next to her. “I’m sad, too, but Daddy is gone. We have to go on.”

“I’m trying, Caitlyn. I just feel so lost,” she said, choking back her tears.

“Mr. Charles said he needs to speak to you soon. Please, go talk to him. He can’t speak to me since I’m a minor. You have to deal with our finances,” I scolded.

My mother nodded and closed her eyes. “I’ll go in the morning.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said, not hiding my relief that she had agreed to go.

Her brown eyes popped open, and she shook her head. “No, Caitlyn. They are right. You’re the child. You need to enjoy the last summer before you’re an adult. Weren’t you going to the beach with your friends?”

“But—” I tried telling her I would be there for her, that she was not alone.

“I can do this,” my mother said, stopping me. “You need to enjoy your youth while you can. You can’t throw away your chance to enjoy your senior year. You have worked so hard.”

My mother would not relent. Giving up, I kissed her on the cheek and headed to bed. When I woke in the morning, I found an envelope with sixty dollars and a note.

Caitlyn,

Enjoy your day, honey.

Time will pass so quickly.

In a blink of an eye,

*You will be off to college.
Treasure this time.
Love, Mom*

I typed the words into my phone. I stopped and reread my lies. It took me several attempts before I had even convinced myself I was being truthful. Holding my breath, I prayed I wouldn't have to use my father's death as my excuse, and just hit send.

Caitlyn: Hey Rach, I am not going to make it today

Rachel: What! No! >:(

Rachel: It's been ages!!!!

Caitlyn: 3 days

Caitlyn: I saw you at the funeral.

Damn you for making me pull the dead father card! Why does she always have to exaggerate?

Rachel: Doesn't count!!!

Caitlyn: It's a crazy time. Mom needs me. The beach soon? Tell everyone hello. xoxo

Rachel: Ok, Caitlyn. Promise we'll see each other soon.

I almost saw Rachel's big doe eyes filling with dramatic tears.

Caitlyn: I promise.

With those words, I turned my phone on silent. Without a second thought, I stuffed my cell, along with the money, into my purse, and headed out. When I opened the garage door, the silver paint of my 1989 Porsche 911 glimmered. I

forced back the tears brimming in my eyes.

Images of the day my father brought the car home flashed before me. We had just finished dinner, and he casually said, “Oh, I left your gift in the trunk of my car. Could you go get it for me? I need to make a quick phone call.”

When I frowned, he added, “It will be quick. Get your present and we’ll open it together.”

I entered the garage, flipped on the light, and screamed. Under the fluorescent light sat a convertible with a big silver bow on the hood. Keys dangled before me as my father hugged me from behind.

“Happy Sweet Sixteen, darling Caity,” my father said. “It is a special car for a magnificent young woman.”

“Gregory, it must have cost a fortune,” my mother gasped.

“No price is too high for my girls. I wanted to get you a brand new one, but the deal I got on this classic was too good to pass up. I hope you like it.”

“Like it? I love it!” I laughed throwing my arms around him, almost knocking him down.

“Gregory, convertibles are so unsafe,” my mother scolded. “If she is ever hit, she will go flying out of the car.” She shuddered in horror for effect.

“Our girl is a safe driver, and the seatbelt is meant to hold her in.” My father kissed my mother on the cheek and whispered something in her ear. Her eyes lit up at whatever he said.

“You’re right. She is a good girl,” my mother said, stroking my hair.

“Great. Shall we go for a ride?” He handed me the keys and swept the bow to the ground.

After the customary checking out all the controls, I clicked my seatbelt and asked, “Where to?”

“Wherever the road takes us!” he joked. Leaning out of the car, he called to my mother, “Are you sure you won’t join us, Hill?”

“No, no, you two enjoy,” she responded.

“Head North,” he cried, and we were off.

I pulled out of the driveway and relived that day. Instead of taking the Interstate and arriving at our destination much faster, my father taught me how the coastal roads were energizing. It may have taken extra time, but the view of the ocean and the salt air whipping through my hair washed away all thoughts. There was nothing but the moment.

Driving down Coast Highway towards Carlsbad State Beach, I played the beach music that was gifted with the car. I could almost hear my father belting out a plea for Rhonda to save his broken heart. When I arrived at our favorite spot, I sat in the car, just staring at the ocean.

I was scared if I left the vehicle I would lose a piece of him. *He’s already gone. You can’t lose him again, Caitlyn.*

Forcing myself to face my fears, I walked towards the water. My heart was heavy, and my head filled with the unleashed tears drowning me.

Dipping my toes in the water, I heard a small voice cry out, “It is too cold, Daddy.”

A male voice responded, “Dip your toes in, little one. You’re entering the magical home of mermaids and the king of the sea.”

I heard the joyous laughter from my small self as he lifted and dipped my toes until I was comfortable enough to splash on my own. I would never hear his strong words of encouragement again. Before I could stop myself, a tear flowed down my face, and soon, I was sobbing uncontrollably.

When I finally composed myself, the sky was filled with the purple and orange hues of the sunset. I slowly breathed in and out, releasing my tension. Today, I said goodbye. I would not let myself lose control like this again. I would be the strong daughter he thought I was. I would make him proud.

THREE

By the time I pulled into the driveway, my home was dark. Entering through the garage, I found my mother sitting at the kitchen table with a stack of papers. The glow from the stove light gave her a ghostly reflection.

“Good, you’re home,” she said, quickly shoving the papers into an envelope. “We need to talk.”

“Is it about your appointment today?” I asked nervously.

“Yes, please sit.” She patted the table. As soon as I sat down, she was up getting food out of the fridge. “Let me warm this up for you. You must be hungry.”

“I’m not. Just tell me what is going on,” I said with an edge in my voice. Immediately, I regretted my tone. “Please, just sit and tell me. I can eat later.” I forced a smile and mimicked her patting the table.

“Oh, ok.” She sat down and began biting her bottom lip. “Today, I met with Mr. Charles.” She took in a deep breath. “Caitlyn, I can’t sugarcoat this. We need to move out of our home. We can’t afford living this lifestyle without your father.”

“But, he had life insurance. Savings? He always told me how important it was to be prepared,” I cried.

“Honey, your father spent more than he made. If... he hadn’t,” she quickly clamped her mouth shut.

“If he hadn’t what?” I asked.

“Your father made some risky investments. We are moving into Grandma Jane’s house. It has a great high school there, and you will be able to visit your friends.”

“You can’t be serious! My senior year, and you want me to start over at a new school?” I jumped up, knocking my chair over.

“Caitlyn, calm yourself,” my mother scolded.

“No, this is your fault,” I screamed, and ran to my bedroom.

I slammed the door for emphasis and threw myself onto my bed. This time I had no tears. The well was dry.

Not long after my tantrum, a small knock sounded on the door. I pinched my eyes shut, feigning sleep. The light from the hallway filled my room. I waited in anticipation.

After a few minutes, my mother softly said, “I’m sorry it has to be this way. I’ll do my best, Caity.”

I lay in bed, hearing her words, over and over. I was losing everything I knew in one fatal swoop. The reality of it all consumed me, and I willed myself to sleep. I needed to escape it all.

I woke suddenly. The alarm clock read 2:33 AM. My stomach growled. Today – no – yesterday, I had not bothered with food. I devoured grief instead.

Sleepily, I shuffled to the kitchen. In the fridge, I found a glass container with some tomato soup. I tossed the lid in the sink and put it in the microwave. As my food heated, I contemplated stopping the timer, but paused when I thought about a mouthful of cold broth. To pass the time, I poured myself a glass of iced tea, adding way too much lemon and sugar.

In the center of the table lay a manila envelope with the return address of Oxford & Charles, Attorneys at Law. *Does this explain why we are losing our house?* I picked up the envelope, and then quickly set it down. The beep of the microwave sounded, ending my debate.

I stared at the packet of papers in front of me as I ate my soup. It was

taunting me. *He was your father. You have a right to know*, it called.

Like a madwoman, I answered, “I want to know, but didn’t Pandora open a box once?”

It’s already opened. Just look, it called again.

“Fine, I’ll open it, so you will go away. I’ll be locked up if anyone hears me talking like this,” I said aloud, shoving my soup aside.

I pulled the papers out and carefully sorted through the pile. Past due credit cards. Bank statements. Our house mortgage. A second mortgage with a larger payment?

Searching for more details, I found an address in San Diego. Flipping through the papers, I found another sheet with the same address. It was closing documents.

Words popped out of the page. *Walking district of Bankers Hill. Mills Act*. I scanned to the end. It was signed by Judith Savage. I sighed with relief. The law office had messed up and put her paperwork in our envelope. It was understandable. After all, she was riding in the car with my father and died alongside him.

The easy explanation was squashed when I saw my father’s elegant signature listed under borrower. It made no sense. Did he help her buy a house?

“Caitlyn, put that away,” my mother hissed.

I ignored her and flipped to the next page. A purchase contract for a Porsche. Again, Judy and my father both signed as the borrowers. Before I understood what I was reading, it was ripped out of my hands.

“This is not your business,” my mother cried.

I lunged, trying to take it back.

“No!” she shrieked. “This is my problem.”

“Why did he buy her a car and house? What else is in there?” I asked.

She pulled a long lighter from a drawer and lit the papers on fire. Like a woman possessed, she shook the burning pile. “Leave it be, Caitlyn. Let his secrets die with him,” she pleaded.

When the fire began to burn out of control, she threw it into the sink and let it extinguish itself. I ran to save the papers. She couldn’t keep me from the truth.

As I neared her, my mother caught, and pulled, me into her arms.

“Nothing in there changes how much your father loved you. The only thing you can take from this is to never sit back and be the helpless woman. Always protect yourself... no matter how much you love the man.”

The night I found the envelope shattered me. Had my life been a lie? Every loving gesture, every moment was scrutinized. When my brain could handle no more, I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I found my mother in the kitchen. The woman of my childhood was before me once again, as if nothing had changed. She was perfectly posed to play Gregory Chase’s wife. Beautiful appearance. Immaculate house. Cheery disposition.

“Good morning, Caitlyn. I prepared a document for you with *all* the information you need to know about your father and Ms. Savage. We shall speak no further on the unsavory subject. We will remember Gregory as the perfect husband, father, and surgeon he was,” my mother said, handing me a square envelope.

I stared at it. *Caitlyn* was written in beautiful calligraphy. She even took the time to wax seal it with our family monogram. It seemed more like she was inviting me to a dinner party, not revealing the secrets of my unfaithful father.

“Come, sit and eat your breakfast. You can read that later,” she insisted, setting down a plate of my favorite Bananas Foster French toast, sprinkled with roasted pecans.

In a daze, I picked at my breakfast. The entire time, I eyed the envelope.

“Go ahead and open it. You won’t enjoy the meal I prepared until you get this over with,” my mother scolded and slid the letter closer to me.

My hands shook as I opened it and pulled out the single piece of textured paper from inside.

There were only six words. ***He loved you. Nothing Else Matters.*** All my questions were not answered. She decided to seal the issue, and I would never know the truth. Instead, my mother told me to forget what I saw.

Our eyes met, and I saw her desperation...her need for me to let it go. Was she right? Did nothing else matter? Suddenly, a huge weight was lifted from me. I understood.

It wasn't Hillary Chase avoiding the truth. It was how she preserved her sanity. Pressing my mother to answer questions about my father's indiscretions would not change the life we had before. It would only tear her apart... and maybe me, as well.

I slid the paper back into the envelope, closing this chapter of my life. Resting my hand on hers, I smiled, and said, "Thank you."

FOUR

One month later, we moved into my grandmother's house. It had not been occupied since her death, two years earlier. My childhood memories of spending time with her were ones I remembered fondly. Still, as much as I loved her cottage-style home, change is never easy.

The place I lived in had been three times the size of our new living space. My bedroom now felt more like a cell. I tried to be positive, telling myself it would be less than a year before I left for college. Not to mention, we were closer to my father's favorite beach. Still, I struggled.

Since the house was fully furnished, my mother insisted we only take the essentials, allowing us a couple of suitcases each. The executor of my father's will made arrangements for the sale of all property we left behind. The proceeds, along with his life insurance, would be used to pay off the majority of his debts. Anything that didn't sell would be donated to charity. Hillary Chase wanted to box it all up and forget that chapter of our life.

With encouragement from her friends, my mother decided to go into business for herself. The planner extraordinaire would put her talents to work. Event planning would be how we paid our bills.

My father had taught me that education was important if I wanted to succeed in life. The first three years of high school had been rigorous. I had met all my

required courses by the beginning of my senior year and was able to attend community college classes. The dual credits gave me a head start on my college years.

When I started at my new school, I was thankful my father had been so wise. I only had to feel like an outsider for half a day since my classes ended at one o'clock. As thankful as I was, I was irritated that my final class fell after the lunch break. I was a new girl, and the cafeteria was the perfect place to remind me of that. My only consolation was that I'd be able to escape before the masses did.

From day one, I made a point to be invisible. I didn't want to make new friends, and the old ones slowly stopped reaching out to me. I just wanted to get through this part of my life. I went to school and I kept to myself, but my attempt at isolation was futile once I met Thomas Martin.

It was a typical day. Like I had done for the last two weeks, I found a corner of the lunchroom unoccupied. There, I ate my fruit salad and read until the bell rang.

"Oh no, this won't do, Sweetie," a voice called, pulling me from my fantasy world.

My eyes met his. Thomas Martin was in my English class, but I had never spoken to him before today.

"Did I take your seat?" I asked, tucking my book into my backpack and picking up my lunch.

"Honey, you need a makeover. Let's go," the boy said, grabbing my hand.

Before I knew what was happening, I was letting a stranger drag me out of the cafeteria to the Dance classroom. We arrived at the massive room, and he dropped the bag onto the floor.

"Stand right there," Thomas commanded. He proceeded to dig through his duffle and frantically pulled out clothes, piling them into my arms. "Go change," he insisted.

When I didn't move, he pointed to the restroom. "Go on. The bell is going to ring, and I am not letting you leave until we fix this mess."

In the bathroom, I put on the short skirt, button-up top, and black jacket he

gave me. I stared at the black and white tie, unsure what I was supposed to do with it. I tried to tie it but gave up.

Thomas was dancing in front of the mirror when I returned to the room. There was no music. He finally noticed me and grinned. “Now, for the final touches.”

Holding up black thigh-high, heeled boots, he held them out like an offering to a queen. “You can walk in heels, right?”

I nodded before I really took in his question. By the time I did, I was unable to find the right words. “Can I walk in heels like these?”

Once again, I had no time to argue before Thomas was helping me slip into my new shoes. While I zipped up the boots, he slid the tie off my neck and wrapped it around my waist like a belt. I jumped back in surprise.

“Woah, Princess, you’re safe with me. You’re not my type.” He held up his hands in mock surrender.

My face must have shown my confusion.

“You’re missing the right equipment.”

I raised my eyebrows, still not getting his point.

“I’m gay,” he explained.

“Oh,” I fidgeted, unsure what the appropriate response to his declaration was.

“It’s not a secret, Caity Cat, but I don’t run around waving my pride flag.” He laughed and hugged me.

Leading me to a chair, he pulled out beauty products and wildly began to brush my hair. I caught a glimpse of the high ponytail he was creating before he began to apply powder to my face. With the skill of a makeup artist, he brushed, lined, and blushed.

The warning bell sounded, and Thomas stopped me from leaving. “No worries. We’ll have time. My masterpiece is not finished yet.” Holding out a burgundy lipstick, he said, “Kiss me.”

“Um,” I wriggled in my chair.

Sticking out his lips in an exaggerated pucker, he waved the lipstick. Understanding, I laughed and obeyed. When he finished lining my lips, he

dragged me to the mirror.

“Welcome to the new you, honey. Gone are the sad days. I just know we’ll be the best of friends.” He grinned and hugged me again.

FIVE

Thomas was right. From that day forward, we became inseparable. I found a best friend and a new group of friends. It made me sad my old classmates were out of the picture, but I didn't have much time to dwell on it.

The first time I brought Thomas home to meet my mother, he charmed her. She doted on him like he was my boyfriend. I was nervous to tell her why Thomas would only be 'just a friend.'

One day, after he left, I decided to address the situation.

"Mom, I have something to tell you." I cleared my throat, and then blurted it out, "Thomas is gay."

My mother raised her eyebrows at me and laughed. "The best ones usually are, dear. Did you really think I wouldn't know? One would have to be blind and deaf not to know this."

"You're okay with it?"

"It is none of my business. Thomas is a wonderful boy. I am so happy you found such a good friend."

With her acceptance, our relationship only grew stronger. Weeks passed, and Thomas became a fixture in our lives. He would come home with me after school and eat dinner with us. He was an instant family member... the brother I

would never have.

One evening, as Thomas was leaving, my mother stopped him. “I would like you to come over for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Of course, Mrs. Chase. Seven o’clock early enough?” Thomas asked.

“Sleep in and join us at eight. It is the weekend, dear.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows in question? I shrugged and mouthed, “No idea.”

The door closed. “Why is he coming to breakfast?” I questioned.

“I want to talk to him about the situation.” I was surprised my ostrich-of-a-mother wanted to talk about an issue, instead of burying her head in the sand.

The next morning, Thomas arrived for breakfast and found a Hillary Chase feast.

“Caitlyn, why don’t you take your plate to your room or the patio,” my mother suggested.

“But,” I began to argue.

Thomas grinned. “I think that is a great idea, Mrs. Chase—”

“Hillary,” my mother corrected.

Thomas made a shooing motion at me. “Hill and I have so much to learn about each other.” Then, he linked his arm with her and winked.

My mother blushed like a schoolgirl at his affectionate behavior.

I began to choke on the sip of orange juice I had taken.

“Maybe the patio would be a better choice, so we can watch you,” my mother said with a serious tone.

They exchanged a look and burst into laughter. Through the window, I watched the two of them eat and talk. From that day on, Thomas was the son my mother never had, and she was the mother he always wanted. The amazing thing about Thomas was that he kept the two relationships separate. He never broke my mother’s confidences and promised mine were just as sacred.

The downside of their bond was now I had two people worried about my social life. Both my mother and Thomas constantly prodded me with questions about why I wasn’t dating. How could I explain to them that I was so content in my new world that I had no interest in dating? Besides, I always made excuses

when I was asked out, so the boys eventually gave up on me.

The day before Christmas break, I had been in a hurry to get home and had forgotten the novel I had just started. Not wanting to leave the magical world behind, I threw everything into my car but rushed towards the school.

“Wrong way, Cat,” Thomas scolded.

“I need to grab something from my locker,” I called.

Distracted, I hadn’t noticed the red ribbon hanging from the vent. It wasn’t until I flung the door open and a red envelope swung at me that I noticed. Someone had slipped the present into my cabinet. The handwriting on the front was unfamiliar.

“What is taking you so long?” Thomas huffed. When he saw what was in my hand, he snatched it from me, and asked, “What is this?”

Taking it back, I glared. “I have no idea since you ripped it out of my hands.”

“Go on then. Open it,” he ordered.

Inside the crimson envelope, I found a card with Santa Claus on the front. Between the covers, there was a silver charm bracelet with a heart. The engraving read: “Please Return to Tiffany & Co, New York 925”.

“Who’s it from? No one has ever bought me a present from Tiffany’s,” Thomas gasped.

“I don’t know,” I said, handing it to him.

“Ooohh, “You’re on my nice list,” Thomas mocked reading the card aloud. “Isn’t he creative?”

“It is sweet,” I said, taking it back. “Now, shut up and help me put on the bracelet.”

I wore the bracelet every day even though I never found out who gave it to me. Thomas and I speculated on who it could’ve been, but we never found the mystery man. It wasn’t until Valentine’s Day arrived that I received anything further, compounding the mystery.

The day had been a cupid-filled hell. Love was alive, and the dreaded flower distribution came and went, without one having my name on it. I wasn’t dating anyone, so I don’t know what I expected. When I arrived at my locker, I found a square envelope pushed almost all the way through. Inside was a compact disc

with the words '*How I feel about you*' written in sharpie.

I looked around to see if anyone was watching me. The hallways were empty, except for an elderly janitor. There was no way he was my secret admirer. He was so focused on scraping gum off the ground that I doubted he would pay any attention to a student at a locker.

I waited until I was home before I listened to the disc. The songs ranged from pop crush songs to dedications of love. The next day, I gave it to Thomas, in hopes he could decipher the clue that had to be hidden in the playlist. Once again, we hit a dead end.

With my secret admirer unknown, I became more interactive with those around me. This new attitude released the silenced suitors, and I was being asked out again. I accepted every date, hoping to find out who had given me the gifts.

Every weekend, I went on one or two dates, but no one even hinted they were interested in me. Growing tired of trying to figure it out, I gave up on solving the mystery and just enjoyed the final months of my senior year of high school.

In April, Senior Prom fever began, and I became swept up in it. Thomas and I agreed to go with another friend, Beatrice, and forego waiting to be asked. However, our plan was canceled with a single red rose.

SIX

At the end of class, two weeks before prom, I arrived at my locker to find a red rose taped to the door. When I turned to see if anyone was watching, Christopher Ross appeared. He was holding a sign that simply read: PROM?

“Sorry for the late invite,” he stepped forward and removed the rose, holding it out, and asked, “What do you think?”

“I... uh... I mean,” I stuttered.

“I know you already made plans to go with Thomas and Bea, but if it’s cool with you, I could join you.” He stepped so close I was sure he heard my rapid heartbeat. “Say yes, and I promise you’ll have a night you’ll never forget.”

“Okay,” I relented.

“I’ll call you this evening to confirm the details.” Christopher leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. Without waiting for my response, he turned and walked away.

I leaned against my locker, dazed. *Did I just get asked out by the hottest guy in school?*

“Did you just kiss Christopher Ross?” Thomas squealed. My best friend rushed in and began his rapid-firing questions at me. “Is he the mystery man? What did he want? Is that rose from him?”

“I... I don’t know what just happened, but I am going to prom with him,” I blurted out.

Thomas frowned.

“I mean we are going to prom - you, Bea, Christopher, and me,” I corrected.

Linking his arm in mine, he screeched, “Ooh, you must tell me all. Let’s get a java on our way home.” Thomas danced around me as if we were already at Prom. Grabbing my hand, he twirled me. “Ross is connected. Prom is going to be amazing.”

Christopher Ross was the typical Cali boy: good-looking, blonde locks, blue eyes, tan and fit. Besides his gorgeous appearance, he was also smart and dedicated to his studies. His father was a big-shot lawyer who gave it all up to be a law firm administrator. He came from a family of old money, but Christopher never made you feel like he was better than you.

On the day of prom, Bea, Thomas, and I spent our time getting ready at my house with my mother fluttering around us. She was as excited about our evening as we were. When Christopher showed up with the limo to pick us up, I thought my mother would faint.

We piled into the limo laughing. I was glad Thomas suggested inviting Bea. She would keep Thomas busy, so I could focus on Christopher.

The first stop was at a fancy steakhouse on the beach, where we were greeted by an overzealous maître d’.

“Mr. Christopher, we are so pleased you have chosen to dine with us,” he gushed.

“Thank you, Zachery,” Christopher said nonchalantly. “I hope the requests I made are still available.”

“Of course, of course, follow me,” he answered.

We were led through the crowded dining room. Several waitstaff joined us, and soon the other diners were staring at us, their reactions clearly expressing their thoughts. *Who is that? Movie stars? Probably rich kids.*

Instead of seating us at a table in the dining room, we were brought to an elegant and secluded space. The table was laid with golden silverware, fine china, and bouquets of flowers everywhere.

Christopher pulled my seat out for me. “Are you okay with us being separated from the rest of the diners?”

“This is fantastic, Christopher,” I praised.

Both Thomas and Bea eagerly chimed in with their enthusiastic agreement.

The waiter appeared with a bottle of wine and offered it to Christopher for approval. As if he were an expert wine taster, he sniffed, swirled, and sipped before nodding his consent. Then, without question, everyone at the table was poured their own glass.

I was so nervous about getting arrested for underage drinking that I only took a small, polite sip. Thomas and Bea seemed unaware that the legal drinking age was twenty-one and drank theirs quickly.

Sensing my fear, Christopher whispered, “This is a private event. No one is watching. You can drink your wine and enjoy your meal. I would never do anything to hurt you, Caitlyn.”

He handed me my drink and held his own up. “To my new friends and a night of memories.”

After dinner, I was feeling a bit buzzed. I snuggled in the limo next to Christopher, where we talked about our plans for the next year. Christopher had decided to go to school in New York while the rest of us were going to stay in San Diego. I had dreams of being an author one day, or an English professor, and Christopher would follow in his father’s footsteps.

As the limo approached the school, Christopher pulled out a bottle of champagne. When he popped the cork, he sent a stream of alcohol that soaked Bea’s shoes.

“God, I’m a doofus,” Christopher apologized. Digging through the mini fridge, he grabbed two bottles of water and offered them to Thomas. “Hey, man, why don’t you help her rinse off her shoes? If she reeks of booze, they won’t let you in.”

“I’ll help,” I said and started to follow.

Christopher grabbed my wrist gently. “At least have a toast to our night with me before we go in,” he suggested. “I always feel more relaxed after a little bubbly.”

Thomas had the situation under control, and I wanted to spend more time with Christopher, so I agreed. I dreamt of him kissing me all week. *This might be the perfect moment*, I realized as he handed me a glass.

“To us.”

The bubbling liquid tickled my nose as I took a small drink.

Christopher leaned in close and twisted my bracelet. “I’m glad you still like my gift. I worried that it wouldn’t be your taste.”

Surprised, I gasped. “You were the one?”

“Is that okay with you, Caitlyn?” he whispered in my ear.

“Yes, but why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

“I like the surprise,” he said seductively.

Then, my hopes came true because he kissed me. Gently at first, and then deeper, more intoxicating. My mind was moving too fast. I had thoughts of being his girlfriend, of changing my college plans to be closer to him. Like a silly schoolgirl, I thought, *this must be what love feels like*.

Our passion was interrupted by the door flinging open, and Thomas shouting, “All cleaned up. Let’s dance.”

Christopher groaned but said, “Just a second, and we’ll join you.”

Thomas smirked at me and closed the door again.

Christopher poured us another glass of champagne, and though he drank his quickly, I only sipped a bit.

Eyeing my drink, he said, “Looks like you’re done. We better head in or Thomas will waste all of his good moves out here.”

I laughed as I saw my friends dancing on the lawn to the music emitting from the school.

The gym was decorated in silver. It had a science fiction feel to it. We walked

through smoke machines as we entered the loud and crowded gym.

Christopher led me to the dance floor, and soon our small group was moving to the beat of the music. It felt like I was in a dream. Christopher spun me around. When I stumbled from the height of my heels, he caught me.

“You’re a lightweight.” He laughed and pulled me close to him. A sudden urge to kiss him filled me, and soon we were making out.

Thomas bumped into us and laughed, “Get a room, you two.”

A rush of heat filled me. It felt as if my body was on fire from the inside out. I swatted at him and fanned myself. “It is too hot in here. I need air.”

“Are you okay, Cat?” Thomas grabbed my hand.

“Just need water,” I said. Pulling away from him, I forced my way out of the crowd.

“I’ll take care of her. She probably needs something to eat. She picked at her dinner,” I heard Christopher say.

It felt like I was in a tunnel. There were lights and faces everywhere. I found myself at the refreshment table, where I immediately picked up a heavily frosted cupcake and began to devour it. I remembered thinking that heat and alcohol didn’t mix.

“You have a bit on your cheek,” Christopher laughed. He wiped my face before kissing me. “Mmm...vanilla, my favorite.”

When we returned to the dance floor, meeting up with Thomas and Bea again, I felt the heat from my best friend’s anger.

“She never drinks. How much have you given her?” Thomas grilled Christopher.

“*She* had the same as you and one sip of champagne. I am having a fantastic evening, and you don’t need to be a bitch about it,” I hissed.

Thomas’ face fell, and I immediately regretted my harsh words. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I began to flood his cheek with kisses.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered in his ear. “I am having the best night ever. Please, let me enjoy it.”

He squeezed me tight and kissed me on the lips. Turning to Christopher, he said, “Make sure you take care of her. This girl deserves to be treated like a

queen.”

Christopher shook Thomas’ hand and patted him on the back. “I get it. You’re like a big brother. I’ll look after her, and no more booze,” he promised.

As the evening shut down, couples danced to the final slow song. The night had gone by too fast. I didn’t want to leave Christopher’s arms.

“I have never met anyone like you, Caitlyn.” Christopher cupped my face in his hands and then kissed me gently.

Our magic moment was broken when the main lights were turned on, and the custodians began their clean-up.

Reluctantly, we returned to the limo. Everyone looked a little worse for wear but content. Bea kept checking her cell phone, visually upset.

“What’s going on, Bea?” Thomas asked.

“My parents are freaking out and want me to come straight home. I’m sorry. Can you drop me off first?” Bea bit her lip nervously.

“No problem. Sucks that you won’t be able to hang out longer. I have had a great time with my new friends,” Christopher replied. My heart melted a bit more. He was so sweet.

“We should drop Thomas off before me,” I whispered in Christopher’s ear. “I want to spend more time with you.”

He nodded, and then texted a message to the driver.

As the driver missed the turn-in to my house, Thomas’ face grew confused. “Hey, man, you missed a stop,” he called to the driver.

“It’s ok,” Christopher soothed. “Once you’re tucked in, I’ll get Caitlyn home.”

I could tell Thomas wanted to argue with him. Our eyes met, and I pleaded with him, silently, to not make a big deal.

Thomas glared at me.

I mouthed the words, *please don’t be mad*.

I watched his anger melt, and he shrugged in defeat.

Thank you, I mouthed.

“Oh, ok, that’s cool,” he shrugged. Reaching into the mini fridge, he pulled out a bottle of beer and grinned. “For the road.”

Both boys laughed. Joy filled me. Thomas and Christopher had to get along. My best friend and my new boyfriend would be spending a lot of time together.

When it was time to say goodbye to Thomas, I walked him to the door.

“Are you going straight home?” he questioned.

“I’m not sure. I would like to get to know Christopher better,” I admitted.

“Call me when you get in,” he insisted.

“No, don’t wait up. I’ll call you in the morning,” I said and hugged my friend tight.

SEVEN

When I returned to the limo, Christopher handed me a bottle of water. “Drink up.”

I took a long sip and then smiled. “Now, what do you have planned?”

“Straight home,” he said with a stern expression. Christopher laughed when he saw my smile fade. “I’m just joking, my beauty. I thought we could go for a walk on the beach.”

I beamed at his suggestion. It was as if he was reading my mind. The ocean would be the perfect place to learn more about my future boyfriend. The chauffeur carried out a basket and blankets to the sand.

After the driver laid out everything, Christopher said, “Travis, we’ll be here a bit. Feel free to take a break and return in an hour or so.”

The man nodded and accepted a folded stack of cash. He grinned as he shoved the money into his pocket. “You have my number if you need me earlier, sir.”

Christopher nodded and waved the young man away. He sat on the blanket and patted it. Reaching into the basket, he withdrew its contents and put out a spread of cheese, crackers, and fruit.

“All of that dancing builds up an appetite.” He prepared a small nibble and fed it to me. As I chewed the delicious concoction, he smiled. “Do you like it?”

I covered my mouth and politely answered, “I do.”

We shared the food and continued our conversation about our future plans. I

was shocked this perfect person was interested in me. I kept waiting to find out what was wrong with him. Did he have a dark secret? An irritating quirk?

I could not find one thing I did not like about him. Even kissing him seemed like a fairytale dream. Before I knew it, the hour had passed, and I was even more smitten with Christopher. I felt cheated when the driver returned.

“I guess it is time to go,” Christopher smiled.

I got up and brushed the sand off myself. Christopher slipped his arm around my waist and began to dance with me. We laughed, and he kissed me. I let our passion grow, and soon we were both breathing heavily.

The sound of a throat clearing broke us up. “Looks like you’re having an enchanted evening, Miss,” the driver said.

“I am,” I answered honestly. “This has been the best night of my life.”

Christopher scooped me into his arms. I laughed and put on a show of mock protest as he carried me to the limo. Inside the vehicle, we continued our make-out session. I considered the idea of making love to him but brushed the thought away quickly. I barely knew Christopher. My desire didn’t matter anyway. He was a gentleman, and I was not that girl. I would not lose my virginity in the back of any vehicle. My first time would be special.

My contemplation quickly ended as the sweet moment of heat suddenly turned urgent. I went from never wanting our passionate kissing to end to feeling like his tongue was choking me. When I pushed him back, he slowed his aggressive kisses. I felt an urge to scream and flee, but I told myself I was just being crazy.

Denying to myself how forceful he had been moments before, I fell into the magic moment of our kiss again. His hand, set gently on my thigh, slowly began to creep, traveling further up my leg. Before I comprehended what was happening, he slipped a finger into my panties and yanked them down.

“No,” I cried out.

My words were silenced as his mouth covered mine roughly. He kissed me

harder. I beat on his chest. I couldn't breathe. I didn't want him to touch me anymore. The reality flooded over me. I found out his flaw. When he lifted off me long enough for me to catch my breath, I scrambled as far away from him as I could.

"No, I don't want this. I want to go home," I cried.

"I thought I would get a glimpse of it on the beach, but you disappointed me. What, I am not good enough to get the Chase treatment? I am handsome enough, rich enough. Why are you holding back with me?" He slid closer to me. "You don't have to pretend to be the sweet virgin. Everyone knows what a fun girl you are. Why, you're the talk of the school, Caitlyn."

Stunned, I didn't know what to say, except, "No!"

"Seth told everyone how your movie theatre date went. He called you his little Alanis. I prefer a bit more full body contact, but I wouldn't have objected to such an appetizer."

"What? He was lying. We didn't even kiss," I exclaimed.

"I don't believe you. You were supposed to be special. I gave you gifts. I tried to romance you. Instead, I found out what you really are – a whore."

"I didn't know the gifts were from you." *Did he ask me to prom because of the lies?*

Christopher's lip curled up in disgust. "Have you fucked the entire school by now, or are there a few left on your list?"

I began to object, but he put his pointer finger on my mouth, silencing me.

"Did you think the guys you dated wouldn't swap stories about Caitlyn Chase, and how the dirty slut would do it anywhere?"

"I promise I never had sex with any of them. They are lying about me," I exclaimed, pushing his hand away. "I've never –"

"I don't believe you," he said, voice void of emotion.

He unzipped his pants, exposing himself. I looked away. *This is not real. You are dreaming.* He pulled a condom out of his pocket and ripped the foil off with his teeth. With a steely expression, he covered himself.

I stared in shock at the person in front of me. I was frozen in fear. My inner voice screamed, *Run! Get out and run!* I took a deep breath before I lunged at

the door, struggling to open it.

He grabbed my foot and dragged me back to him. Pushing me face down onto the leather, he shoved my dress up to my neck and pinned me down with a strength I did not expect. He ran his fingers over me.

I began to scream for help.

He grabbed my hair and pushed my face deeper into the seat. I struggled, but I couldn't fight him off. Soon, I couldn't get any air. My lungs burned. I didn't choose to stop fighting, but I had no more strength.

"I'll let go of you if you settle down." His hand gently stroked my hair. As my cries calmed, he softly whispered, "Now, be a good girl. I won't talk like the others did."

He lifted off me and gently sat me up. He wrapped his arms around me and stared into my face.

I blinked the tears away. He wasn't going to hurt me. I would make him understand. Staring into Christopher's blue lifeless eyes, I knew I was wrong.

The next words I heard would haunt me for the rest of my life. "I hope you were worth the wait."

Christopher closed his eyes and began to kiss my neck and breasts. It was not romantic or tender. I turned out of his arms and tried to escape again. This time when he pushed me facedown into the leather, my mind went into protection mode. I tried to block out what was happening.

I stared at the blue lights and the crystal glasses on the bar as if they would save me. I was not there. This was a horrible nightmare.

Christopher dug his fingers into my flesh as he gripped and lifted my hips. I couldn't pretend I wasn't being attacked when my entire body filled with a sudden burning sensation, as he jabbed himself inside me. The more I cried out, the harder his movements became.

He grabbed my hair and pulled me back to him. "Shh, it will feel better if you just relax," he whispered in my ear. "You're so beautiful. God, you feel amazing. Just like they said, you're tight like a virgin."

He is doing this because a bunch of boys lied about me?

I closed my eyes and prayed for him to stop. Every violent movement

seemed as if it was cutting my soul. Finally, it ended with him convulsing and collapsing on me. He lay on me breathing heavily.

“Why did you have to be such a whore, Caitlyn? We could have had something special,” he whispered.

When I thought I could no longer hold in my terror, he composed himself and lifted off me. I remained still, afraid to move.

“Get up and cover yourself,” he growled.

I didn’t move fast enough, so he yanked me into a sitting position and pulled down my dress to cover me. I tugged on it, trying to fix it myself. I willed the fabric to grow like a cocoon and protect me.

“Drink,” he commanded. He pressed a water bottle to my hand.

I didn’t move.

Angrily, he grabbed it from me and twisted the cap off. He shoved it back into my hand, squeezing the bottle and covering me with the icy liquid. I let out a small squeak of surprise, and he took that opportunity to pour it into my mouth. I submitted and swallowed the drink before he drowned me.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked. “I liked you so much.”

“You like me? Don’t you like everyone?” he snarled. “It doesn’t matter. Sluts like you are available everywhere. There are plenty of clean girls who *like me*. You disappointed me. You could have been someone special to me. Instead, you turned out to be another very expensive piece of ass. I’ll expect payment in full for the gifts and other expenses for this evening.” He laughed as if he was telling me a joke. His cold laughter rippled through me.

“Please take me home,” I pleaded. “I won’t tell anyone what happened.”

His face had a vacant look. My words were futile. He couldn’t hear me. The voice that came out of him was unfamiliar. “You were such a good girl the first time. I think we’ll have a bit more fun before I tuck you into your bed.”

A wave of nausea rolled over me. I began gagging, and he grabbed my hair and shoved a trash can under my face. “Get puke in my limo and you’re dead.”

The contents of my stomach emptied as I violently retched. When there was no more inside, he handed me water.

“Swish and spit.”

After, he took the bucket, I heard gravel under the tires, and the vehicle began to slow. Everything became blurry and blocks of black flashed before my eyes.

The limo stopped, and the door flung open. Travis peered in.

“Help me,” I groggily called out.

Leaning in towards me, his face grew with concern. “You need my help, Miss?”

“Yes, please. He...” I couldn’t say it out loud.

He held out his hand to me, and I quickly grasped it. I clung to my savior. Christopher followed close behind.

“Is this true, Mr. Christopher? Does Miss Chase need help?” Travis held me close to him.

For one moment, I thought I was saved. The driver smiled down on me, and both men began to laugh.

The driver grabbed my arm and leaned in close to my face. “I’d love to help you, if you suck my dick.”

I recoiled in fear, but there was nowhere to go. Christopher grabbed my other elbow, and both men carried me towards a three-story beach house. The sound of waves crashing against the beach filled me with fear. He was going to kill me and throw me in the ocean.

As we reached the doorway of the home, I tried to jerk away from them, but I was held harder.

“You have a feisty one tonight,” Travis said.

Christopher shrugged. “She should quiet down when the G kicks in. You will be paid well at the end of the night, so get your hands off my fucking date. I like my girls clean.”

The driver rolled his eyes and pulled a vial out of his pocket. With his pointer finger and thumb, he made an ‘L’ and shook a bit of white powder into the curve. He quickly snorted the particles. With the cap back on the container, he tossed it.

Christopher caught it and shoved it into his pocket.

“Go now. We are going to party, and you have a limo to clean out,” Christopher growled.

The driver glared and slammed the sliding glass door.

“Wait, I need my CD. Go get it,” Christopher screamed.

“Fuck, can’t you just put on the radio?” the driver yelled.

I began to cry. A few minutes later, Travis returned with a CD case.

“Set it up and get out. Tonight is not a party for three,” Christopher snapped before turning his attention back to me. “It is time to get serious. I want the full works. Give me a show like you gave Steve Louis.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I sobbed.

He pulled my dress down, exposing me. “No need to be coy. Get on my lap and grind on me like you got off Andy Lester. Joe McGuire said you were insatiable.”

“I didn’t do any of that. Please believe me,” I begged.

“I wasn’t planning on sharing you with Travis, but if you don’t start behaving, I might change my mind. He won’t be as sweet to you as I will. He likes screamers.” Christopher went to the bar and poured two drinks.

I tried to contain my sobs. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“This will help you calm down.” He held a glass to me.

I accepted it with a trembling hand.

He sat down on a grey leather couch and downed his glass. “Be a gracious guest and drink, Caitlyn.”

I started to protest. He jumped up and slapped me across the face. Shaking, I began drinking. I gagged on the strong taste. I wasn’t going fast enough for him, so he tilted the glass back until I swallowed every last drop. Finished, he threw the glass on the floor and pulled the vial out of his pocket.

“Strip for me,” he demanded.

When I didn’t move, he called, “I’ll have Travis help you.”

I trembled uncontrollably but obeyed. Once again, I didn’t move fast enough, so he yanked me down onto the couch. I cried out in pain. He removed my remaining clothing and leered at me.

“Don’t move.” He shook out two lines of white powder across my stomach. He rolled up a hundred-dollar bill and leaned in to snort up the lines.

“Where did you get this shit, Travis?” he called. “Weak as hell.”

Travis responded by turning the music up. I tried to see where the driver was hiding. Fear filled me. *_Is the driver watching? _Is he going to hurt me, also?*

Christopher drew another line on me and quickly snorted it. When he finished, he looked down at me with interest. Once again, Christopher climbed on top of me.

Everything was fuzzy. I kept coming in and out of consciousness. I began to cry as I realized the music playing was the same soundtrack he had given me.

The last thing I remembered was him saying, “Just be quiet and you’ll enjoy it.”

Off and on, I came into consciousness, and each time, I wished I hadn’t. It was like I was a puppet, and he was reconstructing my alleged sins. I had no concept of time, but eventually, whatever he had given to me was wearing off. The last time I woke, I found Christopher passed out next to me.

I slid off the bed and searched for my clothes. There wasn’t one piece of clothing in the room. Desperate to get away, I decided I would find something to wear when I was safe. I was so focused on escaping that I didn’t see Travis when I opened the door.

“Ah, Ah, Ah,” Travis said, wagging his finger at me. “Christopher, we have a runner,” he called out.

Groggily, Christopher stumbled towards me. “Shower,” he ordered.

Understanding the directive, Travis picked me up and carried me, kicking and screaming, to the shower. He tossed me in and turned on the water. Ice-cold water poured on me.

I shrieked.

He responded by turning the water all the way too hot.

I screamed as I tried to move out of the scalding stream.

Christopher reached in and turned the water to warm. “No marks, fucker,” he said, and punched Travis. Ignoring me trembling in the corner, he slipped in the shower and let the water run over his body.

“Don’t worry. I won’t compare notes with the guys,” he promised. “I’ve reconsidered, and I want to give you a chance to be my girlfriend.”

I began to cry, and he wrapped his arms around me. It was as if the night had never happened.

“Shh,” he murmured in my ear. “I forgive you. You will be a sweet girl from now on. Let’s clean you up and get you home.”

After I was cleaned to his standards, he towel-dried me and brushed my hair.

“Have a seat,” he said, pointing to the nearby vanity.

When I shivered, he wrapped a robe around me. Carefully, he applied makeup to my face, telling me how beautiful I was. Before putting on the lipstick, he kissed me tenderly.

I looked out the window and saw that the sun was rising. *Had I dreamed everything?* I drifted in and out of consciousness as I tried to piece everything together. Suddenly, I jerked forward as the limo stopped suddenly. Confusion flooded me. I had no idea how I went from the house to being fully dressed and riding in the limo again.

Christopher smiled sweetly from the seat across from me. “I need to remember, the next time we go out, that champagne is a bit much for you. You were hallucinating as if you were on drugs. Do you take drugs, Caitlyn?” He kept talking as if he hadn’t spent the evening violating me. “I’m glad you are sober enough now to go home.”

My body ached in ways I never felt before. I hadn’t dreamed anything. “What did you do to me?” I hissed.

“Nothing you didn’t beg for,” he said, still using a syrupy sweet voice.

A sudden memory of him covering my mouth until I gasped for air filled me. I heard him saying, “Tell me you want it,” and my own voice saying, “I want you.”

“I didn’t ask for...” my voice broke. Bile filled my throat. I had to get away from him.

My prayers were answered when the limo stopped. Travis opened the door and grinned at me. Christopher got out and shoved his friend out of the way, then held his hand out to me. I refused to take it.

Pulling his hand back in mock retreat, he stepped back. I grabbed my things and rushed to the door. Christopher followed. As I fumbled with the keys, he grabbed my face and kissed me.

I slapped him across the face. "You will never touch me again. I am going to tell everyone what you did."

"You're going to tell everyone you threw yourself at me, in front of hundreds of our classmates, and that you made me drive your friend home first, so you could seduce me? You think your little boyfriends won't confirm what a whore you are?"

"They lied, and you drugged me."

"No one will believe you. There is no evidence," he boasted, as if we weren't talking about his planned assault on me. He took the keys from me and opened the door.

I tried to get into the safety of my home, but he grabbed my wrist.

"Thank you for the lovely evening, Caitlyn. We can do it again sometime." He dropped the keys into my hand and released me.

I shoved past him into the house and shut the door. I turned, bolted every lock, and then rushed around, making sure all entrances were sealed.

When I was safe in my room, I locked the door to make sure he couldn't get to me. I closed my eyes and slid down it, trying to block out the memories of my broken evening. He was right. No one would believe me. I had thrown myself at him.

The darkness filled me again, and I slipped into unconsciousness. I woke to the sound of my mother. I quickly ripped off everything I was wearing, including the bracelet, and threw it in the wastebasket. I stared at myself in the mirror.

He had not left any marks. The only proof of his assault was soreness, an aching feeling throughout my body. I turned the shower to the hottest temperature I could stand, and I scrubbed every inch of my body. When the water finally ran cold, I dried myself off, dressed in my warmest pajamas, and

climbed into bed.

Hours later, I was woken by my mother and the sweet smell of pancakes.

“Wake up, sleepyhead, and tell me about your evening. It’s almost two o’clock,” my mother’s singsong voice chirped, adding to my throbbing headache.

I was afraid that Christopher and the driver would return, but whatever drug he gave me knocked me out.

My mother fussed around my room, and when she made a move towards the bathroom, I jumped up. My dress was in the trash. If she found it, I would have to tell her everything.

“It was a long night. I’ll get dressed and join you. Can I have French toast instead of pancakes?” I requested.

My ever-accommodating mother beamed at my request. “Of course, dear. Any special toppings?”

“Surprise me.” I forced a smile.

“Oh, I have another surprise waiting for you,” she called out as she walked away.

“I can’t handle any more surprises, Mother,” I mumbled.

I showered again after hiding my garbage in my backpack. I would dispose of anything that was connected to that monster. He took my virginity. He stole the prom memories that would have been perfect. He broke me.

If you hadn’t been such an eager whore, I scolded myself. As if the devil and the angel from old cartoons were dueling on my shoulder, I suddenly found myself saying, “I didn’t ask for what he did. I was the victim. Those boys lied.”

Returning to the kitchen, I found a crystal vase filled with four dozen red roses. I stared at the bouquet.

“Is it from Christopher, dear?” my mother asked. “He is such a nice boy. What a lovely gesture.”

The room began to spin, and I forced myself to sit.

“Aren’t you going to read the card?” my mother prodded.

I had to decide, here and now. Was I going to tell her the truth or lock it away? Deciding I couldn’t let her be hurt also, I picked up the white envelope and slipped out the tiny card. *Beautiful flowers for my beautiful girl. To our future. Love, Christopher.*

I stared at the words. He had to be insane. Did he think the evening we spent was consensual bliss? *How will I face him at school? How will I face all of the boys that had lied about me?*

“He got the beautiful right,” Thomas said, appearing over my shoulder.

Something in me exploded. I pushed myself up, knocking the chair over, as I picked up the flower arrangement. I wanted it gone, but I didn’t know what to do with it. The world decided for me as it slipped from my hands and crashed to the floor. I tried to catch it, but instead, ended up with a handful of thorns.

“Oh my,” my mother cried as she rushed in. “What a waste. I’ll try to save them, Caitlyn. Don’t move. I’ll go get the broom.”

“What is going on, Cat?” Thomas whispered.

“Get them away from me,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “I don’t want them.”

“Cat, you need to tell...Oh honey, you’re bleeding,” he said, taking the roses by the flower. “Let’s go clean you up.”

When my mother returned, she saw my injury. “Caitlyn, let me –”

“I got it, Hill. We’ll go into Cat’s bathroom and clean her up. A bit of the glass got her.” He looked at the mess and frowned. “I mean, if you can handle this?”

My mother daintily began picking up the flowers. “Of course, of course – take care of Caitlyn.” She barely looked up to send us off.

When both bedroom and bathroom doors were shut and locked, Thomas held my hand under cool water, washing away the blood. He led me to the edge of the tub and began to dry my wounds off.

“What happened, Cat?” he asked. His voice was so sweet and caring that I instantly burst into tears.

“He raped me.” I wasn’t sure if the words had actually been said out loud, so I repeated them. “Christopher raped me.”

Thomas’ grey eyes blazed with fury. “That son of a bitch. We need to call the police.” He pulled his cell out of his pocket.

I grabbed his hand. “You can’t.”

Relenting, he returned his phone to his pocket and dragged me into the walk-in closet. The same place we shared all our deepest secrets. Triple door barriers contained our private conversations.

Thomas sat down in the middle of the floor and patted the plush carpet. “Tell me what happened, Cat. You were having so much fun when we left.”

I sat down across from him and grabbed his hands. I retold the events of the evening. Thomas’ rage turned to pity. When I finished, he blinked away tears and pulled me into his arms.

“I’m sorry I didn’t protect you. I’ll fix this.” Thomas held tight and stroked my hair. “I won’t let anyone hurt you ever again, Cat. I love you.”

When I had no more tears to cry, we left our sanctuary for the last time. The secrets I told on that day filled the closet. There would be no more room for more confessions in this once sacred space.

Thomas fulfilled his promise. The roses were gone, and my mother never mentioned Christopher or Prom again. When I asked Thomas how he had achieved this, he replied, “I told her you caught him making out with another girl at Prom and how he thought he could get away with it.”

How well my friend knew what made my mother click.

Returning to school on Monday, I did my best to avoid Christopher. He didn’t speak to me, but I felt him watching me. When I did dare to look, he grinned and blew me a kiss. Chills ran through me. I wasn’t safe from him.

I made sure I was never alone. I didn’t know if he would grab me and hurt

me again. Every day, I struggled with wanting to report him, and knowing no one would believe me. Anger filled me as I thought about how I had been lured into his trap.

Christopher was not my only attacker. The boys who lied about me set me up. They should pay for what they did, but who would believe me? What would the cost be to my life? My mother's?

With one week left of school, an idea came to mind. It was so crazy I knew I couldn't even tell Thomas my plan.

EIGHT

“Hey, Seth,” I leaned against his locker. “We had such a good time on our first date. Why haven’t you asked me out again?”

Seth’s eyes shone with excitement. “Because I am stupid,” he chuckled. “We should go out again. How about —”

“Tonight.” I moved closer to him. His muscles tensed. “It’s Friday night.” I pressed my mouth close to his ear and breathily whispered, “Our last date ended too quickly. We have so much more to *talk* about.”

I kissed his cheek and walked away. I needed to get far away from him before I slapped him across the face and caused a scene.

“Text me,” I called back.

Before I even started my car, Seth texted me.

Seth: Dinner at 6?

Caitlyn: Sounds perfect

I shoved my phone in my pocket just as Thomas got in the passenger seat of my car. “We should rent a bunch of movies, and pop popcorn tonight. I think I can convince Hillary to whip us up a batch of her marshmallow kind,” Thomas suggested.

“Sorry, Seth asked me out and I said yes,” I answered, not looking at him.

“Why would you go out with that asshole? He lied about you, Cat.” I felt his eyes boring into me.

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” I shrugged. “I can’t let what happened turn me into a hermit. Honestly, he only said I blew him. Some of the other’s lies were way worse.”

Thomas began to object. I held up my hand, signaling it was too much to talk about. He relented, but I knew he would be on high alert all evening.

Thomas was so irritated he asked me to drop him off at his house. I didn’t have time to worry about his concerns. I spent extra time getting ready, choosing my sexiest sundress. As I looked at my outfit, I knew Seth would be drooling over me.

And your mother will make you cover up, I told myself. I grabbed a fitted jean jacket and buttoned it.

“You look beautiful, darling,” my mother crooned as she opened the door to greet Seth.

I slipped in front of her and grabbed Seth’s hand. “I’ll be home by curfew. Love you,” I called as I dragged Seth out of her interrogation zone.

Seth drove us to Carlsbad Village. He planned our evening. First, we would have a nice dinner, and then walk around and soak up the area’s activities. The Teppan-style restaurant he chose was busy, and our table had six other people with us around the grill.

“It’s warm in here,” I said, removing my jacket.

Seth’s mouth fell open in appreciation of my skimpy outfit. Seth was just as charming and polite as the first date.

The chef joked with Seth. “How can such a boy have such a pretty girlfriend?”

Seth shrugged sheepishly. The chef responded by flipping one of the cooked shrimp toward him. Seth caught it in his mouth, and everyone at the table cheered.

For a moment, I almost forgot what he had done, and that tonight was about making him remember me forever. After several hours of casual conversation,

we left the restaurant. The night air was cold, but I carried my jacket, knowing it would be beneficial to be so visibly chilled.

“Where to now?” he asked, taking my hand. His eyes stared down the top of my dress.

“It’s not even a mile to the beach, and I could use the walk after such a big meal.” I leaned forward teasing him.

“Me, too. I don’t even think I have room for the ice cream sundae I was going to take you for,” he chuckled.

As we entered the beach, the sign – PARK HOURS: SUNRISE TO SUNSET – glared at us.

Seth slowed and sighed. “Ugh, it’s almost sunset.”

“Since when do you care about rules?” I laughed and tugged on his hand.

We ran toward the water. I threw my jacket down and slipped out of my shoes. Without a thought, I ran to the ocean and began splashing and shrieking. Seth grinned at me and ripped his shoes off.

We kicked water at each other and laughed. When a large wave began to roll in, Seth swept me into his arms. My feet dangled as he backed away toward the beach. His lips were so close, I could have kissed him.

“It’s getting dark. We should head back,” he murmured. Reluctantly, he let me down.

While I slid down his body, I rested my hand on his pants zipper and began to tug it. Stunned, he stared at me as I undid the button.

“What are you doing?” he rasped.

I shoved his pants and boxers down and inspected his now fully erect penis. Seth’s confusion turned to delight.

“So, when I went down on you in the theater, did I use protection?” I grasped his stiffness and fell to my knees before him.

He shifted uncomfortably but did not pull out of my grip. I was sure he was hoping I would follow through, and service him, right there.

“What...what,” he stammered.

I gazed up at him and seductively licked my lips. His eyes shifted away, acknowledging he knew what I was talking about.

“Well, if I am going to give you the *Chase Treatment*, I need to know what that entails.” My voice was ice-cold as I clenched him hard, digging my nails into the tender skin.

“I didn’t mean —” He moved as if weighing the risks of leaving himself in my hands.

“You didn’t mean to start the ball rolling on creating my bad reputation? Boys will be boys, right? Were you angry to hear I gave Steve Louis a striptease before he had sex with me?”

I slid my finger in my mouth and then slowly removed it. “Is this what I did,” I asked coyly. I teased him. I wanted him to desire me. I felt his anticipation.

Out of greed or instinct, he shifted his hips several times, as if helping me out, urging me to go further. I traced the wetness of my finger along his hardness and moved my mouth closer. He sat still in expectation. I slowly blew my hot breath along the line I had just traced. This simple act caused him to jerk and prematurely ejaculate in my hand.

“Oh god,” he gasped and pulled himself out of my hand. His face flushed red with embarrassment. It was my turn to stare silently as he struggled to get his pants on.

“Was it as good for you this time as the first time?” I sneered.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lie. I just...” he apologized.

“Next time you lie about someone, know your words can destroy them. Do you know how town sluts get treated around here? They get used and abused like paid whores. You have a sister, right? Would you want your buddies to lie about her?”

“No. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I didn’t say you did anything. They just...”

I understood. “You didn’t deny it – didn’t clear my name. Didn’t you call me your ‘little Alanis’?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have,” his voice cracked.

“Be sure to let the boys know how good I was tonight. Don’t forget to mention how quickly it ended.” For emphasis, I wiped my hands on the sand,

trying to remove his bodily fluid from me.

“I won’t say anything. I’m truly sorry, Caitlyn,” he apologized. His eyes told me he was sincere, but I didn’t care.

“Save your sorry for the next girl you hurt,” I snapped and walked away.

“Wait, I need to take you home,” he called out.

He was wrong. I had made prior arrangements. Without looking back, I slipped on my jacket and left the beach. When I showed up at the Starbucks a mile away, Thomas was waiting in my car, sipping hot coffee.

“What took you so long?” he asked. He handed me a blended drink. “You are freezing. I should have got you something warm.”

“I’m fine. This looks yummy.” I took a drink of the cool concoction and grinned.

“Why the change in plans?” Thomas wiped whip cream off my lip.

“I just realized that popcorn and movies with my best friend sounded like a better evening.”

“I could have told you that hours ago.” Thomas laughed as he accelerated and rolled down both our windows. There was nothing better than being with my best friend and inhaling the ocean air.

Later that evening, I confessed what I had done. Thomas was supportive but concerned. I promised him I wouldn’t confront any of the other boys and that I would stay far away from Christopher. This promise I was happy to keep.

Instead of dwelling on the memories of the horrible evening, I chose my mother’s approach to life and pretended it didn’t happen. I focused on my final month of school, and I dove into helping my mother grow her event planning business. Wherever, and whenever, she needed anyone to help, I was there.

I would survive high school. Studying and work were what kept me going. My focus remained the same when I entered college. There was only moving forward now.

NINE

THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

My 19th Century British Literature class just ended when I heard a voice behind me. “Butterworth is a pain. I swear his main focus in life is to destroy GPAs,” the man said.

I turned to see soft brown eyes staring at me. “To strive, to seek, to yield,” I quoted Lord Tennyson.

The man grinned. “I am aware of Alfred Tennyson, but I am afraid this is out of my element. You seem to have caught on quickly.” He nodded at my paper with a big red A and “Insightful” written on the top corner.

“I’m an English major, so this is my element,” I replied.

“Well, it’s nice to meet someone who enjoys this kind of stuff. Paul Wallace,” he said, offering me his hand.

I accepted it. “Caitlyn Chase.”

“Well, I’m an environmental biologist. I am not in my element at all. Do you think we could study together sometime?” Paul squeezed my hand and smiled.

Our friendship blossomed quickly into a romantic relationship. I studied at his apartment every evening. Sitting on the couch near each other turned into making out. Even with the distraction, Paul was focused on his academics, first, and me, second.

One night, our kissing session became a bit heated, and he placed his hand on my upper thigh. I flinched, and he immediately pulled back.

“Did that make you uncomfortable, Caitlyn?” His face was lined with worry.

“I just haven’t had... a safe relationship.”

My statement was not enough for Paul. Before the night was over, I told him everything that had happened. I was afraid to look at him, to see the disgust in his eyes.

Paul lifted my chin. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.” His words were fiery. “You were abused. That monster deserves to burn in hell.”

Instead of continuing our passionate exchange, we talked for hours about what happened, and what the next step would mean. Before I left that evening, I promised I was ready for this change in our relationship, and my past was the past.

The next night, Paul was waiting with candles and sparkling water. He toasted. “Caitlyn, you are the most beautiful person I have ever met – inside and out. Tonight, I want our souls, not just our minds, to connect. Will you share this journey with me?”

Paul had prepared the bedroom with soft candles and classical music. He kissed me delicately and undressed me, not taking his eyes from mine.

When we were naked, he patted the bed, “Lie with me.”

Nervously, I slid under the covers. “We’ll go slow. Tell me if anything scares or triggers negative emotions.”

“I will.”

His fingers trailed over every inch of my body. It was as if he was determining which areas were traumatized. When he was done, he left the bed and returned with massage oil. “You are too tense to enjoy any pleasure.”

I blushed at how he stared at me. He pulled back the covers and squirted the oil into his hands, rubbing them quickly before he placed them on me. Once again, he covered each part of my body. The massage was calming. I wasn’t sure if it was his warmth or the healing scent.

As he kissed my breasts, I tensed.

“We should stop?” he asked.

“No, keep going. I’ll tell you if I want you to stop.” I blinked away the tears in my eyes. I was not going to let Christopher control my life. This was my body.

Again, I flinched when he touched the moist area between my thighs. *Will I always cringe when being intimate?* I didn't want the past to control the good things in my present life. His touch felt nice, and I wanted to keep going. Paul was being so caring, but I didn't feel what I thought I should. I wanted him to know I was enjoying his attention. So, I pretended, screaming like girls did in the movies.

As I finished my writhing show, Paul rested on his elbow. "Caitlyn, you don't have to fake it for me. Your body may not be ready for such a release. Just tell me when it feels good, and we'll try to reach the mountain together."

Embarrassed, I nodded. "I think it would be better for you to just...um..."

"Penetrate you?" he asked.

I nodded.

Watching him prepare himself was painful. He was methodical in applying the condom properly. I wanted to scream, 'Just put it on!'. Instead, I slowly breathed, thinking about the positive side of his care. I would not get pregnant, and he wouldn't have to worry that I gave him some disease.

Finally, he slipped on top of me. Paul was gentle when he entered me, watching my reaction. "Most women cannot orgasm with penetration alone. If you feel it is stimulating you enough, I will control my ejaculation. For now, I think it would be wise to complete the act. We'll connect more and more each time."

I could have died. I was in biology class, not making love. He was right that I did not achieve any great pleasure, but it wasn't unpleasant. He grunted and rolled off me, then immediately went into the bathroom and showered.

Tears fell from the corners of my eyes. I had disgusted him. I was too broken. When Paul returned, his clean soapy scent overpowered me.

"Caitlyn, I would like to try several pleasure techniques on you. Are you comfortable trying again?"

I smiled. "Yes, please."

Yes, please, I mocked myself. *Did you order dessert?*

Honestly, I felt like a specimen being examined. Every new touch meant Paul would stop and confirm I was comfortable. After an hour, he determined

the exact amount of pressure and digital penetration needed for me to orgasm.

When the sensation left me, and my breathing returned to normal, Paul leaned over me. “This is such a breakthrough. Many women never truly reach their sexual peak. We have something really special together.”

I laughed. I was his penicillin, his lightbulb, his sliced bread. It became his mission to fix me. And, most important, I didn’t disgust him.

Paul was everything I wanted in a boyfriend. He was a gentleman. I felt adored by him. My needs were just as important as his. Our relationship was about more than sex. We shared our passions and knowledge. He tolerated me reading Shakespeare, and I listened attentively when he talked about what steps were needed to save the world from self-destruction.

The nine months we were together, I learned much about myself. My biggest realization was that we weren’t meant to be. He was nice, but there was no true passion. Paul wanted to save the world and bring me along with him. When he approached the idea, he knew my answer before I even spoke.

In the end, we both agreed we were better as friends. After we parted, I decided I couldn’t tell anyone ever again about the assault. Paul had healed my body with care. Telling my story wouldn’t help anyone. It would turn me into a victim and cloud the relationship.

TEN

THE DOMINANT APPROACH

My sophomore year, I had been so busy helping my mother with an event that I waited too long to get my textbooks. “I don’t understand how the books I need are not available for this class,” I ranted.

The chubby sales assistant with the bright blue DONALD name tag on his chest pushed his glasses up. “If we ordered a book for everyone in the class, we would have an overflow. For you, the guesstimated numbers just didn’t work out. It’s a risk you take if you are a procrastinator.”

“I see the books I need right there. How about you give me those books and tell the next person about guesstimation? Donald, I would be really, really grateful if you helped me out.” I placed my hand on his and smiled.

“Sorry, do you still want these?” He pointed to the stack of books that I had found.

“Yes,” I sighed.

Donald began to ring up the items.

“I’m sorry I was being such a B. I’m just having a bad start to the new year.”

“Your total is seventy-two, ninety-six.” Leaning close to me, he whispered, “I gave you my staff discount.”

“That was nice of you.” I smiled.

Donald finished the transaction and scribbled something on a flyer. I looked at the note:

Meet me at 37289 Iguk Lane in one hour.

I'll make it worth your while.

Donald

I raised my eyebrows. He grinned and nodded his head back towards the stack of books behind me.

“Ok,” I finally answered. “See you later, Donald.”

He grinned and waved as I walked away.

In my car, I looked up the address. It was only two miles away and looked like a nice residential area. *His house? I'm going to get murdered*, I thought wryly. *He's not going to kill you. What do you have to lose? Maybe he is just being nice.*

I wanted to call Thomas and ask his opinion, but I knew he would tell me to drop the class and take it next year. My schedule was mapped out. I didn't want to go off track already.

To ease my nervousness, I stopped at a drive-thru and ordered an iced tea. I drove to his house and waited until ten minutes past the arranged time to knock on the front door. Donald greeted me. He looked as if he had been running.

“I just got home,” he breathed heavily. “Come in.”

He lived in a normal-looking house. It was clean and well-furnished. No signs of a hatchet murderer were apparent. A fluffy grey cat rubbed against my leg, and Donald picked it up.

Dangling the cat towards me, he cooed, “Mr. Cattington, meet Hillary.”

He thought I was Hillary because of the credit card I used. I smiled but didn't correct him.

“So, why did you ask me here?” I bluntly asked.

Donald rushed to the kitchen and returned with a bag. He opened it and showed me the books I needed.

“Thank you. How much?” I gushed, taking the bag.

He held it tight.

Now here is the payment time, I thought, forcing myself not to roll my eyes. “Do you want me to buy you a coffee? Sit and have a chat?”

“No. Um, how about you make out with me?” he blurted.

“No!”

He was trying to bargain with me. “Let me feel you up?”

Feel me up? What, was he fifteen? “Dream on,” I pulled on the bag.

He puffed up. “No action. No books.” He tugged the bag out of my hand and went for the door.

“Fine. Ten minutes.”

“Fifteen.”

“Ok, fifteen.” I set the alarm on my cell phone and held it out, showing him the time ticking.

His bravado faded. He dropped the bag and took his pants off.

“No, the deal was to *feel me up*.” I glared.

He grunted trying to figure out his next move. Diving at me with both hands, he began manhandling both my breasts.

“Can I at least see them?” he moaned.

“Feel,” I said, not hiding my boredom.

“Fine,” he grunted again. He squeezed and tugged at me before giving up with my breast.

I braced myself for his next move.

Roughly, he slid his hand down my sides and squeezed my butt. When I let out a squeak of surprise, he smiled and slipped his hand under my skirt. I grabbed it, squeezing his fingers hard.

“You said I could feel,” he whined.

“Seven minutes left,” I relented, feeling repulsed.

He had beaten me. Without hesitation, he slipped his fingers inside my panties and began exploring my most private parts. His confidence was renewed. He leered as if he were giving me the greatest pleasure of my life. Suddenly, he must have decided to get his money’s worth. He shoved his hand into his underwear and began to masturbate.

“Five minutes.” I wanted to slap his hand off me. “You really are bad at this,” I said cruelly.

His face flushed with embarrassment. He fumbled around a bit more before

stopping. "If I suck so bad, why don't you teach me?"

"Two minutes." I waved the phone at him.

"I have a hundred bucks if you teach me," he pleaded.

"I am not a whore," I snapped.

"No, like a tutor."

Intrigued, I said, "Show me the money." No way this college student had the money to waste on me. I stopped the timer as he picked up his pants and dug through the pockets.

He counted out ninety-eight dollars. "This is all I have." He crushed the bills into my hand.

"Just your hands. No mouth, and especially not that." I pointed at the bulge in his tight white briefs.

"Ok, teach me."

"Not here." *Damn it, Caitlyn. What are you doing?* my inner self screamed.

"My bedroom. No one will be home for hours," he excitedly suggested.

I sighed. "One hour. Time starts now."

I considered renegeing on the deal and leaving him, but something inside me liked his desperation. I could find out what it was like for Paul to guide and teach me.

Donald's room was exactly as I expected. It was a comic convention. Anime and figures lined every spare space. He quickly made his bed, covering his Star Wars sheets.

"Would you like a drink?" he offered.

"No." I didn't want to give him the impression that I was interested in him at all.

"Ok, teach me." He stepped closer to me.

I put his hands on my breasts and gently massaged. Delicately, I squeezed my nipple.

"I can't feel what I am doing with your sweater," he complained.

“Fine.” I stripped my shirt and bra off.

His mouth gaped open.

“If a girl ever lets you get here, be gentle. Sucking and pinching gently, then firmly. Listen to her body.”

He copied my demo for a few minutes.

“What about down there.” He pointed.

You asked for this, I thought. You are his teacher. Now teach.

I slid out of the rest of my clothes and placed his hand on me, I guided his fingers. As I walked him through the steps, my body rocked against him. I was actually aroused by the power I had over him.

“You’re wet,” he said nervously. “Is that bad?”

“No, that means you are doing it right,” I said breathlessly. “Maybe you need to see better what you are touching.”

Feeling confident, I lied on the bed and spread my legs for him to inspect me closer. I was so engaged in his newly learned talents that I didn’t object when he kissed the inside of my thigh.

Abruptly, my pleasure stopped. Donald sat up and grabbed a box from under his bed. He started counting out money. It looked like he had around eighty dollars. “How much to, you know...”

He was so eager and so desperate. Something made me want to make his first experience a better one than the one I had. He didn’t say he was a virgin, but it was very obvious.

“This should be enough.” I snatched the money from his hand. I looked at my phone – twenty minutes left. “Do you have any protection?”

“Yeah, I do.” He beamed. He rifled through his nightstand until he found an unopened box. “Gift from Mom.” He smiled at his own joke.

I grabbed the condoms and checked the expiration. “So, is this your first time?”

“No, I’ve been with...” He started to lie before suddenly confessing, “Yes, it’s my first. Is that ok?”

“Twenty-year-old virgin?” I mocked.

“Nineteen and a half,” he corrected.

“If you want to spend your hard-earned money on one minute of pleasure, who am I to argue? You wanted tutoring, so let’s focus on my climax first. Most women will not orgasm with only penetration,” I quoted Paul.

Donald nodded eagerly. This time he dove between my legs. “Ok, teach me.”

The memory of Paul was beside me as I walked Donald through the process of finding out what the woman enjoyed.

He kept asking, “Is that ok?”

“If you stay quiet, I’ll be able to focus. You are distracting me,” I scolded.

“Sorry,” he said before returning to my previous instructions.

In a brief time, he learned what made me tick. Before I knew it, I had climaxed.

While regaining my breath, he eagerly hopped up and began to cover himself with the condom. “Now, my turn?”

Recovering from my body’s intense response, I could only nod. I was surprised this awkward boy just rocked my world.

Donald climbed on top of me. He struggled around his big belly to align himself. I sighed and helped him. His arm muscles were stronger than I expected, and he kept his weight off me.

Nowhere to look, but his flabby chest, I saw only two black hairs. Reality hit me. *You are a prostitute, Caitlyn*, my inner voice screamed.

As if Donald’s penis understood he was going to be evicted soon, in less than one minute, he groaned. He spent himself. Carefully, he rolled off me.

He smiled sleepily and cupped my breast. “You are so beautiful,” he murmured, and then fell asleep.

While he lay snoring, I put all the money he gave me on his nightstand. After I dressed, I dug around his dressers. I found a fast-food restaurant menu and a green highlighter. I scribbled a note and placed it on the bills. It read:

Keep practicing.

Soon, you will have all the girls screaming your name.

xoxo, Me

Donald taught me I had power. This new knowledge fueled my desire for sex. I no longer turned down invitations to parties.

Fraternity boys were eager to sleep with me and forget. I spent the next year finding men who would be around long enough to satisfy me. Ones who worshipped me for only fifteen minutes, but never knew my name.

I had fulfilled the prophecy, and I was the town whore. Luckily, I had been discrete. Not even my best friend knew how many strangers I had been with. Or I thought I had been.

The Brit

“Your order will be right out.” His rich British accent sent chills straight through me.

From the bar, I admired my mother’s latest hire. He was model handsome. He had rich mocha skin, piercing brown eyes, and full lips. I sighed as I imagined what I could do to him. I hadn’t got his name, but I knew I would have him.

Serving the drinks, I made sure to press up against him under the guise of passing by. “Oops sorry,” I purred and patted his chest as if I had spilled something.

He grinned at me and returned to his guests.

The main course had been served, so I approached my mother. “I need a break. I bet I am not the only one.” I motioned to the men immediately around my target.

“Fine, you get fifteen minutes to regroup,” my mother said, dismissively.

“Good news. We are on break.” I relayed the instructions. As the others dispersed, I caught my target. “I’m going to get some air. Want to join me?”

“Sure,” he said. “Lead on.”

I knew the hotel very well. When we were in an isolated hallway, I made my move and kissed him.

“Right here? Right now?” he asked. “I’ll get fired.”

“Shh,” I said, pushing him into the utility closet. I ripped the tape I placed on the lock earlier that day in case I found someone of interest. This was not my first closet quickie. I was always prepared for such an adventure.

“But, I...” he objected.

I silenced his objections by grabbing his head and kissing him deeply.

He didn’t resist.

Seconds later, he lifted me up and pinned me against the wall. He began kissing my breasts and stopped when he found the condom poking out of my bra. I always carried one. I was foolish, but not stupid.

“For me?” He grinned.

“Yeah, we need to hurry. Our break is almost over,” I teased.

“You American Girls like it dirty,” he commented as he covered his erection. “So, how do you want it?”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Nothing fancy, but if you take too long you might get fired,” I teased.

He stuck his hand under my skirt and laughed. “You are a dirty girl. No panties?”

“Shut up and fuck me,” I ordered.

The waiter growled, pulling me towards him, and kissed me deeply. He lifted my leg and wasted no time slipping inside me.

My leg wrapped firmly around him and my arms clung tightly around his neck. We rocked together. Soon, his long, thick strokes sent me over the edge. My fingernails dug into his shoulders, and I moaned. It felt as if he was growing inside me.

His groans grew so loud I was afraid we would get caught. I covered his mouth with mine. With him silenced, I heard the voice in the hall. I stopped kissing him and listened.

“I think there is more in here,” the voice said. “Ok, I’ll check. Yes, two. I’ll get two.” The familiar voice must have been on a phone or talking to himself.

Panic filled me. It was Thomas.

The door jiggled, and then the sounds of keys.

“Shit.” I tried getting the attention of my lover, but my words were muffled as he slipped his tongue into my mouth. I pulled away. “Someone is coming.”

“I am not finished,” he objected. “Almost there...” He pumped harder.

You brought him here, I scolded myself. *Ride it out, Caitlyn.*

I heard the door open. I closed my eyes and hoped Thomas had turned around when he saw us. It seemed like minutes passed before my stranger finally climaxed.

“What do you think you are doing? You are not on that kind of break,” Thomas screeched.

The waiter deflated and slipped out of me. Unabashed, he threw the used condom into the trash and pulled up his pants. “I didn’t know there were rules about what I did on my break, mate.”

I tried to stay hidden from view as I straightened my clothes.

“The both of you back to work,” Thomas ordered.

I got away with it. Thomas didn’t realize it was me.

As I walked past him, I felt his grip on my arm. “Wait. You, stay.”

The waiter winked at me and kept going. I didn’t blame him. I would have done the same thing.

“Cat? What the hell?” Thomas hissed.

“I was just having a bit of fun,” I said nonchalantly.

“I thought the stories were lies. Cat, really? You are fucking the waitstaff?” Thomas’ eyes filled with pity.

“I’m young and single. I can do whatever I please,” I snapped. “Who are to judge? You’ve had plenty of your own one-night stands.”

“But, you’re different, Cat. This isn’t you,” Thomas’ voice was filled with pain. “I let you down. I was supposed to protect you.”

Sadness washed over me. I wasn’t different. He couldn’t protect me from anyone, especially not myself.

I didn't stop right away, but I found, over the next few weeks, that my hunting for strangers to hook up with became less satisfying. Each cheap moment left me full of shame. I had seen myself through Thomas' eyes, and I wondered, *who have I become?*

The Bad Boy

One morning, Thomas met me at the mall for an impromptu shopping spree. He was giddy with the idea of transforming my look. Katherine Hepburn meets Marilyn Monroe was his inspiration.

After a few hundred dollars and several hours, Thomas left me with strict instructions for my next purchases. I was lost in the overwhelming scent choices when I felt a hand on my waist.

"You don't want anything too overpowering. Men don't like to go home to their wives smelling like their dates," the deep voice of a man advised me.

I whipped around and was face-to-face with Christopher. He wore a soft beard and mustache now. Any stranger would think he was very handsome, but those people didn't know he was a psychotic rapist.

"Long time, no see, Caitlyn," he smiled. His hands squeezed my hips.

"Get your hands off me," I hissed and shoved him away.

"Don't be like that, Caitlyn." His voice was strong and clearly sending me a warning. "I am just saying hello to an old friend."

"You and I were never friends." I backed away.

He looked at me with concern. "I don't see your bodyguard anymore. Did the queen take off and leave you all alone?"

Bile rose in my throat. "No. He's waiting for me." I set the perfume I had been testing down and began to walk away.

Christopher grabbed my arm and pressed his mouth to my ear. Inhaling deeply, he whispered, "I'll always be inside you, Caitlyn. The night we shared was magical. Come away with me. I promised you that I wanted to make our relationship more permanent. I am ready now."

“Would you like to test any other samples,” the salesclerk called to me.

Christopher released me and turned around to smile at her. “No, thank you.”

I took the opportunity to get away. When I turned to make sure I wasn't being followed, I saw Christopher whispering to the girl.

You can't leave her, my mind screamed.

“Christopher, I'll see you at home soon. Our daughter is so happy to know her daddy got off work early tonight,” I called, forcing him to address me.

Christopher turned and glared at me. “I'm looking forward to our evening together, sweetheart. Bath time is always fun.”

Terrified, I rushed out of the mall and into the parking lot. The bags I carried were heavy and slowing me down. When I reached my car, I checked to make sure he hadn't followed. Confident he wasn't behind me, I threw everything onto the passenger seat before climbing in.

My hand shook violently, and it took me several seconds to get the key in the ignition. I turned over the engine and pressed the gas. A group of teenage girls on their cell phones walked in front of me, and I slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting them.

“Put your phones away and watch what you're doing!” I screamed.

Unaffected, the teens carried on as if I hadn't almost killed them.

Tears flooded my eyes. *Get yourself together*, I scolded myself.

After a few minutes of deep breathing, I composed myself enough to drive away.

I drove carefully and kept checked my mirrors to make sure I wasn't being followed. When the gas light flashed, I almost threw up. *You are five minutes from home, and it is still daylight*. The sun would not set for another six hours. I would be safe.

I pulled into my usual gas station. I just finished filling the tank when a silver car appeared. It slowly drove past me. The windows were tinted, but I made out the silhouette of a man. The Mercedes circled around again, and I knew it was

Christopher. I had hurt his ego. He was going to make me pay.

I searched for anyone to help. I saw a biker leaving the convenience store with a bottle of water and a bag of chips. He was shoving his items into a backpack when I approached him.

The driver had not gotten out of the car. I knew he was watching me and plotting the perfect time to grab me.

“Hey, can you take me for a ride on your bike? I’ve always wanted to see what it felt like.” I smiled seductively.

The guy looked me up and down. “Sure, babe. Park your car over there and I’ll give you a little ride.”

I reconsidered as I walked to my car, but then I saw the Mercedes. I could jump off a motorcycle, but I would not be able to escape Christopher if he captured me again. I relocated my vehicle to a parking spot and tucked my shopping bags into the trunk. When I returned to the biker, I saw who was stalking me.

My heart fell as I watched an old man shuffle out of the vehicle, and his wife rush to help him.

“Ready?” the biker asked.

“Yeah,” I reluctantly said. *You need help*, I scolded myself. *You have now put yourself in a bad situation.*

He handed me a hot pink helmet with the words ‘Old Lady’ written in silver. “Let’s get this lid on you and see where the coast leads us.” He put his own helmet on and straddled the bike. “Climb on.” He grinned.

There was no way out. I didn’t know how to tell him I changed my mind. Feeling as though I had no choice, I slid behind him. “My name is Caitlyn. What can I call you?”

“My bros call me Bulldog, but you can call me Marcus.”

Panic filled me as I realized I was doing this. He was probably in a motorcycle gang and had a girlfriend who wore tight leather. *Girlfriend*, I thought and immediately felt terrified. “Will your old lady mind that I am wearing her hat?”

Marcus threw his head back and laughed. “There is no one to worry about,

babe. The hat was given to me as a joke. It will protect you. Lucky you chose to wear jeans and sexy boots today.”

Before I could question what he meant, he revved the engine and cried, “Hang on.”

I rested my hands carefully on his waist. When he jerked forward, I held tighter. I was on the back of a dangerous vehicle, pressed close to a complete stranger, and I felt surprisingly alive as we rode North. The ride was exhilarating. I had become completely confident in my rash decision until he turned off Coast Highway. My stomach churned as he pulled onto a side street and into a residential area.

I considered jumping off the back of the bike. The risk of getting injured and not being able to fight off an attack stopped me. Who was I kidding? He was solid muscle. Nothing could save me.

A garage opened, and he drove into it. He turned off the machine and got off.

“I need to feed my dogs. Come in and have a drink. It won’t take long,” he explained.

“I don’t drink.”

“Water, babe. You will get messed up if you don’t hydrate.” He reached over and unhooked the helmet.

I pulled it off, and he reached out to me. I jerked away.

“Easy, girl. Your hair is sticking up.” He gently smoothed the offending pieces down.

Inside his home, we were greeted by four Chihuahuas of mixed breeds. The small animals yipped at me. He scooped them up, affectionately kissed them, and doled out treats.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m home to feed you. You act like you are starving,” he gently scolded them.

He dished out their food and then turned back to me. “Sorry for the detour. I need to keep my girls happy.”

“You live alone?”

He laughed. “Those four are enough.”

He reached into the fridge, pulled out a bottle, and offered it to me. An image of Christopher forcing me to drink the same brand washed over me. “Can I just have tap water?”

“Okay.” He raised his eyebrows at me and opened a cabinet with dozens of cups. “Lady’s choice.”

We sat at the table drinking our water. “So, do you go around picking up strangers often?”

“No.” I started to lie about my reason for asking today. “I thought my ex...” I cringed at the word *ex*, “was following me. It turned out to be an old couple.”

“So, you used me?”

“No, I...”

He let out a hearty laugh. “It’s okay. I like being used by hot chicks.” He got up and refilled my glass of water from the sink. When I finished it, I asked where the bathroom was.

“Second door on the right.” He pointed down a hallway.

I passed by a master bedroom that was nicely furnished and as clean as the rest of the house. *He didn’t trick you into the bedroom*, I thought, forcing myself to stop having negative thoughts.

Just past a guest bedroom on the right, I found the bathroom. When I returned to the kitchen, Marcus was gone. I heard clicking in another room. I followed the sound into an office.

“Hey, sorry, I thought I would answer a few work emails while you were gone.”

“What do you do?”

“Website design. Some people are so foolish.” He punched the return button. “Really, some shouldn’t even have computers. So, what do you do, Caitlyn?”

“I’m a junior at USD. I’m majoring in English,” I answered.

“So, this stalker ex... want me to scare the daylights out of him?”

I looked at the massive man. His dirty blonde hair was neatly pulled back, and his beard was short and neatly trimmed. His arms were tattooed from hand

to biceps. He was intimidating. I nodded yes.

“Okay, babe, bring me your phone and pull up that jerk. I am going to make sure he never bothers you again.” Marcus’ green eyes sparkled with impish glee.

My hands trembled as I unlocked my phone and found Christopher’s number. *Why did you keep this?* I scolded myself. I handed it to him, and he began to call. The familiar ring of FaceTime sounded. I turned to stone.

“I knew you would call,” Christopher purred as the phone connected and he popped up on the screen. His voice turned to steel when he saw Marcus, instead of me. “Who are you?”

“I’m your worst nightmare, preppie. If you hassle my old lady again, they’re going to be looking for your remains all over California.” Marcus held a hand out to me and motioned me close. When I took his hand, he pulled me onto his lap. “This is now my property.”

Christopher started to protest.

Something came over me. I grabbed Marcus’ face and kissed him, slowly and deeply, for the camera. Underneath his thick mustache were the softest lips. He tasted like peppermint.

He tugged lightly on my bottom lip, clearly for show. When he broke away, he smiled at me. “Come on, babe. This small-dicked jerk has nothing left for you.”

Christopher turned red and began screaming. “I’ve been in every bit of that person. She’s —”

Marcus ended the call and wrapped his arms around me. He held me as if I was a fragile doll. In his arms, I felt safe. Pushing the memories of pain deep into the crevices of my mind, I let him comfort me.

Ding, Ding, Ding. The obnoxious ringtone of my cell ringing frightened me. I jumped and reached for it. Marcus grabbed it first. He grinned and handed it to me. On the screen was a picture of Thomas in a rainbow beret and pop-up heart sunglasses.

“Hey, T,” I said, my voice more breathless than I wanted.

“Where are you? I have been texting. I saw your car at the QT,” Thomas said, his voice tinged with hysteria.

“Oh, I just went for a run. I needed to feel the ocean breeze,” I lied.

“You should have told me. I need to get rid of some extra pounds myself,” Thomas chimed in. “I was thinking –”

“Thomas, can I call you back when I get home? I’m losing my adrenaline.”

“You better call me. I have big, big, big news.” Thomas made sure to emphasize the urgency that I call.

“I promise. Bye.”

I set the phone down and found Marcus staring at me. “Another boyfriend?”

“My gay best friend.” I smiled.

“Good. I was jealous,” Marcus teased.

“You aren’t really going to kill Christopher, are you?” I asked, afraid of the answer.

“Only if he messes with you.” Marcus’ eyes burned fiery hot and I believed he would keep his promise.

“Why do you care?”

“I have a sister. You were smart not to take my water. There are sick bastards in the world. Some do really shitty things to girls.”

He rested his hand on my knee and stared at me. I felt as if he was searching my mind for the answers. “Scum that manhandle and misuse girls are not right.”

Marcus took my phone and looked through it. He jotted down a number I knew was Christopher’s. He slid me off of his lap and handed the phone back to me. “Let’s get you home.”

“I don’t think I am ready to go.” I set my cell on the desk and kissed him.

It didn’t take long before our kisses became hot and urgent. I tugged my shirt off and began to tug at his belt buckle. Marcus groaned in admiration before he kissed my breasts. His attention didn’t remain their long. Returning to my mouth, our frantic kisses left me burning in a way I hadn’t felt in a very long time.

When we reached his bed, he laid me down gently and removed his shirt.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, halting the moment.

I stared at the man before me. He had to be in his late forties and his scarred, tattooed body told a story of a hard life. His appearance was rough and threatening, but I saw his true self – a kind protector.

“Yes, I want you, Marcus,” I whispered.

Without another word, he pulled off my jeans and stared down at me. It was his turn to decide if the view was worth the price. When he took off the rest of his clothes and covered himself with a condom, I knew his answer.

Marcus was not the best lover or the most considerate. When he was done, he rolled off me. His snoring told me my opportunity to climax was over. I lied in shock. My sexual experience with the bookstore clerk had been better. Disappointed, I sat up to leave the bed when he clasped my arm.

“I think we have some unfinished business,” his voice husky with desire.

This time was different. He focused on my pleasure before his. When he finally entered me again, I was reeling from the sensations.

After we were both exhausted, I laid on his chest while he softly slept. When he woke, we dressed and silently returned to the garage. We had said everything necessary and I let the silence wash over me.

Once we reached the gas station where we had met, Marcus helped me off the bike. “Thanks for the day, babe,” he said before giving me one last kiss.

“Will I see you again?” I asked.

His eyes filled with sadness. “A pretty girl like you doesn’t need an old man like me. You need to find yourself someone who’ll treat you right and give you a life. I’m going to remind that guy to stay away from you.

“Thank you.” I kissed Marcus. One last tender moment. One final goodbye.

“Thanks is not necessary, babe. Promise me you won’t go riding off with any more loser bikers. The next time, you might not meet a gentleman like me.

I smiled. “I won’t.”

As he rode away, I wondered why he had been brought into my life. Several weeks after, I considered going back to his house, but something inside me told me to say goodbye, and I did.

Perhaps he was supposed to save me from Christopher? Maybe stop me from

the road to destruction I was on? Whatever he did, I had slept with my last stranger.

The Keeper?

By the time I met Peter, I wanted something real. A relationship, not just a fling.

Peter worked at the local organic grocery store. He was tall, lanky, and I fell head over heels for him. His relaxed nature drew me in. I didn't realize his college part-time job was his end game. I told myself that I could make him into a respectable businessman. He just didn't realize his potential.

After six months, I realized, if I continued with him, I would end up a single mother, and my children would have a deadbeat dad. I knew he was not the right man for me, but our power play was intoxicating. Every day, I planned to end it. Each time, I told myself, 'one more day.' Every time, I found a reason to give him another chance.

At the start of summer vacation, I decided to skip classes over the break and enjoy my time. I promised myself that, when school started again, I would tell Peter we were done.

One evening, I was working as a server at a business event my mother had organized at a five-star hotel. Five hundred men, all eager to talk about their business connections and complain about their wives, attended. I had just passed a plate of appetizers, and returned to the kitchen for another, when I found Peter waiting.

"When do you get out of here," he asked.

"The night just began. I have at least four more hours." I handed him one of the finger sandwiches and watched him devour it. "I'll come by your apartment after."

"Can you spot me some cash and I'll pick up some beer?" He pushed himself against me.

Spot you? I thought angrily. _You should be filled with polka dots for all the spotting I've done.

“Please, Caitlyn,” he whispered in my ear. “You know I am good for it.”

Relenting, I grabbed my purse and pulled out all the cash I had. “This will have to do.” I crushed the bills into his hand.

Instead of leaving, he pulled me into the hallway towards the bathrooms and began kissing my neck.

“Stop,” I said. I looked around to make sure no one saw us.

“You got me fucking hot, girl.” He continued to kiss me.

I knew he wouldn’t leave easily, not unless I submitted. “Not here.” I pushed him back.

“Come on, just a quickie to tide me over.” He unzipped his jeans and shoved my hand inside the opening.

“I have to go, Peter,” I said, trying to pull away.

“Then do it quickly.” He clamped his hand over mine, guiding me.

I could have resisted. I could have pushed him away, but I didn’t want the scene. I didn’t want him to break up with me. As pathetic as it sounded, I didn’t want to be alone.

“In here.” I pushed him into the men’s bathroom.

“You’re a dirty girl, Caitlyn. I like it.”

Inside the handicap stall, he lifted my skirt and tugged on my panties. “No, something fast,” I hissed.

While I straightened myself out, he linked his hands behind his head and jerked his lower body. “I’m ready. Show me how much you love me,” he purred.

When I gripped his erect penis, he whispered, “Go on, have a little taste of your favorite Peter.”

I clamped my hand over his mouth to silence his moans as I used my other hand to make him feel good. *You have sunk to another low, Caitlyn. But, Kudos, for not ending on your knees*, I thought wryly.

It didn’t take much work before Peter released. He had length, but no endurance. In this instance, I was grateful for his lack of stamina.

“Ok, I have to go back to work now. Go clean yourself up and I’ll leave when you’re gone,” I whispered

Grinning, he kissed me on the cheek. “You’re the fucking hottest chick I’ve

ever been with. Let's continue tonight. I'll make you scream for me."

I forced a smile and waited. When I knew he was gone, I rushed to the sink and washed the evidence of our disgusting act from my hands. I checked myself in the mirror. I felt pity for the girl in the reflection. She had become exactly what the boys in high school had claimed she was.

But, I am in control, not them, I argued. I had just dried my hands when an older man stepped out of the stalls. I could have died from embarrassment.

"Oh, I must be in the wrong room," he said, washing his hands and smiling at me

Had he heard Peter? Did he know what I did?

"Actually, I think I was mistaken," I said, nodding at the urinal. "My apologies, sir."

I quickly ducked out and returned to my duties. The night flew by as I catered to the needs of the men from all over the world. They were in San Diego for a trade's convention. Talks about the best flooring for commercial endeavors, new equipment, and sales tactics filled the ballroom.

The Reality Check

I returned with a fresh tray of bacon wrapped shrimp when I bumped into the man from the bathroom. This time, I noticed how attractive he was. He looked to be in his forties with hints of grey in his deep brown hair. His jaw was strong, and his blue-grey eyes were piercing. He had the body of a retired quarterback.

"We meet again," he said, taking one of the appetizers from my tray. "I'm Nick Fisher, and you are?"

"Caitlyn...Caitlyn Chase," I stammered.

"Would you have a drink with me, Caitlyn?" he asked.

"Um, I can't. I am still working," I said.

"I am staying in the hotel. When your shift is over, I would like to learn more about you." He smiled.

I checked the time. What did I have to lose? A night of Peter attempting to

convince me to try out the latest sexual position he saw on the internet? Or, perhaps, watching my mother fall asleep on the couch to an old black and white movie?

“Ok, where should I meet you?”

“I have a room at the hotel.

I raised my eyebrows.

“I assure you my intentions are not nefarious, Caitlyn. I am in the presidential suite on the 21st floor,” he said, taking my hand. “We’ll be able to have a nice chat and drink out on the balcony.”

He really would’ve been a more appropriate fling for my mother, but there was something so comforting about him. I knew better than to go out with a nice man. *Didn’t I find out how easy it was to be drugged and raped by one?* Even with this knowledge, something led me to him.

At the end of my work shift, I said goodbye to my mother, lying that I was going to spend the night with Peter. She frowned at this but didn’t comment. She would be even more disappointed if she knew I was meeting an older man alone in his hotel room

Nick hadn’t lied. He was staying in the presidential suite and it had two balconies. The room was luxurious. I felt giddy, like a schoolgirl. Like one of the sappy RomComs I loved to watch came to life.

“What would you like to drink, Ms. Chase?” He led me by my elbow to the bar.

“Whatever you have in a sealed bottle.”

He raised his eyebrows and opened the mini bar. “Help yourself.” He smiled.

I took a can of sparkling fruit-flavored mineral water and a bottle of vodka. I poured them both into a glass and took a sip. “Would you like one?” I dropped several ice cubes into my glass.

He poured the leftover sparkling water into a glass and dropped a few ice cubes. He left out the vodka. “Shall we adjourn to the balcony?”

I nodded and cautiously followed. Instead of taking the available love seat, he chose the long couch. He motioned for me to sit. "I'll not bite, Caitlyn."

Sighing, I sat down an arm's length from him. "The view is beautiful," I commented. The ocean waves were mesmerizing.

What are you doing here? my inner voice cried. *You promised Marcus no more strangers.*

I dug my fingernails into the palm of my hand.

We sat in silence, staring into nothing, before Nick finally spoke. "You deserve better than the boy from the bathroom," he stated in a serious tone.

Now the truth comes out, I thought.

"I do, huh?" I glared.

"I don't mean to offend, but a real man would never have interrupted your work shift for his bestial desires. He was clearly focused on his own sexual needs with no regard for your situation."

"He is young and dumb," I explained.

"You deserve to be treated like a queen, not a prostitute."

I set my drink down and stood. "I am not sure what you're playing at, but I am not interested."

He stepped in front of me, blocking my escape. "I am not playing anything, Caitlyn. I want nothing from you but to show you your worth."

"What do you know about my worth?"

"I can tell you have been deeply hurt, and you have never truly been loved by a man." He rested his hand on my shoulder. "There is a scared little girl inside you. Let her grow up."

Emotions flooded me. I had tried to forget the evening with Christopher. I even convinced myself that I was in control. All the men that I had used to forget what happened were supposed to make me better. They didn't. He was right. I was just a scared little girl.

I collapsed on the loveseat and buried my face in my hands. It felt like I had been transported to five years earlier, and I was still trapped in the beach house. The degradation. The pain. The guilt. It all washed over me. The memories I buried were torn wide open.

I cringed as I felt his arm around me. “You owe no man, Caitlyn. Free yourself from the burden. You’re not inferior. You’re a treasure waiting to bloom.”

My instincts kicked in, and I kissed Nick.

Gently, he pulled away. “Your body should not be payment for a kind gesture. The pleasure of the flesh will not heal what is broken.”

I moved away feeling rejected.

“Do not feel hurt. Talk to me. Show me the real Caitlyn.” He took my hand.

We sat in silence as the night sky grew darker. Finally, as the twilight sky began to lighten in preparation for the sunrise, I told him the story of how this broken girl before him was formed. I confessed all my sins, my guilt, and my fears as if I was in a church confessional.

He silently listened, only touching my hand to comfort me. When the sun began to rise, I had bared my soul. I was exposed and raw, but I felt released from the prison I had trapped myself in.

“Caitlyn, I would like to sleep with you,” Nick said.

I cringed at his words. I told him my darkest secret. The things I had done. Was he turned on by this?

“You misunderstand.” He touched my cheek. “Fully clothed, nothing more than a warm body holding you as you heal from your cleansing. When you wake, the broken girl you have been holding so tightly to will be gone. She will be free.”

Exhausted, I wanted nothing more than for his words to be true. I followed him to the master suite and climbed under the covers after removing only my shoes. I watched as Nick removed his shoes, suit jacket, and tie, but nothing more. He slipped under the covers and opened his arms. Without hesitation, I snuggled against him.

I trusted him. Naïve or not, I was in his arms, hoping it wasn’t a lie. When I heard the soft breath of sleep from him, I relaxed and allowed myself to drift to sleep.

In the morning, I woke to an empty bed. My heart fell. Disappointed, I gathered my items and began to leave. I was met by Nick. He had showered and changed into a pair of khakis and a crisp white short-sleeved shirt.

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Would you like breakfast? A shower?” He greeted me with a kiss on the cheek. A knock on the door sounded, and Nick beamed. “Perfect timing.”

The door opened, and a silver tray of food was wheeled in. “Would you like this placed on the dining room table, Mr. Fisher?”

“Yes, and has my order arrived yet?”

The bellhop reached into the dumbwaiter and pulled out two bags with Macy’s written on them.

“Good.” Nick smiled. He signed the check and sent the man on his way. Turning to me, he said, “This is for you.”

“Me?” I asked, not hiding my surprise.

“Caitlyn, I want you to stay with me for the week I am here. I want you to heal. I want to meet the woman you will one day be.”

“If you want to have sex with me, you don’t need to put on the show. You know my secrets. You know I wouldn’t have turned you down.” My voice was void of emotion.

“I am not looking for a cheap thrill. The broken teenager you’re hiding behind is not who I am interested in. I want you to stay with me. There are two sleeping rooms. During the day, we can share this amazing suite.” Nick set the bag down. “I want to meet the real Caitlyn Chase. Tell me she is here and ready to find out what it means to be loved. Is she here, Caitlyn?”

For the first time in my life, I felt in control of what I wanted. I wasn’t doing what was expected to please someone else or to hide my pain. I turned myself over to Nick, knowing this would be one week in our life.

It wasn’t a fairytale. It was real. I had to find out who I was. I had to find the real Caitlyn.

Nick was true to his word. Other than holding my hand or kissing my cheek, our intimacy was only emotional. I would have called it fatherly if not for the fact that I was psychically attracted to him. During our time together, he showed me the city I had forgotten. We went sailing, ate at local restaurants, and toured the local museums. He reminded me of my passion for the written word. Nick even inspired me to chase the dreams I once had of being an author or professor.

We read Shakespeare, watched old black and white movies, and strolled along the pier. One afternoon, I taught him how to play my favorite card game, Crazy Eights.

When I handed him the deck of cards to shuffle, he set them down and said, “You have a final year of school, Caitlyn. Promise me you will live in the moment from now on and forget the past.”

My breath caught. How could I tell him that I wanted nothing more than to live in this moment, with him, forever? I couldn’t. He would think I was a silly schoolgirl. Instead, I chose the complacent smile and nod. There was time left; I could only hope I would build up enough courage to tell him how I was feeling.

On the last night, I asked if we could dine in the hotel room instead of eating out. I wanted nothing to distract him from us. I was overjoyed when he easily agreed, and we ordered room service. Afterward, we adjourned to the patio to watch the sunset.

Nervously, I took his hand as we stood by the balcony. “Nick, this week was dreamlike. The wounds I had been hiding behind are healed. You taught me I needed to be who I wanted and never let anyone treat me like their property. Are my strong feelings of gratitude and desire wrong?” I rested my hand on his thigh, hoping to convey my intentions.

“Do you want to be with me to pay me back for our week?” he asked seriously.

“No,” I cried, “I want to know what it feels like to be touched and explored by someone who loves me.”

He led me to the couch. “Caitlyn, you’re a beautiful woman, and I am flattered by your generous offer.”

“But,” I whispered.

“I need to be honest. I was not with the convention. I know your mother.”

“What? I don’t understand.” I recoiled, moving farther away from him.

“My intention was never to bed you. By chance, your mother reached out to me and begged me to help her sweet girl who had changed overnight.”

“My mother? What? Does she know I am with you?” I wasn’t sure if I was trembling from anger or fear.

“This is highly unorthodox, but I am a psychologist. Your mother wanted me to talk with you, to help you work through whatever pain you were going through. I planned on meeting you the old-fashioned way – by introduction – until the bathroom incident. Caitlyn, I knew I had to reach you. I took a risk, and, sweet girl, it worked.”

“You knew I would be the whore, who quickly followed the rich older man off to his hotel room?” I choked out the words.

“No, Caitlyn, I knew you would be the scared little girl seeking a way out of the life you found yourself in. Do not let your anger ruin the week we shared. I know you found yourself again.”

We talked for hours about what I had learned about myself. I understood why he chose such a dramatic way to reach me. The desire I felt for him washed away to gratitude. When the sun rose, I gathered my things and we said our goodbyes.

“Here’s my number if you ever need to talk, Caitlyn.” Nick handed me a slip of paper.

I took it, but we both knew I would never use it. He had been right. I was broken, but I found myself again.

With that newfound strength, I promised to forget the pain from my past and to build the life I was meant to have.

When I finally turned my phone back on, it blew up with messages from Peter. Not one of them indicated concern for my safety. Each was a reminder of what I really meant to him.

Peter: Where r u? Bring dinner.

Peter:???

Peter: Seriously!

Peter: There are hotter bitches waiting to get on this train.

Peter: So this is how it is?

Peter: Come on!

Caitlyn: I'm done with you. Have a nice life, Peter. Find someone else to support you. I deserve better. Don't contact me anymore.

Before he could respond and derail my progress, I deleted the messages and blocked his number. For the first time in a long time, I knew I was in control of my life. I was too good for Peter. I deserved better.

Scrolling through my messages, I was surprised there was not one picture or text from Thomas. Fear filled me. *Did I chase away my only true friend?*

Caitlyn: Hey, I'm home. Come over?

Thomas: On my way!

As if he had been waiting for me to reach out to him, Thomas showed up twenty minutes later, bearing an iced caramel mocha. Setting the drink down, he hugged me tightly. After our greeting, we settled on the patio, and I explained where I had been all week.

Thomas listened quietly. Too quiet for my chatty friend. Realization slowly sunk in.

“You knew about Nick?” I accused.

Thomas sucked in a deep breath and nodded. “Your mom came to me a month ago to find out what was going on with you.”

I felt the blood drain from my body. “You didn't –”

“Never,” he rushed to answer. “I just said you were going through some things, and I was worried about you, too.”

“Why didn't you talk to me?”

“I tried, but you didn't want to hear it.”

“I’d of –”

“You’d what? Tell me to mind my own damn business and worry about who I was fucking?” Thomas used the words I had thrown at him when I first met Peter.

“Oh, Thomas, I’ve been such a bitch.” Throwing my arms around him, I hugged him tight. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You’re wrong. You deserve the world, Cat, but enough about you.” Thomas pulled back and clapped his hands together. “I have *FAN...TAS...TIC* news.”

I couldn’t help but get sucked into his excitement. “Well, don’t keep me in suspense.” I took a long draw off the yummy mocha he brought, coaxing the caffeine to start working immediately.

“Well, you know how I have been working as an intern at Nitro,” he crowed.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, the front page of the New York Times alerted everyone,” I answered sharply.

“Shush, you.” Taking a deep, dramatic breath, he blurted out. “They have offered me a paying job.”

“But, you have to finish school,” I cried.

“That is the best part. They are paying me to finish, and if I decide to go for my master’s, that will be paid for!”

“What will you be doing?”

“A little of everything. My attention to detail makes me a brilliant copy editor, but Julian promised I could get a crack at book editing. He liked my input on J.M. Northup’s next bestseller.” Thomas puffed up with pride.

“Everything is coming together, T. I am so proud of you,” I gushed.

Thomas’ hard work had paid off, and he had the job he dreamed of already. Now, I had to prove it to myself. I was out of the rabbit hole and ready to begin my new life.

BREAKING CAITLYN

ELEVEN

To begin my new life, I enrolled in summer school. Summer passed quickly with the invigorating courses on Shakespeare and Women's Literature. By the time the summer was over, I had pushed my previous pain deep inside me. I felt physically and mentally strong.

My social life focused on Thomas and his latest crush, Jacob Anderson. We spent weekends driving up Coast Highway and shopping at local markets we found along the way. I would not allow myself to date anyone. I was afraid I would fall back into my old habit of taking any scrap thrown at me.

With my head on straight, I proved myself worthy of an internship at Nitro. Under Thomas' tutelage, I was able to move from assistant copy editor to copy editor. I was overjoyed to know my dream job was lined up for when I graduated in the next few months. My life was mapped out, and I was the driver of my destiny. At least, I thought I was.

For Thomas' twenty-second birthday, Jacob planned a surprise beach party and "hired" my mother to organize the event. With my mother's help, and their endless secret meetings at our house to work out the details, they organized the perfect party. The only task I was given was to keep Thomas busy until it was time to bring him there.

The day of the party, I convinced Thomas to go shopping, saying I needed a

new dress. While we were there, I talked him into a new outfit of his own. With our new clothes, it felt only right we should be completely pampered with new hairstyles and facials. Thomas was so excited about his new look that I had to talk him out of an evening in downtown San Diego.

“T, I promised my mother I’d stop by a beach party to help out,” I lied.

“Ok, drop me off at home. I want to surprise Jacob with my new look.” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

“It’ll be quick, and Mom will be overjoyed to see your new outfit. Then, I’ll bring you home.”

Parking was a nightmare. I hadn’t realized the number of guests invited. Finally, I found a spot. As we walked the half-mile back towards the beach, I was relieved we didn’t run into anyone Thomas knew.

“I’m going to be all sweaty, and my hair is going to be flat,” Thomas grumbled.

“You look great. Now, hurry up so we can check in and go,” I commanded.

As we approached the event, Thomas stopped. “Isn’t that Jacob?”

“Is it?” I smirked and grabbed his hand. “Let’s go find out.”

My mother saw Thomas and motioned to someone. The next thing we knew, we were surrounded by a mariachi band. Jacob stepped through the costumed men, carrying a small cake with a long candle.

“Happy Birthday, Baby,” Jacob called out.

“You did all this for me?” Thomas beamed.

“Nothing is too good for my man,” Jacob kissed him tenderly.

Soon the crowd rushed in with birthday wishes. I stepped back, watching as the birthday boy dove into his celebration. Settled in a beach chair, I watched the waves crashing and mellowed to the sound of the party.

“The thing that stinks about beach parties is the sand.” A man stepped in front of me and began to frantically brush off the offending rock particles. “Would you mind getting it off my back?”

“Um, sure,” I hesitated.

“I promise this is not a pickup line,” the blonde-haired man beamed at me. My breath caught as I got a good look at him. Blond hair, blue eyes, athletic, and charming.

“Ok, turn around,” I said. Gently, I began to brush my hand over his muscled body. A weird sensation ran through me. I wanted to run my hands through his silky hair.

Slow down, Caitlyn. You’re not that girl anymore, I scolded myself.

“Thanks for the help. Forgive my bad manners. I’m Jeremy Whittaker, and you are?”

“Caitlyn. Caitlyn Chase,” I stammered like a fool.

“My date dragged me to this event, and I don’t know anyone here.” He motioned to a blonde girl behind us who was dancing in the center of a group of men.

“Oh, she seems —”

“Yeah, Lisa is... well, she’s a party girl. A bit fast for my taste,” he admitted. “Mind keeping me company until I get to escort her home?”

Over the next few hours, I learned everything there was to know about Jeremy Whittaker. Twenty-five. Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology and Health and a master’s degree in Finance. He told me how he planned on being a personal trainer until he fell in love with the stock market.

His enthusiasm was contagious. Jeremy had plans for his future, not just living off his inheritance. Our conversation was easy, and I was disappointed when it ended.

“Looks like my date should be taken home before she gets herself in trouble,” Jeremy sighed.

“Sand,” I exclaimed, and we both laughed as we dusted the sand off each other.

Mid swipe, Jeremy caught my hand. “I really enjoyed talking to you, Caitlyn. I would like to see you again.”

A lump formed in my throat. *He seems nice, but wasn’t Christopher at first? You suck at picking men.*

Sensing my hesitation, he handed me a card. “We can just have coffee, tea... anything, as long as there is no sand involved.

I smiled and accepted his card. “I’ll text you.”

“Don’t be coy and wait a few days to message me,” he laughed.

I pulled out my phone and entered his contact information.

Caitlyn: Coffee sounds great.

Jeremy: Tomorrow at 11 AM.

I looked up from my phone, and our eyes met. “Eleven is perfect.” I smiled.

TWELVE

I didn't expect our coffee date to be as comfortable as the beach, but it was like we knew each other all of our lives. Coffee dates turned to lunch. Lunch turned into dinner.

When he finally kissed me, it was tender and sweet. I kept waiting for him to attempt to sleep with me, but he never tried. Nothing in the way he behaved gave any indication that he planned to seduce me. Instead, we held hands, hugged, and snuggled on the couch. Innocent romance only. Jeremy was respectful of my commitments to finishing school, my job, and even the odd shift to help out my mother.

I finally met a nice man. With that, our whirlwind romance was cemented. I thought of myself as Jeremy's girlfriend, even though it was never officially said. It didn't matter. I had never been happier.

Being with Jeremy changed everything. I found myself consumed with the new world he showed me. Even though he despised the ballet and the theatre, he thought it would be useful to impress future clients.

Jeremy made a point to be well-rounded in his experiences. In his profession, it was important for him to be able to recommend the newest and hottest dance clubs or recommend a vineyard for a weekend getaway. His ability to know what a client wanted even before they did charmed everyone he met.

I wondered, sometimes, why he was with me. Anytime I mentioned my concern to Thomas, he reminded me that Jeremy was not my father. The remarkable thing about the fast-moving life I now lived was that before I could

drown in my self-doubt or fears, Jeremy would whisk me away on another adventure.

Four months after we met, a package arrived by courier service. Inside the silver box, I found a snowsuit and ski sunglasses. Inside the note read:

Colorado and the slopes are calling us.

Come away with me, Caitlyn?

In the time we spent together, we kissed and were affectionate, but he never pushed it further. He was a gentleman, but I knew I was ready for the next step with Jeremy. I was in love, and I hoped he felt the same.

When we arrived in Colorado, heavy snow had fallen the night before. My first sight of snow was exciting. The joy wore off when I realized how my attire really wasn't adequate. My sexy jacket did nothing to block the chill.

I snuggled closer to Jeremy as we rode up the mountain toward what looked like a resort in the Alps. The resort looked like a series of designer log cabins. Stepping out of the limo, a cold wind cut me to my core. Once inside the hotel lobby, I found the warmth we had left behind in California.

"Mr. Whittaker, you have been checked in. Sean can take you straight away to your residence," a desk clerk greeted us in an overly cheery tone.

"Great." Jeremy clasped his hand in mine and squeezed it.

Along the way, the young man described the history of the property and the winter opportunities available to us. When he opened the door to our accommodations, he continued, "The Penthouse offers a view of the mountains from every angle." The young man set the bags down and opened the curtains. "The kitchen has been stocked with the essentials per your request. I'll bring the bags to the master suite. Would you like me to give you the full tour?"

"I think we would rather explore ourselves," Jeremy said, taking my arm.

"Very well. Please let us know if you or Mrs. Whittaker need anything else,

sir,” the young man said.

“We will. Thank you.” Jeremy slipped some cash into the man’s hand. “Just be sure to put up the ‘do not disturb’ sign.”

I blushed as the man’s eyes met mine.

“Of course, sir. Enjoy your stay.” He nodded and left.

“Mrs. Whittaker?” I questioned.

“I may have told a little white lie to make sure we would be spoiled all weekend,” Jeremy admitted. After hanging our jackets in the front closet, he clasped both my hands. With a little tug, he pulled me towards him and kissed me. “I hope that is ok? We should have talked about my plans. Instead, I just jumped and hoped you would agree.”

“So what perks does a pretend bride get?” I asked, feeling intoxicated by the romance of the vacation.

“Well, there’s a fine kitchen where we will be able to prepare a meal together,” he said, opening the fridge, confirming it had been filled with food. “Then, we will have a romantic dinner,” he continued as he led me through the lavish space. “When we are full, we will relax in front of a roaring fire.”

The bedroom we saw next was smaller than I expected. The queen-size bed was exquisite, but not as grand as the rest of the space.

“So, this room is available for you.”

My heart fell a bit. *We will be sleeping separately?*

“Or, if you’re into bunk beds, you can stay here?” Jeremy suggested, pointing to the room across the hall.

My mind raced. *Didn’t he tell the bellman I was Mrs. Whittaker? Did I read the situation wrong?*

“Let’s continue the tour,” he suggested.

When we returned to the dining room, he opened a door I hadn’t noticed. The master suite. Inside was a California king bed with crisp white linens. Rustic furniture filled the room, leaving me in awe of its Northwoods Style. The master bathroom was as big as the bed chamber and had an oversized tub with an adjoining glass shower.

“Caitlyn, I would like for us to stay in this room for the weekend,” his

voice was husky. "I don't want you to feel pressured. We should've talked about this before we got here."

"I... I want that, too," I blurted out, and then felt foolish. Instead of the sophisticated woman I wanted to be, I sounded like a child.

If he knew what you've done, he wouldn't want to touch you, the voice inside chided.

As quick as I said I was ready, a tinge of doubt filled me. *He doesn't need to know my past*, I argued. "The bathtub looks very inviting," I said, trying to sound sexy.

"It does." He kissed me and let his hands drift to my blouse.

I felt the cool air hit as we began to undo each one slowly. I shivered in anticipation. He kissed my shoulders as he slowly removed my shirt.

He stood back and gazed at me. "God, you're beautiful. Let me fill the bath for you."

Jeremy started the water and poured a rose scented liquid under the stream. Bubbles filled the tub as we both silently watched. The anticipation was agonizing.

I knew how I would have behaved before. I would have seduced and dominated him. That girl was gone.

I felt sick as I thought about how I treated myself, and the men I found. All of it to forget Christopher. A boy that had used me and never looked back.

"Test the temperature," Jeremy suggested.

Shaking my dark thoughts away, I dipped my hand under the bubbles. It was perfect. I stood back up to tell him, and I found myself face-to-face with him.

"Is it ok?"

"Yes, very warm."

He slipped his hands behind me and in a quick movement, unhooked my bra. His fingers trailed down my shoulders, sweeping the straps off, and the garment fell to the ground. His eyes filled with desire as he traced down my arms,

stopping at the button of my jeans.

His touch was torture. I wanted him to sweep me up and carry me to the bed. Our eyes locked as he removed the rest of my clothing.

“Don’t let the water get cold,” he said, taking my hand and helping me into the tub.

I slipped under the water, and my heart began to beat frantically. “There’s room for two.”

He knelt by the tub and removed his shirt. I sighed as I took in his strong shoulders and tight abdominal muscles. It was my turn to be forward. I stroked my finger down his chest and slipped my fingers into his waistband. I tugged him towards me.

“Not so quick, Cait,” he whispered as he slipped his hand under the water and began to explore my body.

Jeremy confirmed that he was an experienced lover with the technique he used to tease and prod my sensitive areas. Just as I felt I would peak, he pulled away, directing hands to other parts of my body. He slipped his finger inside me, and I rocked against him. I ached from the pressure building inside me.

“Now,” he whispered.

My body was under his command, and I cried out in pleasure. When I opened my eyes, I saw him smiling down on me. Self-consciously, I tried to slip under the bubbles, but the water was lower. He had pulled the plug.

“That was –” I struggled with words.

“Let me dry you.” Jeremy quickly grabbed a towel and held it open for me.

I stepped into it and allowed him to wrap me in the warm cloth. Slowly, he dried me, teasing me along the way. After I was dry, he scooped me up, and carried me to the bed.

He laid me under the silky sheets, and I rolled over to watch him undress. The blissful torture intensified as I watched him slowly remove each remaining piece. I trembled with excitement and fear as he slipped under the covers next to me.

“Let’s just explore each other,” he murmured in my ear and rolled me into his arms. “I have never met anyone like you, Caitlyn. You’re different. I want

this to last.”

After every ounce of my body had been kissed, caressed, or examined, it was my turn. It was nothing like Paul’s scientific exploration. It felt raw and emotional.

Rolling on his back, Jeremy smiled at me. I teased and taunted him until he was moaning. I ached again.

Abandoning my task, I murmured in his ear. “No more teasing. I’m ready.”

Jeremy grabbed a condom from the nightstand and covered himself. I wondered if he could tell how many men I had slept with. Would it be obvious?

He slipped on top of me and moaned, “God, you’re tight.”

My fears were calmed. My secrets would remain locked away.

Jeremy was a considerate lover. His movements were gentle and caring. For the first time, I understood what it felt to make love.

His thrusts sent chills throughout my body, and I clutched him as I orgasmed. With my pleasure achieved, I thought it would soon be over. Instead, Jeremy slowed his movements and stopped his own release.

This act of selflessness sent me over the edge. I didn’t know it was possible to feel this way. For the third time since we arrived, I writhed and moaned in ecstasy. I thought I might explode.

Finally, Jeremy reached his peak. Shuddering, he slowly relaxed, gently covering me with his weight.

We laid still for seconds, our heavy breathing in unison. The blood pumped through every bit of my body. I sighed when he lifted from me and left the bed. The chilly air prickled my skin.

That’s what you’re used to, Caitlyn. They always leave when they are done. Just as the negative thoughts came to mind, Jeremy slipped back under the covers and he hugged me tightly.

“Cait, you wrecked me.” His mouth was pressed against my neck. “Was I worth the wait?”

Twisting around, I kissed him. “Yes. Next time, let’s not wait so long.”

Growling, he held me closer, and I felt our wait wouldn’t be much longer at all.

Instead of testing out my new snowsuit, we found excuses to make love in every part of the suite. Jeremy didn't know it, but I tried to replace each of my cheap acts of lust with his loving. Pretending to be the scientist, the bookstore clerk, the biker, and the prom date, he thought I was role playing. Our new love was insatiable.

On the last day, we forced ourselves to test out the slopes, but one fall led to a frigid make out session. Sadly, our four days of bliss had to come to an end. As the plane landed in San Diego, Jeremy kissed my hand

“I don't want anyone else, Caitlyn. This is the real thing. Am I enough for you, too?” he asked.

Tears of joy filled my eyes and I answered him with a kiss. The door to my past was locked and I threw away the skeleton key.

THIRTEEN

Everything changed. I was officially Jeremy's girlfriend. We became inseparable. Thomas, Jacob, and my mother were happy I found a kind man who stole my heart. Even with this affection, my mother warned me that a man like Jeremy would be hard to keep devoted. I ignored her jealous words.

Months after we returned, Jeremy was offered a job with The Hayes James Group. The marketing director's promises of a seventy-five thousand annual salary, plus bonuses, were too tempting for Jeremy to not take the job. I was worried since the headquarters were a hundred miles away in Los Angeles, but Jeremy juggled everything with finesse.

He worked in the San Diego office three days a week and was put up in a corporate condo during the weekends. Jeremy had been hired to wine and dine the clientele. This meant Thursday through Sunday, he had to be in L.A. and ready to treat the clients to a weekend they would never forget

During the week, I found myself staying at his apartment. Not only was it close to my job but it would ensure that I saw him the minute he returned from LA. At first, my mother was worried about the arrangement, but before I knew it, Jeremy had worked his magic on her.

"Caitlyn, you told me you are ahead of the game with your edits. Come spend

the weekend with me. The clients love you,” Jeremy pleaded. Enveloping me in his arms, he nibbled on my neck.

“I’d love to go, but I need to focus on finishing this novel.” I wriggled out of his grasp. I knew, if I didn’t break the spell, I would be packing my overnight bag and forgetting my responsibilities.

“Fine.” Pouting, he flopped on the couch and continued his guilt trip, “I’ll go all by myself to the big scary city.”

“I am sure you will be fine. Do you want to take my pepper spray to protect you?” I laughed

Jeremy caught my hand and pulled me onto his lap. “I’ll forgive you this time,” he purred in my ear. “We will just have to make the best of the next few hours before I leave you.”

Instead of changing my mind about going with him, Jeremy and I spent the next two hours quenching our physical desires. Jeremy was the master of seduction. He would bring me to the brink, and then slowly tease until I was begging for him. It was like the universe made us for each other. His technique worked, and we both exploded in pleasure.

“This should keep you tied over,” Jeremy said breathlessly.

I snuggled into his arms, inhaling his scent. I traced my nails down his chest and along his tight stomach muscles. He shuddered from the sensations I sent through him. I knew every freckle, every scar, every inch of his body

“Do you have to go?” I whispered in his ear, pressing my mouth to his neck.

“Yes, my temptress.” He laughed. This time it was his turn to wiggle out of my clutch.

I watched him walking away, admiring his tan body. The shower turned on, and I waited until I knew he would be nice and soapy. Quietly slipping behind the shower curtain, I let the water drip on me as I wrapped my arms around him.

He jumped in surprise before whipping around and kissing me deeply. Abruptly, his mouth broke from mine. He turned me around and pulled me

towards him. It was my turn to shudder as his hot breath against my neck sent chills throughout my body.

“I love you, Caitlyn. I can’t imagine my life without you,” he murmured, his strong arms, holding me tighter

I froze.

In the nine months we had been together, he never said those words. He was going to eventually move to LA. He was my long-term fling, who would leave me, one day. When he moved, I planned to visit him, but I never thought of permanency. He was my ‘right now.’

His arms released me, and I felt a twinge of disappointment. I worried that my lack of response had upset him. When I turned to face him, he was on bended knee, water drenching him.

“What are you doing?” My voice cracked.

“Caitlyn Elizabeth Chase, I am madly, deeply, and insanely in love with you. You are my yesterday, my today, and I want you to be my tomorrow. I want you to be my wife,” he declared.

“This is so impulsive.”

“No.” He jumped up. “I have wanted to do this for several months. I’ve been thinking about it since Colorado.”

I clearly did not hide my look of doubt well enough. Our trip would confuse the clearest mind to think we were in love; it had been so intense. It was too soon to fall in love. Our weekend had been nothing more than a passionate affair. Wasn’t it? We both enjoyed the time that we spent together but could our feelings be deeper?

“Seriously. Stay here.” He hopped out of the shower.

When the sound of his bare feet slapping on the tile ended, I sighed and slipped under the stream of warm water. *He is joking. He must be joking. But, what if he isn’t?*

The curtain waved, his shadow outlined on the other side. Peeking out, I saw Jeremy naked, except for a black bow tie. Once again, he was kneeling, but this time he held out a burgundy box. I pulled back the cloth dividing us, and he caught my hand.

“Marry me,” he insisted.

The feelings I had been holding back flooded me. A single tear that dared to release flowed down my cheek.

With the flip of his thumb, he opened the box. Nestled inside was a pear halo engagement ring. The larger diamond was encircled with smaller diamonds, and the delicate platinum band had five sapphires on each side. It was beautiful.

“If you don’t like it, we will get a new one. If you want me to propose in front of an audience, I’ll do it. Just say yes. Caitlyn, we are meant to be forever.” His words were confident.

“Don’t mess this up,” I warned myself. “You love him.”

“Will you...”

Before he had a chance to ask again, I threw myself into his arms. “Yes! Of course, I’ll marry you.”

Jeremy slipped the ring on my finger and scooped me into his arms. “I’ve caught you now, Caitlyn. You’re mine forever.”

“Forever,” I whispered as I melted into the arms of the man I never thought I would find. He was real. The impossible had happened. I would really get my happy ending.

FOURTEEN

“Simple, Mother,” I warned.

My mother sighed and stepped away from the full-skirted monstrosities. “Fine. We will find you something elegant and—”

“Simple,” I reminded.

Walking past the rows and rows of fancy wedding dresses, I stopped at one of the mannequins. “Like this.”

My mother wrinkled her nose at my choice. “It is so plain.”

“Can I help you, ladies?” A matronly woman appeared from behind the racks.

“I want to try this one on.” I pointed at the high neck ivory dress.

“Are you sure? It is so plain.” My mother’s frown deepened.

“It is perfect,” I insisted.

Two months later, I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, praying Jeremy would never change like my father had. To my relief, my fear of moving to Los Angeles was squashed. Jeremy was a vital player in the San Diego scene. With his new demands near home, his boss decided to cut his time in L.A. down to one week a month.

“Things are going to work out, Caitlyn,” I told myself.

As I hoped, the simple dress was perfect. The high front was countered with a deep V in the back that trailed long ruffles. It was elegance meets seduction. I twirled around as I admired my image.

“You’re beautiful,” my mother gushed as she held out teardrop diamond

earrings.

“From Daddy?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Yes, he gave them to me on our fifth wedding anniversary. I always planned you would wear them one day. Are they ok?” She fluttered around me. “I know I should have asked you before, but I wanted to surprise you.”

“It is like the best part of him is here,” I said, quickly putting them on and hugging her tightly.

“The best part of him is here, Caitlyn. You,” my mother said, releasing me.

To appease my mother, I agreed to have my beach wedding on land, not sand. I relented to an oceanfront lawn instead of being by the waves. My mother went above and beyond to make the elegant and tasteful nuptials she always aspired for me.

With my mother on one arm and Thomas on the other, we walked through white petals leading to Jeremy. The golden man before me looked like a movie star in his black tuxedo and wavy styled hair. My heart flipped as he took my hand.

The day was a blur. My thoughts raced with both doubts and elated feelings of joy. Jeremy’s declaration of love and adoration left few with dry eyes. As we stepped onto the dance floor, all of my questions were answered.

“I am his.”

My life had begun.

Caitlyn Whittaker was the answer to all my fears. I would be the perfect wife and, one day, the perfect mother. It was a dream wedding, and it would be a dream life.

FAKING CAITLYN

FIFTEEN

In the first few years of our marriage, I often thought back to the days when we first met. Our first home was a quaint cottage on the beach. It was my style of home, not his, but he wanted to make me happy. How sweet and selfless he was only enforced my complete confidence that our love was real and would be eternal.

When Jeremy and I first discussed being parents, I was relieved he agreed to no children for the first five years of marriage. I forced my dark memories of the past deep and far down, but I was not foolish enough to think I was ready to nurture another life. Our commitment to each other was my focus.

The whole time, I had been so worried about my past that I didn't see my present. Looking back, I scolded myself for not realizing what our relationship really was – I had become his trophy. He was mildly interested in my brains, but not enough to keep me around forever.

Our relationship changed as we grew older.

My appearance made my job as Mrs. Jeremy Whittaker possible. No promotion for being witty or charming, but a demotion or even a dismissal always loomed for the slightest imperfection. It was as if Jeremy was in denial that I wouldn't always be the twenty-three-year-old bride he married.

He made sure to remind me my beauty would never fade as long as our love was strong enough. This meant as long as I limited my food consumption and never missed a workout, our love would thrive. Jeremy was obsessed with bottling our youth.

Food became my obsession. Jeremy never told me I couldn't eat pasta, or I shouldn't order dessert. However, if I felt defiant and did, he would stare at me until I said I was full. Of course, he polished off his dinner and my leftovers, being sure to tell me how delicious it was.

Instead of feeling bitter, I told myself he was right. I could easily gain weight if I ate like I wanted to. With this acceptance, I spent all my energy on being the perfect size, the perfect wife, and the perfect shell.

This became even more difficult when Jeremy's job changed again. His company added more workdays in Los Angeles. This included a generous travel budget, allowing him to stay in hotels on long days instead of corporate housing.

In the beginning, I joined him for long weekends. I was there to charm the clients. When Jeremy suggested I not join him one weekend because he had 'so much work to get caught up on,' I was relieved. I didn't think twice when it became more frequent.

My trips with him became few and far between. I felt guilty that I was secretly pleased by this. The club life and playing the perfect wife in public were exhausting.

One morning, I found Jeremy sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for me to make his breakfast. As usual, he was reading the paper and drinking his third glass of ice water with lemon. I stopped and stared at the photo of Christopher plastered across the front page.

"Are you not going to fix me breakfast?" Jeremy called, not realizing I was staring at him.

"The usual?" I quickly answered.

He grunted his approval, and I robotically prepared his avocado toast and protein oatmeal. *Why is Christopher Ross on the cover of the newspaper?* I wondered.

"Wear the red dress from prom tonight. Your ass looks hot in it," the voice of Christopher whispered from behind me.

I whipped around to face him. “What did you say?” I snapped.

“Wear the red dress I bought you for dinner tonight. It looks great on you,” Jeremy answered. “Hey, did you see a guy from your high school died?” He held up the paper. “Did you know him?”

The bile rose in my throat as I stared at the image of my attacker. I vehemently shook my head. “No, no, I didn’t know him,” my voice a whisper.

“Good. He sounded like a real piece of work.” Jeremy folded the paper and set it down. “What’s going on with you today? You look horrible.”

“I’m not feeling well. I woke up feeling like this,” I lied.

“You aren’t pregnant, are you?” Jeremy scowled.

“I’m 100% sure that is not the case,” I quickly answered.

“Good. Well, rest up today. I need you tonight.” He placed the dirty dishes in the sink and wrapped his arms around me.

I flinched at his touch.

“Oh, babe, you are warm. Let’s tuck you into bed.” He scooped me up and carried me to our bed. Once I was under the covers, Jeremy kissed me on the forehead, darkened the room, and then brought me a glass of water. Handing me a bottle of pain medicine, he said, “Get some rest, and I’ll check in later.”

When he was gone, I returned to the kitchen. The newspaper was gone. I frantically dug through the recycling. Instead, I found it in the garbage covered in coffee grounds. Wiping off the slime, I stared at the image.

“SON OF RENOWNED LAWYER FOUND DEAD” shouted at me. I skimmed the article. *Linked to sex and drug trafficking*. The story claimed Christopher had been drugging women for years and selling them to the highest bidder.

Dozens of women had come forward with allegations. Two of his accusers were able to gather enough evidence for the district attorney to prosecute. One woman claimed she had been assaulted by Christopher and his friend, Travis Warner, her freshman year of high school. She insisted others would have been

found if the men hadn't died.

The official causes of death were determined to be suicide. The letters found indicated there had been a death pact.

The phone rang, startling me.

"Did you see the paper," Thomas said before I could say hello.

"I'm looking at it now. Is it finally over, T?" I cried.

"It is. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Thomas comforted me while I processed my relief. I didn't have to watch over my shoulder, wondering if Christopher would appear. No one would find out what happened to me. I would let the official count of women assaulted by those monsters remain one less.

By the time Jeremy showed up, I had composed myself enough to go to dinner. The man who supposedly cared for and cherished me was too oblivious to see I was in pain. All he saw was the beautiful wife who would charm his clients.

SIXTEEN

Thomas burst into my office and sat down on the manuscript I was editing. “I met a boy in San Diego, and we are getting married.”

Wonderful. We are going to start the day quoting old movies. I set my pen down and sighed. “What are you talking about? You are going to make a mess,” I scolded.

I grabbed my coffee before it was knocked over and set it on the bookcase behind me. “You met a boy and you’re getting married?” I said the words out loud and instantly understood. I threw my arms around my friend. “You didn’t? You can’t be – he didn’t! How wonderful,” I gushed.

Thomas and I hugged and jumped around. When we calmed, Thomas sat down, crossing his legs, then his hands. He leaned in as if telling me a secret. He waved his wrist in front of me. I grabbed his hand for a closer inspection.

He was wearing a chronograph watch. The handsome timepiece had a gray band that held a deep brown dial case. It was stunning.

“He bought you a Movado? Do you even know how to use it?”

“Of course, I don’t.” Laughing, he took his arm back and admired it. “But it is pretty enough to be on my dainty wrist.”

“You’re a fool.” I joined in his laughter. “I am so happy, T. You are getting married!”

“Yes, Jacob Anderson and Thomas Martin will unite to be the powerhouse of Mr. & Mr. Martin-Anderson.”

“How did you convince him to have your name first?”

“Well, I used my amazing reasoning skills.”

I raised my eyebrows in disbelief.

“I told him he had three choices for our new names. He could choose the seductive and sexy, Martin-Anderson. Or, we could merge our names and try Manderson or Andertin. Thankfully, he didn’t call my bluff.” Thomas threw back his head and laughed. “Good thing we are getting married in two weeks. It won’t give him time to think about my trickery.”

“Oh, Thomas, he knows about your sneaky ways. It’s my mother you need to worry about. She’s going to freak out. She won’t be able to throw you the wedding she always dreamed of.”

“Jacob has already handled sweet Hillary. They have been planning since this morning. He soothed her with a morning coffee splashed with Bailey’s and a heavy helping of ‘Only you can save us, Mother Hillary’.”

I chuckled at the image. How well the boys knew my mother.

“The wedding will be at your mother’s house. She already has the backyard lined with soft twinkling lights and seating for our intimate group. It will be simple, sweet, and cheap,” Thomas bragged. “Of course, the money we saved will be blown on a fantastic two-week honeymoon in Europe.”

Just three years before, we had been devastated when Proposition 8 passed in California and took away my gay best friends’ right to marry. When ‘Prop Hate’ was ruled as unconstitutional, I was surprised they hadn’t run out that day and celebrated by getting a marriage license. They didn’t need the official paper. They were meant for each other. Even so, I was thrilled love had finally prevailed.

With marriage on the brain, the manuscript I was editing was neglected for the rest of the afternoon. We decided we would not get anything done, so we took the rest of the day off to join my mother and Jacob. We found out immediately that we weren’t needed. Thomas was right. My mother had everything handled, including the dress I was going to wear. I knew my mother would make sure my best friends had a beautiful wedding.

That evening, over dinner, I told Jeremy the great news. I described the plans my mother came up with on short notice to create a magical wedding. He pushed his plate away and glared at me.

“You really expect me to be there on this short notice for a fairy wedding?” Jeremy scowled.

I cringed at his insult. Jeremy made comments before that made me wonder if he was supportive of their relationship, but they were so flippant that I attributed it to juvenile humor.

“They are our best friends,” I argued.

“*Your* friends,” he snapped.

“You met me because of those *friends*.” I picked up the uneaten plates and tossed both in the sink. “I ask very little from you, Jeremy. Anytime you demand I join you in Los Angeles, I am there. No questions asked. If you need me to leave work and deliver something to you, I do it. When do I ask you for anything?”

Burning tears filled my eyes as I pushed the pasta into the disposal. *I am married to the most selfish man in the entire world*, I thought bitterly.

“I’ll reschedule my appointments.” Jeremy wrapped his arms around my waist. “I’m sorry. It will be awesome to see them finally settle down.”

He slipped his hand under my shirt and squeezed my nipple. My anger was still there, but my traitor of a body responded. I let out a soft moan.

“You’ve been very naughty tonight by wasting your dinner, Caitlyn,” his voice husky. “I think I will send you to your room.”

“I’m not tired,” I rasped as he began to kiss my neck.

“We will have to talk about this defiance,” he teased, pulling down my pants and panties.

Smack. His hand playfully slapped my ass.

“Are you ready to behave or would you like another spanking?” Before I could answer, he slapped my bare bottom again. This time harder, and it stung.

Shock filled me. *Is Jeremy into this kind of sex games?* I trembled at the thought. A light slap I could handle, but anything more might send me to therapy. I turned around and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“I will behave,” I purred in his ear.

Growling, he picked me up and sprawled me on the dining table. His attention was no longer on punishing me. His focus was dedicated to pleasure.

My mind raced. I tried pushing back the bottled feelings of fear from my senior year of high school. However, they came rushing forward, reminding me of the devastating assault.

He doesn't know what happened to you. Jeremy loves you. He would never hurt you.

It was too late. My mind overpowered my body and I did not feel any pleasure from our intimacy. I closed my eyes and allowed him to use his skillful tongue between my legs. I played the satisfied wife. After a reasonable amount of time passed, I let out fake screams of pleasure and writhed.

Another award-worthy performance, I thought.

Jeremy slid me down the table and picked me up. He kissed me deeply as we moved to our bedroom. Setting me down on our bed, he finally entered me, completely focused on his own pleasure.

Pressing his mouth to my ear, he said, “My little spanking seemed to get you hot.”

I closed my eyes to hold in the tears I knew would flood my cheeks. He was oblivious to the fact I was not here.

Jerking in release, Jeremy clung to me. “We should fight more often, babe. You were on fire.”

The man I fell in love with should have noticed the disconnect. This new person thought I was just a toy to dress up and show off. *Now, he wants to strike me?* How simple it was for him to believe we had both experienced the fuck of our life. In that instance, I felt truly alone.

SEVENTEEN

On our fourth anniversary, Jeremy showed up at our home with a set of keys.

“These keys represent our new life.” He grinned as he placed them in my hand. “James offered me the Regional Marketing job. Our hard work has paid off. You can quit your job. Best news, I sold that old car of yours and used the cash towards our new home in Los Angeles.”

“You did what?” I forced my voice to stay calm. “The old car you got rid of was from my father. You had no right.”

His face changed. A darkness filled his eyes as he ripped the keys out of my hand. “Maybe I wasn’t clear enough. I invested in our future, not *your* past. I’ll get your precious car back, and you can ride off in it...out of my life.”

Like telling me to go buy groceries. Cold. No feeling. Our marriage was that easy to dispose of. Fear filled me. I was Jeremy’s wife. What would I be without that title?

“I’m sorry. It’s just the last part of my father that I had left,” I said, trying to take his hand.

He shoved me away. The force of his push knocked me onto the arm of the couch. The heavy wood sent a sharp pain through my body. I crumpled to the floor as he walked out the door.

Stunned, I stared at the door, waiting for him to return. Hours passed and I was afraid to move. I rehearsed my apology. Practiced my congratulations for his success and hard work. He needed to know how sorry I was.

The sound of the door unlocking woke me. I quickly stood to greet him.

“Thanks, man,” Jeremy slurred. He shoved a wad of crumpled money into the taxi driver’s hand. “See, I told you I had the hottest piece of ass in town waiting for me.”

The driver’s eyes caught mine, but he quickly looked away. “Well, you’re safe and sound now. Have a good evening, sir.”

Jeremy swayed as he struggled to shut and lock the door. I jumped to help him. I just latched the door when he had his arms around me, and he was kissing my neck. The stench of cigarettes, beer, and cheap perfume washed over me.

You forced him to leave. You drove him away, I chastised myself.

“Let me get you to bed, Jeremy. You must be tired.” I twisted out of his hold and slipped my arm around his waist.

“You’re so hot, babe,” Jeremy slurred. He pulled on my sweater, exposing my bra.

I pulled him along as he continued his attempt to undress me. Frustrated, he chose to begin removing his own clothes. He stumbled as he fought to remove his leg from his pants. Like a toddler, he threw himself to the ground and frantically wriggled out of his clothing. Lying naked in the narrow hallway, he grinned up at me.

“Your turn, babe,” he teased, thrusting his erect penis at me.

“Jeremy, it’s...”

“Never mind,” he growled, banging the wall as he struggled to stand.

I reached out to help him, but he slapped my hands away. When I finally caught his arms, I held onto him tightly.

He let me guide him. He flopped down on the bed when we reached it, but on his way down he grabbed me, pulling me onto him.

“Why did you drive me away? You know it’s all your fault. How could I say no? I mean you wouldn’t,” he slurred as he clung to me. “You should been happy.”

“I’m sorry, Jeremy. You’re right. I did ruin your surprise. Just close your

eyes and we can talk in the morning.”

Slowly, he released his hold on me. Minutes later, Jeremy was heavily snoring. I slipped off of him and wrapped the blankets around him. I checked to make sure the front door was locked and along the way I gathered his discarded clothing. I took the pile to the washer and threw them in.

His phone, I suddenly remembered.

I pulled his pants out and fished out his wallet, keys, and an empty condom wrapper. Bile rose in my throat. *You know it's all your fault. How could I say no?* echoed in my mind.

It was my fault. I'd driven him away. He was excited to share his good news. He impulsively sold the car I complained about so often. How did he know what the car symbolized? I never told him. I never told him anything.

I shoved the wrapper deep in the trash, burying it like my feelings.

I had a choice to make. My mind played, over and over, all the scenarios as I watched the sunrise from the kitchen window. Would I stay with him or leave him for the crime I assumed he committed?

As the sky turned blue, I made my decision. I would forgive and forget his indiscretion. He never gave me any signs he was a cheater before, and I would be a better wife. One thing I knew for sure...I couldn't tell Thomas what happened.

Determined to move on, I loaded a tray with eggs, bacon, and toast. I even made Jeremy's favorite Bloody Mary, light on the vodka. I set the tray down and climbed onto the bed next to him.

“Wake up, sleepy head.”

“Mmm,” he moaned.

“I brought you breakfast in bed.” I trailed my fingers along his cheek and circled his lips. His eyes closed again. I needed to be a more aggressive alarm clock. I lightly dragged my nails down his chest, down his stomach. His body shuddered as I lowered my touch and retreated.

I knew what he expected me to do next and reluctantly complied.

When I asked girlfriends how they felt about the obligatory blowjob, I received mixed reviews – indifference to grandiose feelings of power and control. I loathed myself for succumbing to an act that made me feel dirty.

The thought that the woman he picked up last night probably had her mouth on my husband the same way made me abandon my task.

Jeremy growled in frustration, “Tease.”

I slid up his body and pressed my mouth to his neck. “Your breakfast is getting cold.” I continued to tease and taunt his now hardening manhood.

In a fast movement, he flipped me over and was on top of me. His piercing blue eyes locked with mine.

Once again, I let myself believe I was all he wanted and needed. Nothing would break us. I promised myself I would be a better wife... a better lover. I would not end up like my mother – alone.

“What do you mean you’re giving notice,” Thomas snapped, slamming his fist on the desk.

“Jeremy has been promoted and we are moving to L.A.,” I explained.

“So, you telecommute. There, problem solved.” He rubbed his hands together, dismissing the issue.

“No,” I said, forcing myself not to cry. “Jeremy needs me to play a more active role. Appearance is everything in his line of work.”

“Well, I am not accepting your resignation. You will die if you do nothing but play wifey,” he countered.

“What if you got a great job offer and you need Jacob to support you?” I sighed.

“I would never ask my husband to give up his dreams to chase mine, Cat. I believe in win-win, hun. What does he expect you to do with your time?”

“Plan dinners. Workout. Keep the house well maintained and running... I don’t know, Thomas. All I know is that Jeremy is my husband, and we have to

make it work.” I wanted to confess everything that had happened, but I knew it would not end well. Thomas would tell me I was selling myself, and he would’ve been right.

“Well, I’m still not taking your resignation. You’re on leave. Too many authors depend on you. When you come to your senses and want more work, you know it will be here for you.” Thomas pushed his chair back and moved to the guest seat next to me. He wrapped his arms around me, and I fell into his embrace, hugging him back. “You would tell me if there was something wrong, right?” He smoothed my hair back and kissed me on the forehead.

“I just don’t want to let anyone down.”

“Crazy Cat, you don’t have to worry about me. Like I said, you’re on leave. If I need you, I know you will be there. Will you finish out Winter’s latest and greatest before you go? You know he needs your finesse to smooth out his 007 edges.” He laughed and released me.

“Of course, I’ll keep my commitment,” I promised. Biting my lip, I contemplated my next words.

“Spit it out,” Thomas ordered.

“Let’s not tell Jeremy. I don’t want him thinking I am distracted from his needs,” I blurted out.

“Fine,” he said, extending the word as if he wanted to ask more questions. “I’ll keep it a secret. How will I pay you?”

“Don’t.”

He frowned and shook his head.

“Fine. Pay me cash, then? Save it for me? I’ll collect it when I come visit.”

“You know I really can’t...”

“It’s the only way to keep Jeremy out of it. He handles the money. He would know the minute I got the tax return. I don’t need the money. Hold onto it for a rainy day, ok?”

Nodding, he said, “Rainy day. I hope you aren’t expecting a flood and not telling me.”

“No storm clouds in the sky.” I smiled.

I would handle everything. Living with my mother had prepared me for a life

just like this. But, unlike her, I would control my future. Jeremy would never stray again. I wouldn't let him.

EIGHTEEN

Moving to L.A. was easier than expected. Jeremy handled everything. He picked out the furniture. Made me a list of the local stores he wanted me to shop at. He even signed me up for a gym and a spa.

My days were scheduled. Mornings were focused on Jeremy's needs. No matter how tired I was, I made sure he wanted for nothing. He had no reason to search outside our bedroom. He woke to a beautiful wife with a healthy sex drive who cooked and kept the house in perfect condition.

When he left, I joined him in the chauffeured town car. He was dropped off at the office, and I was delivered to the gym. I spent my mornings on cardio and beauty treatments.

Every other week, I had my hair trimmed. Jeremy insisted I have laser hair removal treatments to keep my skin smooth. I refused to have lasers near my intimate areas, so I endured the torturous waxings. I lost weight, toned up, and looked like I belonged in Beverly Hills.

After six years of marriage, we had fallen into a routine. Jeremy loved me being at his beck and call. I kept my editing a secret, but even Thomas was pleased with my new life.

One evening after we made love, Jeremy sat up and stared down at me.

"What?" I questioned nervously.

He held my breasts in his hands, massaging them. "Let's see if we can make these perkier. I've heard Botox is used now, or we could get you some implants."

"I think they are plenty big enough," I said, not hiding my irritation.

“Just saying you aren’t getting any younger.” He smirked. “I need to keep my hot young wife. I can’t have a seven on my arm.”

Before I could stop myself, I relented. “I’ll look into the options, Jeremy.”

“Good girl.” He kissed my forehead. “Now, let’s see if there are other areas that need attention.”

Forcing a seductive smile and a giggle, I played along as Jeremy inspected me for flaws. After he confirmed I passed his test for perfection, we once again made love. When I knew he was in a deep sleep, I slipped out from our bed and went to inspect myself in the mirror.

“Fuck it.” I wiped the tears from my face. “I’ll never be good enough.”

Throwing on a T-shirt and yoga pants, I grabbed the house keys and quietly left. At the local donut shop, I ordered a dozen donuts and tucked myself in a booth. Without regard to my audience, I proceeded to devour the pastries. The young worker stared at me in shock. When I finished the last one, I daintily removed the crumbs from around my mouth and locked myself in the bathroom. There I would purge the evidence of my crime.

I returned home, cleaned myself up, and searched the internet for ways to enhance the perkiness of my breasts. If I couldn’t make myself look better for him, I knew I would be forced to get cosmetic surgery.

NINETEEN

I was able to keep up the perfect wife image, and I thought I had everything under control. The longer we were in Los Angeles, the more I noticed little things changing. Jeremy's workout schedule became morning and evening sessions. He started calling me 'babe' and ordered me skimpy dresses to wear. I wondered if he was cheating but dismissed it as my own insecurities. I didn't think he had enough time or stamina to cheat on me.

We had been married for seven years the first time I received tangible proof that he cheated on me. Jeremy had been stupid enough to leave his phone on the kitchen island. A picture of a blonde in bra and panties appeared on the screen.

"Who is she, Jeremy?" I asked, throwing his phone at him.

Catching it, he looked at the screen. He enjoyed the image a little longer than appropriate for a man whose wife just caught him cheating.

"You're worked up over this? It's nothing. You're imagining things."

"You...you fucking liar! I saw the text message she sent you. I'm not going to live with a lying cheat," I screamed.

I began to storm off, but then I stopped and glared at him. "How long have you been seeing her?"

His face was void of emotion, except his eyes filled with amusement.

He thinks he can charm his way out of this. Not waiting for an answer, I stomped away. I grabbed my suitcase with the hidden manuscripts I was working on. I began flinging random items into my suitcase.

Jeremy watched with a cold, calculating look on his face as I filled another

bag with my things. “You need help, Caitlyn. I’m not your father. Just because he cheated on your mom doesn’t mean I’m guilty of the same crime.”

“Why would you bring him up? This is about you and your inability to be with one person. You won’t change, so I need to leave.”

“Babe, I want to help you, but you’re right. I think you should go. It will be better for both of us.” He picked up the packed bags.

I stared at him in shock. “That is all you have to say for yourself? I need help? I do? Why am I playing Stepford wife while you’re sleeping with trash?”

“I’ve done nothing wrong. When would I have time for an affair with your insatiable demands? You’re letting your imagination run wild, Caitlyn. So, a beautiful woman texted me, did you see any responses from me? I’ve been nothing but a faithful and loving husband to you.”

Jeremy gripped my arm and dragged me out of the bedroom. I struggled as he pulled me harder towards the front door. “If you want me to make a scene and embarrass you, I will, Caitlyn. I prefer you act like a lady and leave our reputation intact.” He pushed the button on the intercom. “Have my driver outside in five minutes. Mrs. Whittaker is going on a vacation.”

Stunned, I rode in the elevator. The doors opened on floor twelve, and Joe and Susanna Taylor joined us.

“Are you guys going on a trip?” Susanna asked.

I was too numb to answer. We knew this couple. We’d had dinners with them on several occasions. To my surprise, Jeremy lied to them about a fabulous surprise he had planned for me.

“I have the best wife in the world.” Jeremy wrapped his arm around me, kissing my cheek. “Caitlyn really deserves a break. She just found out I’m whisking her off to the airport. After her eleven-hour flight, she will have a week to spend touring Paris on her own for some shopping therapy.”

Shocked, I plastered a smile on my face.

“I’ve also planned a private tour of the Louvre. Caitlyn loves talking about

art,” Jeremy said.

He almost sounds like he knows what I like.

“Twenty-six days to see everything Europe has to offer. I know my Cait will love the French Riviera. She will need the bike tours to keep this figure after all the food she will be eating,” Jeremy laughed and affectionately pulled me closer.

What a convincing liar. By the time we reached the lobby, I almost believed I was going on a fabulous trip.

“I can’t wait to hear all about it when you get back,” Susanna said excitedly.

Jeremy led me to the waiting car as I waved to the couple. The icy chill from the night air hit me, and I took a long, slow breath. Opening the door, Jeremy waited until I entered.

Leaning inside, he warned, “I’ll not let you drag my name through the mud, Caitlyn. You need to get help. I don’t want to see you until you’re ready to apologize to me.”

Having been instructed to take me to my mother’s house in San Diego, the driver proceeded with a nod.

Stunned, I rode in silence. I couldn’t believe he had really sent me away. My cell phone vibrated.

Jeremy: Your credit cards are canceled. I have called a locksmith. When you’re ready to behave, call me.

Staring out the window, I felt blank. *Has this really happened? Did my husband just kick me out of the house because I caught him cheating?* Picking up my cell, I texted the only person in the world I knew would listen – Thomas.

Caitlyn: He threw me out of the house.

Thomas: Jeremy? WTF, are you okay? Do you need me to come get you?

Caitlyn: No. I’m being sent to my mom’s. Will call later. Love you, T.

Thomas: Love you too! That son of a bitch!

Thomas: Call if you need to chat.

Caitlyn: Will do.

Thomas: It will be okay. I have tons of work for you. Fuck him.

I almost smiled at my friend's words. It was nice to know someone had my back. I closed my eyes, holding in the urge to scream. Jeremy was wrong. I was not crazy.

By the time I reached my mother's house, Jeremy had already called to alert her that I was having a mental breakdown. He was such a skilled manipulator, she believed him.

“Oh, you are so thin. Jeremy is right to be so worried about you. We'll get you the help you need, honey. I made up your room. It will all be better in the morning.”

After I changed and climbed into bed, my mother tucked me in with promises I would be well soon. I didn't have the energy to tell her the truth. Alone, I allowed myself to cry. When my tears finally ran dry, I stared at the Marilyn Monroe poster hanging on the wall. Thomas had given it to me when I was a senior in high school.

Nothing lasts forever, so live it up, drink it down, laugh it off, avoid the bullshit, take chances & never have regrets, because at one point everything you did was exactly what you wanted. ~Marilyn Monroe

Something about those words played in my mind as I fell into a dreamless sleep. In the morning, I found out how vindictive my husband truly was.

200-200: Mitico Bank Alert. Credit card ending in 2076 has been canceled per the account holder's request. Questions? Call 1.888.000.000.

200-200: Mitico Bank Alert. The changes requested to the checking account ending in 4051 have been made. Questions? Call 1.888.000.000.

200-200: Mitico Bank Alert. The changes requested to the savings

account ending in 9832 have been made. Questions? Call 1.888.000.000.

I logged onto my laptop and found I was no longer an authorized user on any of the accounts. He removed me from everything. I had been too rash. I should not have confronted him. I should have withdrawn a sizable amount of money before I left him. My immediate reaction ended up hurting me.

By the time I joined my mother in the kitchen, she had several baskets full of muffins lining the countertops. She must have been up all night.

“Jeremy called, honey. What happened with you two? He recommended you see a therapist, and that you possibly need to be medicated,” she said with a scowl.

Dumb move, Jeremy. You never did listen to me. You said the magic words.

Hillary Chase despised anything dealing with psychiatric medication. *Only a bunch of quacks will want to shove pills down your mouth to shut you up*, she’d always say. Though, she never told me why she had such a bad taste in her mouth for mental health providers.

In all honesty, I was surprised she called in Nick to help me all those years ago. I suspected her disdain for the mental health profession had something to do with my father. If I ever approached the conversation, she would shut it down. My mother never talked about those things. According to my mother, she had no life before she married Gregory Chase. I always wondered how she had taken his death so well.

“I found out he was cheating on me and he told me I was crazy,” I said numbly.

Slamming the oven door, she huffed, “Well, you can’t stand for that. You have rights.”

“We’ll work it out, Mother. Just trust me. I already have a job lined up.”

Before I married him, I had a good career as a book editor for Nitro Publishing. I was great at my job and had a list of bestsellers to prove it, but Jeremy didn’t want his wife to work, especially not in such an unflattering job.

You’ll be fine at home. I need you at my side. Imagine a successful investment banker needing his wife to work. I had been his trophy to polish up

and show off. And now, I was homeless and broke. My hands were tied. I was forced to accept his decision...his punishment.

During the two months I lived with my mother, I was reminded daily that she was right about never turning over all my power. I used that time to grow stronger, and a plan developed in my mind. I was not going to lose everything. I would protect myself. I would not be the victim.

I would wait for him to contact me. There was no doubt in my mind he would. A divorce would be the greatest embarrassment to him. He would have to admit he failed at something.

I picked up more work from Thomas and helped my mother at her events. I was going to live as if there was no Jeremy and let fate decide my course. As expected, Jeremy finally reached out to me after months of silence. Our reconciliation was not the flowery apology I wanted or the dedication of his love. Instead, I received a text message.

Jeremy: Are you ready to apologize?

Caitlyn: You were right. I was just hormonal.

Fuck you, Jeremy. You know I did nothing wrong.

Jeremy: You can come home if you promise not to act like that again.

You hurt me, babe :(

Caitlyn: I know. Let me make it up to you.

Yes, I'll make everything up to you.

Jeremy: I'll send a driver for you today.

My mother told me it was a mistake to trust him again and suggested I contact Dr. Fisher. I promised her I would be in control this time and he had learned from his mistake. I could never tell her my plan, but I knew if I could, she would have been proud.

When Jeremy's driver arrived, I hesitated. *No, Caitlyn. You can do this. One year. Then, you're free.*

The ride in the limousine felt like I was on my way to a funeral... my own. In many ways, it was like my death. The naive twenty-three-year-old who had dreamed of happily ever after was gone. Welcome back, Caitlyn Chase, a woman with drive and dreams of her own.

I wasn't excited or hopeful that Jeremy and I would reconcile. We would never share a happily ever after. No. I was determined. Determined to get what I deserved out of life, not the scraps Jeremy thought I earned.

When I arrived home, I found a bouquet of red roses on the counter. *Yuck. I hate roses. Lies on a stem of sharp thorns. How appropriate to remind me what kind of man sends roses after they treat you poorly.* He never sent me the flowers I loved because daisies are not classy enough. Jeremy once told me daisies were for teenage boys to give to teenage girls with their heads full of dreams just to get them into bed.

The note simply read:

All is forgiven, babe.

He couldn't even write my name on the apology?

When he arrived home that night, he promised it was all a misunderstanding and he would make sure I never felt that way again. If I needed to be medicated, he would find me the best doctor to prevent any further breakdowns.

"You're too good to me, Jeremy." I placed the plate of food I made before him.

"This looks great." He cut into the steak I cooked to perfection.

"I just want to make you happy, Jeremy." I cut off a piece of meat from my plate and chewed.

"Just keep being sexy, babe, and keep that smokin' hot bod to make everyone envious, and we'll be fine. You're going to have to work double time to keep looking so hot." He grinned, then took another bite of his meal. "If not, your cooking might be reason enough to keep you around."

I should have left then. My head screamed, *Run. It is not worth this. Start again on your own.*

I couldn't run away. I accepted this life before, and I could again. It wasn't all bad. I had a beautiful house, no money worries, and he was a very giving lover. I *would* accept this life and pretend I believed his promises because I had a plan of my own. I would be his happy housewife because, in the end, he was right – he would never hurt me again.

Just like that, everything went back to normal. Jeremy returned my credit cards and restored my access to our bank accounts. He even increased my allowance and talked about all the vacations he wanted to take me on. Jeremy pretended nothing had happened. He wanted everything to go back to the way it was before, and I promised I would do my best to make him happy. But, this time, I would be smarter.

TWENTY

Thomas was disappointed when I chose to go back to Jeremy. A month after I returned, I lied and told Thomas I was going to leave Jeremy, but I needed to secure my future. He was key to the first part of my plan.

Step One – secure a good job.

Thomas was ecstatic I had ‘come to my senses’ and was leaving that ‘son of a bitch’. When I left Jeremy, I would be added on full-time with benefits. Thomas promptly sent me several manuscripts to work on. We agreed I would not be put back on the payroll until after the divorce. In the meantime, we kept our original payment agreement. He assured me that my first year of paychecks would reflect the *bonuses* I earned while I was still with Jeremy.

It was easy keeping my job a secret. I had plenty of time in my day to edit and still take care of everything Jeremy expected. One of the perks of my editing job was meeting interesting authors with even more exciting backgrounds. One of the first authors I worked with was Jack Winter.

I edited his books before my marriage and after. Jack seemed to still have dozens more on the back burner. Jack wrote 007-type thrillers, but edgier. His detailed novels came from years of undercover work as an FBI Secret Service agent. After my first edit of his latest work, he was so thrilled he said he owed me one.

I never had need for his services until my marriage began to crumble. With my new plan, I greedily took Jack up on his offer. He once told me his specialty

had been surveillance. With nothing to lose, I told him my story and asked if he could find out how much of a cheat Jeremy really was. He agreed to help me.

After a month, Jack called and asked to meet me in person, so we could talk about my issue. He picked a place in West Hollywood, where I had no chance of seeing anyone I knew.

I had the driver bring me to one of the boutiques on Rodeo Drive. Walking into the store, I called a cab. By the time I entered the store, grabbed the first thing off the rack I knew would fit, purchased it, and left, the cabbie was waiting.

When I arrived at the restaurant, my heart was hammering. *Is this what Jeremy feels like when he meets them? You're not doing anything wrong. This is not the same.*

“Caitlyn?” Jack asked, standing and holding out his hand. “So nice to meet you in person. I won’t lie. I was expecting a librarian, not a model.”

I gave him my most charming smile. “You flatter me, Mr. Winter.”

He was not the only one taken aback. Jack was in his late thirties. He wore a sharp fitted navy-blue suit with a silver tie, and his salt-and-pepper hair was fashionably styled. Instead of his hair color aging him, it made him even more attractive.

If only I wasn't married.

He distracted me from my indecent thoughts by pulling out my chair. *Handsome and a gentleman?*

Jack took the seat across from me. His face turned serious as he slid an envelope towards me. “Please, call me Jack. I’m sorry we’re meeting under these circumstances, Caitlyn. I don’t think you want to see this.”

He was right. I didn’t *want* to see it. I *had* to see it.

“There is no need to hide the truth from me. There is no fairytale expected. I know you want to tell me my husband is not a womanizer, that I am his one and only. Let me guess...this holds a picture of a big-breasted blonde who is either giving or receiving pleasure, right?”

His face paled. “He’s really hurt you, hasn’t he?”

I placed my hand on his, “Sweet Jack, I’m not hurt or even jaded. I’m being

real. I feel liberated. You've done me a great favor. Now, shall we eat? My treat?"

"Are you ready to order?" The waiter appeared as if on cue.

"What are you drinking?" I pointed at Jack's drink.

"Scotch on the rocks."

"Perfect, make mine a double. And I want a steak. Rare. And mashed potatoes." *Food Jeremy would shame me for eating.*

Jack stared at me in surprise. "I'll take the same. The lady seems to know what she wants."

Jack and I ate our meal. We had such pleasant conversation despite the circumstances. We talked for hours.

We discussed my life before Jeremy and my plans for the future. Jack was interested in why I became an editor and how I ended up in L.A. Our time passed by too quickly.

"Would you like to order any dessert tonight?" the waiter proposed.

"You need to try their chocolate cake. It's out of this world," Jack insisted.

"Oh, I couldn't," I resisted. *You already had a big meal. You are going to have to work out for days to burn off those calories,* I warned myself.

"Bring us the cake. We can share," Jack said with a wink.

Jack had been right. It was the best chocolate cake I ever ate. I wasn't sure if it was the rich chocolate with the sweet cherry drizzle or because he had fed me my first bite. As the fork slid from my lips, our eyes never left each other's.

"What did I tell you? Worth the calories?" Jack smiled and took a big bite. Handing me a fork, he said, "Go on. Help me finish it, Caitlyn."

There was something about him that excited me. He seemed so formal but emitted a hint of danger. I had edited his books. How many of the steamy scenes were real-life events versus his fantastic imagination? Did he think the same thing about my edits?

For some reason, I wanted to find out more. It wasn't wrong, right? I was divorcing Jeremy. What would be wrong with having a little bit of fun myself?

You aren't that girl, Caitlyn. Eat your cake and say your goodbyes. Yes, the little voice in my head was a damn buzzkill.

After we finished up, Jack insisted on paying the bill. Instead of calling a cab, he insisted on driving me back to Rodeo. I was enjoying his company so much that I couldn't resist. Jack surprised me when a silver Mercedes pulled up with a driver.

Settled in the luxurious back seat, Jack slid in next to me. "Don't mind Patrick. He's discreet, if nothing else. Are you going to open the envelope? It might be better to do it when you're not alone."

I had been holding the manila envelope on my lap since we left the restaurant. Nervously, I peeled back the clasps and slid the photos out. Closing my eyes, I forced myself to breathe.

It was worse than I imagined. Three dozen photos of my husband with various women in a variety of sexual positions lay in my hands. Three months of infidelity before me. Jeremy had been terribly busy.

The most upsetting was a photo of him with one of the blondes on his desk in *my* condo. He had been brazen enough to bring a woman into my home and have sex with her. *Where was I? Was I in the house at the time?*

Angrily, I flipped through the rest of the photos. My stomach tightened. How many nights had he made love to me after being with these women?

Jeremy definitely had a type – oversized breasts with a vacant look of unintelligence. All of them dressed in outfits I knew he chose. I had a closet full of the same kind of clothing, which he had purchased for me. In my case, wearing the whorish clothing meant I was 'Mrs. Whitaker.' So, what did the other girls get out of it? Jewelry? Vacations? A fancy meal? Or, was the fact that he was a good lover enough payment?

I slipped the images back into the envelope and sighed. *I'll not cry.*

"I am sorry..." Jack started to apologize before I interrupted.

"No, I knew it was happening. There is a blonde that keeps reappearing. Do you have her name?" I asked coldly.

"I do." Jack reached inside his jacket and withdrew an envelope. He opened it and pulled out a slip of paper. The white paper had neat handwriting on it that read:

Ginger Sky. Cocktail Waitress at Sonny's Playhouse. Twenty-one. No family to speak of. Condo on Grand.

“You’re kidding me, right? She lives two blocks from my house? How can a cocktail waitress...?” I didn’t need to finish my question. He didn’t need to tell me the answer. Jeremy must be paying her rent.

When we arrived at the boutique, I was shaking. “Can we drive a bit more? I’m not ready to go home yet.”

“Patrick, take us on a tour. The lady is new in town,” he said, winking at me. Patrick looked at us in the mirror and nodded.

Slipping the paper back in the envelope, I forced a smile. “Thank you.”

“You’ll be better off without him, Caitlyn. Do you have a good attorney?” Jack asked. His silver eyes were so sincere.

I reached over and touched his hand. The feel of his skin sent a chill through me, which only added to the warmth building inside me. I let my hand slip onto his leg, leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “You didn’t let me pay for dinner. How can I ever pay you back for all you’ve done?”

“You don’t owe me or anyone else a damn thing.” He cupped my face gently. His eyes shone with a silver spark of anger.

My mind left my body, and I kissed him. It wasn’t the old Caitlyn trying to dominate. I wanted to feel alive and desired. I was not a leftover to be discarded.

At first, I felt his hesitation, but he relented. Jack pulled me into his arms and kissed me back. He tasted sweet like the cake we had just shared. I inhaled his musky cologne, not wanting to forget any detail of the moment.

His kiss was like none I had ever shared before. It was a long, slow kiss. He didn’t jam his tongue down my throat. Instead, it was tender and loving. It was the kind of kiss you saw in the old movies... the kind I always dreamed of. The fire I felt made the feelings I shared with Jeremy feel juvenile.

Sliding onto his lap, I pressed myself against him. His hardness pushed against me as I began to kiss his neck. When I returned to his mouth, he stroked his hands along my back. When he broke away and trailed his lips down my décolletage, I shivered from the feelings running through my body.

The ache inside me was building, and I wanted Jack. Now. No feeling of shame, just a need for sweet release. I reached down to unbuckle his belt.

Jack took my hand and stopped me. He gently slid me off his lap.

My heart was beating uncontrollably. “Why did you stop me? I felt your response. You want this, too. Don’t you think I’m sexy enough, like all of Jeremy’s whores?”

“It’s not that, Caitlyn. I want nothing more than to whisk you off to my bed and make love to you for hours. We could have a quick one, right now, but you know this is wrong. The time isn’t right. This isn’t you. This isn’t what you want,” he said softly. “You’re better than him, Caitlyn. You would regret these ten minutes of desire for the rest of your life.”

He was right. I was better than Jeremy. I shifted back to my seat, and we rode in silence. After a few minutes, Jack reached over and put his hand on mine. The small touch, the small act of tenderness, filled my heart more than what I had almost tempted him to do. Tears fell from my eyes.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a monogrammed white handkerchief. “Here. This is clean.”

When he dropped me off at the boutique, I kissed him on the cheek and crushed the handkerchief into his hand. “Thank you, again... for everything.”

“If you need anything, Caitlyn... anything, you let me know.” Jack folded the white linen and handed it back to me. “Keep it. I have others.”

My heart fell as I left the company of a real man, knowing I would soon be back to pretending I was the perfect wife to someone who didn’t deserve me. The only consolation I had was the tools I needed, which Jack had armed me with. I was more confident than ever that I would be able to bring Jeremy down.

I hid the envelope of Jeremy’s indiscretions and the handkerchief with the manuscripts I was editing. Jeremy’s demands that I always dressed in the latest fashions ensured I had a walk-in closet of my own. He never went in there. Just in case, I made sure to hide everything deep in the back, behind the rows of

clothing.

Seeing the pictures had confirmed what I already knew; we were over. There was no chance of saving us. I wanted revenge, but my plan had changed. Oh, I was still leaving Jeremy, but now, I had a new task.

Step one had been ensuring my financial future was secure. In addition to my own income, I made it a point to hide every last dime I could get out of Jeremy's excessive grocery allowance. I found ways to cut corners. He couldn't tell I bought discount chicken or store-brand products. As long as I was careful to hide the evidence, he would never find out.

Jeremy's favorite scotch was not reordered. Instead, it was magically refilled with a cheaper, less expensive brand. As long as the bottle held the impressive name, Jeremy never noticed. He held the glass, letting the ice cubes melt most of the time. I doubted he really knew what a good scotch should taste like.

The same plight fell upon his designer shampoo, protein powder, coffee, and cologne. All were refilled with a lesser-priced version. Anything I could swap out was changed.

The same applied to my clothing allowance. Second-hand clothing came home with expensive tags. One of the easiest ways to have Jeremy hand over cash was for me to talk about cosmetic issues. Jeremy thought my endless Botox and facials kept my face young and new.

Over the eight months since I went back to him, I squirreled away almost half a million dollars. Neat hundred-dollar bills were bundled and stacked in shoe boxes. At first, I was nervous the penthouse would burn down, but I couldn't risk putting the money I earned into a bank.

I justified every dime I hid. Every time we had sex, every meal I made, every event I attended as his date, I considered it a job with a payment due. He never went without, so I didn't feel any guilt. Legally, half of everything was mine. I was his wife, and there wasn't a prenup.

Jeremy wasted *our* money on his mistresses. Ginger was set up. I had to worry about me. With that decision, Step Two would shake up his world.

It was time to meet the mistress.

After our dinner, I asked Jack for one last favor. I needed to know Ginger's

schedule. I knew it was wrong to reach out to him again, but I needed his help. After hanging up the call, I felt confused. I wanted to meet him again to explore the feelings he ignited in me, but I knew he would never let anything blossom. He was not the type of man to pick up a rebound.

Jack: 8:00 AM The Original Gym. Treadmill 30 minutes. 7 days a week.

Caitlyn: After?

Jack: Varies.

Caitlyn: Jeremy?

His normal immediate response to me was silent. Five minutes passed before I decided I couldn't wait for his answer.

Caitlyn: Come on, Winter. I know he's with her still.

Jack: This week he goes to her at 9:30 AM. Leaves around 11:00 AM.

Caitlyn: I hate him. Thx for being honest. Can you keep tabs 1 more wk?

Jack: Don't get hurt.

Caitlyn: Too late.

TWENTY-ONE

Ginger stuck to her schedule for the next two weeks. When I was ready to make my move, I asked Thomas' partner, Jacob, to help me create a new image. He was delighted by the idea.

Jacob was a makeup artist who specialized in realistic prosthetics. We had what he called a 'Caitlyn makeover party,' where he tested out so many different new 'Caitlyns.' Over many hours and bottles of champagne, we finally settled on an Auburn wig, fake eyelashes, blue contact lenses, and an altered nose. By the time he was done with me, even Jeremy wouldn't have recognized me.

Dressed in a workout outfit, I arrived at the gym Ginger frequented twenty minutes before her arrival. Jack told me which machine she always used, and I chose the one next to it. When Ginger arrived, she gave me a smile and hopped on the treadmill. At the end of her thirty minutes, we smiled at each other again, and then she left for the weight room.

I stayed on the treadmill another twenty minutes, fuming. I watched her leave and had the urge to follow and confront her. *Patience. Four months, then you're free.* This was the day my countdown started. I was leaving soon, and there would be no stopping me.

The second day, I was running when she joined me. She smiled brightly and said, "You're back. It is so nice to see a familiar face."

I smiled at her but kept running. After her time was up, she said, "I hope to see you tomorrow."

The next few days were the same. She greeted me, and I smiled. By day

seven, I was antsy. I wanted to end this ruse. This time, when she arrived, I was ready.

“I was hoping you would show up,” I said. “It is nice to have company.”

“Isn’t it!” she said, way too excited by my attention. “My name is Ginger. What’s yours?”

“Justice. My father was a lawyer.” I copied her same perky tone.

“Nice. I love this song. Don’t you?” Ginger babbled the entire time we ran. The woman was so chatty that she continued past her thirty minutes. Glancing at her watch, she let out a squeak. “Eek, I am going to be late. I guess my boyfriend will just have to shower with me today.”

Forcing a giggle, I said, “I bet he’ll hate that.”

Instead of her getting ready, she grabbed her bag and hustled towards the door.

“See you tomorrow, Ginger,” I called after her.

That evening, when Jeremy came home, I made a fantastic meal. A green salad with colorful veggies and a balsamic drizzle. His favorite pasta dish, with homemade breadsticks.

“Babe, you outdid yourself,” Jeremy crowed as he filled himself. “You’re too good to me.”

“I hope you saved room for dessert. I made you something special.”

He beamed when I carried out the desserts. I made two personal chocolate soufflés. One with a special chocolate that was used to help with constipation, and one made from fine chocolate. One had a raspberry sauce. One had a cherry drizzle. Yes, like the one I shared with Jack. Guess which one I gave Jeremy.

Jeremy devoured his dessert before I finished mine. I savored each bite of the chocolate cherry flavor, knowing he would soon be extremely uncomfortable. When his stomach grumbled loudly, I forced myself not to smile.

“Did you have a nice day at work? I found the most amazing recipe I know will be perfect for our next dinner party. I was thinking for the amuse-bouche we

could have an ahi tuna tartar, or Mrs. Carlson described a recipe she had in Paris. It was candied salmon with yogurt...”

My words ended as Jeremy jumped up and sprinted down the hallway. Snickering, I slowly savored my dessert. Done, I picked up the dinner dishes. After everything was cleaned up, I forced myself to check on him. That is what a good wife would do, right?

“Honey, are you okay?” I asked through the bathroom door.

“I’m just a bit sick,” he called. His voice was weak.

“I brought you some electrolytes. Can I come in?”

“No, I’ll be out soon,” he groaned. I was thankful he was so vain.

“Ok, love,” I said, “I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Changing into comfy pajamas, I climbed into bed and turned on the news. The thought that maybe I had really hurt him came to mind moments before he came out of the bathroom. Jeremy was pale, but the smell of his bath soap wafted towards me. Suppressing a giggle, I ran over to him.

“My poor angel,” I cooed. “You must have caught the horrible bug that is going around. Lucky for you, everyone I know has recovered the next day.”

Handing him the electrolyte water, he took a long, slow drink, and then handed it back to me. Stumbling to bed, he climbed under the covers. I slipped in behind him and wrapped my arms around him.

“Just sleep, love. It will all soon be over,” I said, stroking his hair.

He began to gently snore, so I moved away and took his phone. Carefully using his index finger to unlock the phone, I smiled as I saw messages from Ginger.

Ginger: Babe. Where are you?

Ginger: Baby, I am worried. You always call me before bed!

Ginger: :(You’re just being mean now.

Ginger: Fine. You’re missing this.

Attached to the last message, Ginger had taken a selfie of herself naked, sitting on the edge of a hot tub. *Does she have no pride?* I locked up the phone

after deleting her picture, and climbed into bed, grinning. I couldn't wait for tomorrow's workout.

Befriending Ginger became a game with a delightful outcome. One month, and I had become her best friend. Pity I hated her guts. We could have had a nice friendship, if she wasn't sleeping with my husband.

I had always followed the rules, but with my new persona, I was free. I was smart with the details I shared about my pretend life. Having no parents alive and just moving to Los Angeles became our shared story.

When I told Ginger about my parents' sudden death, tears filled her eyes, and she threw her arms around me. "We have been through so much of the same things. I'm so glad we met, J."

She gave me a nickname. Nice. Now I find out more about the boyfriend. "I am so glad, too. I really have no one here since I broke up with my boyfriend. It's been a relief to find such a great friend."

"You'll find someone, like my Jeremy, one day. I promise. You're so beautiful, J. I can't believe any man was stupid enough to let you get away." Once again, tears filled her eyes.

Not rolling my eyes would be my greatest test in this game. Sniffing, I said softly, "I found out he was cheating on me and I couldn't bear to spend another day with someone who couldn't be with me...only me." Wiping away a tear, I laughed. "I guess I don't like to share my toys."

Ginger let out a small laugh, but her cheery demeanor changed. I had struck a chord. I felt I needed to pluck harder.

"I mean, she was just the perfume girl and he would meet her in the morning, when he should have been at work. You wouldn't believe the lies he told me. The worst part is, he would have sex with her in the morning." I stopped as if the story was too painful to share.

Ginger patted my hand, encouraging me to continue.

"Then, he had the nerve to make love to me in the evening. How can anyone

with self-respect and dignity ever live with that lie? I'm just not that girl."

Ginger was silent while I talked.

"What's wrong, Ginger? Are you okay? Did I upset you?"

"Oh, I'm a horrible person. A truly bad person." Ginger looked around to confirm we were alone. In a hushed voice, she said, "My boyfriend is married. He says it is a loveless marriage, and he's only staying with her until they stabilize her medication. She's bipolar and goes into a horrible rage where she breaks everything. She's even tried to kill him. I saw the home he made for her. She really shouldn't be angry."

I wanted to slap her across the face. "You were in his house? You're lucky his wife didn't show up."

"No, she was at a women's luncheon. He even let me try on one of her evening gowns." She giggled. "I didn't wear it long before he had me out of it and on their bed." Her voice rose as she continued to talk about Jeremy's horrible wife. "You must think I am terrible, but they haven't had sex in two years."

More like two hours, I thought wryly.

Taking my hand, she said, "Do you hate me? I promise I didn't know he was married until it was too late. When I found out, I was so head over heels that I couldn't imagine life without him."

"Oh Ginger, you don't have to apologize to me. I understand. Men play with our heartstrings." I patted her hand, and then checked my watch. "Look at the time. Don't you need to meet with your stud soon? I know that's why you run off after our workouts."

"Not today, he has a work meeting, but he's going to make it up to me tonight. He made reservations for us at a cozy Italian restaurant and booked a hotel that overlooks Rodeo Drive. Can you believe it? He said we're going to shop and shop until we fall into bed. He is so kind. I can't believe I found a man like him."

"Wow, that sounds so great. A long weekend with a sexy man with money," I encouraged her to talk more.

"Well, after we are done here, I am going to the salon to get my hair done. I

am so thankful Jeremy... oops... I mean, my boyfriend paid for laser hair removal. One less thing to get done.” Holding her hands out, she said, “I should probably get my nails done. He loves for me to drag them down his back. Don’t all men love that?” Ginger giggled at her comment, and I joined in.

“Well, Ging, I have an appointment with a client in an hour. I need to run home and shower.” I kissed her on the cheek. “You have a fun time, hun. You really deserve it.”

“Thanks, J. I’ll see you Monday. I might be tired from my sexy weekend, so you will have to push me.” Ginger giggled again.

“Oh, I’ll push you hard.” I laughed and waved. *If I could, it would be off the terrace of the nice little condo my husband is paying for.*

There was no time to be angry or bitter. I needed to focus on how to destroy his weekend, and I had the perfect plan.

TWENTY-TWO

Caitlyn: Up for Coffee?

Vicky: Always!!!! Usual place in 30?

Caitlyn: CAN'T WAIT! See you there.

After I ditched my costume, I prepared myself for a nice visit with Victoria Carlson. Vicky, as she liked to be called, was the third wife of Tad Carlson, who happened to be one of my husband's best clients. Today, Vicky would be the key to ruining Jeremy's weekend.

"Caitlyn, you look fabulous. What have you been doing with yourself? You're glowing." Vicky kissed me on both cheeks before sitting down.

A man carried over two steaming cups and set them on the table. "Hope you enjoy, Vicky. If this isn't what you gorgeous ladies want, holler. I aim to please."

"I ordered for us. I hope you don't mind." Vicky smiled. "Phil always knows just what I like."

"Now, Vicky, if I didn't know better," I teased with a sly smile.

"Oh, no. Phil doesn't bat for the same team as us. Pity, though. He would be a nice distraction for those long work weeks." Slapping herself on the hand, she giggled. Unlike Ginger's, her chuckle was not childish. Hers was a sexy, sophisticated one. "I'm so naughty."

I returned the laugh, and then sipped the drink Phil made for us. "I understand. No matter how much we love them, sometimes, an adventure would be exciting. Pity. If his drink choice indicates what he would be like as a

lover...”

“You’re bad, Caitlyn. You don’t need an adventure. Your Jeremy is a fine specimen. Tad has been eating his stress. I am going to send him on a spa weekend soon, if he doesn’t get rid of those love handles. You’re lucky to have a man that cares about his appearance.” Leaning forward, she whispered, “And from the bulge in his pants, I know you must be satisfied.”

“Yes, my Jeremy is endowed and knows it. He can be a bit vain. Sometimes, there can be too much perfection for any one person. A change to someone like your Tad would be exciting.” Vicky slapped my hand and giggled. Copying her act of discretion, I leaned in. “Sometimes, it would be nice to have a smaller man to please, if you get my drift.”

Her cheeks blushed, and a dreamy smile crossed her face. “We really need to get together soon. Maybe we can swap husbands,” Vicky suggested, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Oh, Jeremy, would never go for that. Not that you wouldn’t be a tempting morsel, but he wouldn’t share me with Tad.”

“Sexy idea, but Tad would be the same. I guess we just need to settle for dinner.” Vicky sighed.

“Why don’t we make it a weekend? Let’s surprise the guys and whisk them away to San Diego. They can golf and talk business, and we can get massages and fantasize about cabana boys,” I suggested.

“Tad has been talking about a relaxing weekend. Great suggestion.” Vicky pulled out her phone and punched buttons. “Done. Two villas booked. We can square up later. We leave tonight and don’t return until Sunday night. Maybe we can skip the fantasizing and find cabana boys to keep us occupied.”

“You’re so bad,” I said.

“But that is why you love me.” Vicky laughed.

Caitlyn: Exciting news

Jeremy: Great. What?

Caitlyn: Tad and Vicky booked a getaway for the four of us this weekend. Golf, Villas, and you have Tad’s ear all weekend.

I smiled as I imagined the panic on his face. He had plans with Ginger. He would be stuck with his wife for a weekend when he could have been with his mistress. *Poor Jeremy.*

Caitlyn: Not good?

Jeremy: Sorry, phone rang. That's great, babe. I can't wait. When do we leave?

Caitlyn: 6 - Tad's limo will drive us. I'll pack for you.

Jeremy: I'll come home early. See you then, babe

"Jeremy is so excited for the vacation." I smiled at myself in the mirror. My smile was not from happiness or joy. It was the cold calculating smile of a predator, luring its victim into a trap. *Poor Ginger.* What story did Jeremy make up to let her down?

When Jeremy arrived home, he seemed flustered. I had packed our bags and been editing for several hours. Tucking away the papers under the couch, I went to him.

"You're home early, love." I kissed him. "Is everything ok?"

"This is just a bad weekend for a getaway. I had business to deal with," Jeremy said sharply.

"Oh, I am so sorry." I picked up my cell phone. "I'll cancel right now. I know work has been tremendously stressful, so I thought time with Tad would be a good thing." I pretended to text.

"No. Wait." He stopped me. "The other stuff can hold. You're right. You're always right."

Scooping me up into his arms, he carried me to our bedroom.

"We don't have time for this, silly," I said coyly.

"I always have time to make love to my beautiful wife. You know seeing you in that dress gets me hot," Jeremy growled. He set me down beside the bed and unzipped my dress. As it fell to the ground, he looked me up and down. "I don't think there's a more beautiful woman in the world than you."

Not even Ginger, I thought angrily.

Smiling at him, I spread myself on the bed and seductively ran my fingers along my flesh. “I am sure there are more beautiful women out there. Blondes with larger breasts, and brunettes with perkier ones. Beautiful black women with luscious asses.” I described the women I had seen in the photos Jack gave me. Pity Jeremy was too stupid to connect the dots.

He settled on the bed next to me, and then trailed his mouth along my neck, stopping to nip and play at the tender spots.

This time, I did not fantasize about my oily cabana boy. I imagined Jack running his fingers along my inner thighs, and it was Jack making my body rock, back and forth, as he gently teased me. On the brink of climaxing, Jeremy stopped focusing on my needs and dove into his own, as if he knew my secret. My fantasy crashed before me. Instead of the delicious image of Jack ravishing me, I faced the cold realization that the man moaning on top of me was my husband, but in no way the man I loved anymore.

***One month, twenty-nine days, twelve hours, three minutes.
Then, I’m free***

Spent, Jeremy lay on me. His hot breath warmed my ear. It seemed forever before he kissed my cheek and rolled off me. I waited for him to fall asleep. When I was sure he was out cold, I slipped out of the bed and went to the bathroom.

Filling the tub with the hottest water I could stand, I sat fighting back my tears. I didn’t need to stay any longer. I had enough money and a job. Do I really need to hurt him? What kind of person have I become? I was no better than him.

Caitlyn: We need to talk.

Thomas: What’s up, love? Did he do something? I’ll come and slap that tan off his face if you want.

Caitlyn: No. I just don’t know how much longer I can fake it. Every time he touches me I want to die. I need out sooner.

Thomas: I was going to talk to you about an opportunity next week, but now seems right. I've been talking to a rich old lady. She wants her story written. You would be perfect.

Caitlyn: Catch?

Thomas: You have to move to Montana.

Caitlyn: For fuck's sake, T. Montana?

Thomas: Let's meet up tomorrow and figure it out.

Caitlyn: Can't. Going to San Diego for the weekend with J. My fault.

Thomas: Oh, Cat. Why?????

Caitlyn: Possibly the worst idea I ever had. Can't talk. See you Monday.

Thomas: Luv you. Text if you need me.

Caitlyn: <3

Sinking under the water, I opened my eyes. One day, I would be free of Jeremy, but would the guilt for what I did consume me? Leaving my pity party behind, I wrapped myself in a robe and crept into the bedroom.

It was only four o'clock. I didn't need to wake Jeremy. His phone was on the ground next to his pants. I picked it up and then checked to see if he moved. Carefully, I pressed the phone to his finger, unlocking it.

He grabbed my arm. "Back for some more lovin', babe?" he murmured sleepily.

Dropping the phone, I smiled down on him. "You looked like a sexy angel."

He pulled me into his arms and crushed his lips against mine. His tongue explored my mouth frantically. I hated that more than anything. I never felt anything loving about it being jammed down my throat, but today, I didn't care. I didn't want this to be a tender moment he would make linger until the last minute before we left on our trip.

If it had been seven years ago, I would have longed for Jeremy to spend the day with me like this. But now, I had to make it fast and exhaust him. My breaking point felt close. Digging back into my memories of our early days of passion, I twisted around onto him and put myself in the dominant position.

Jeremy grinned as he undid my robe. For the next fifteen minutes, I focused

on tiring him out. My movements were quick and hard. My hours on the treadmill were helpful. My energy was high, and I had a mission.

When he finally finished, he was panting and moaning. “What are you trying to do, kill me? You were a tiger.”

Slipping off him, I purred, “If you want to go again, I’m ready, willing, and able.”

His heart was still beating fast. *Please, say no...please, say no...please, Jeremy, close your eyes.*

“You spent me, babe. I need to take a nap.” Grabbing me around the waist, he pulled me close and nuzzled my neck. “Let’s just stay like this. Damn it, Caitlyn. It felt like the old days. You make me insane. What came over you? I don’t think you know how much I love you.”

I didn’t respond. I just shifted as if trying to snuggle closer. *Why didn’t you say those words a year ago, Jeremy? Why was I not enough?*

I lay still while I waited for the sound of him sleeping. This time, I knew Jeremy was in a deep slumber. Reaching to the floor, I picked up the phone and unlocked it.

I took the phone with me to the living room, where I quickly gathered the manuscript I had hidden and returned to my closet. When the door was shut, I hid my work and looked through his phone.

Jeremy: Bad news. I need to cancel this weekend.

Ginger: No! Why?

Jeremy: Business in San Diego.

Ginger: I love the beach. Can I come like San Fran?

Jeremy: Sorry, babe. The bitch is coming.

Ginger: Not fair!!! Jeremy, I am sick of this. I deserve more!!!

Jeremy: If you want to be a bitch, pack and get out of my condo. I pay your rent. You don’t work. What the fuck else do you deserve for a couple of bjs? I already have a fucking crazy wife. I don’t need another. If you want to end this - I’ll find a new piece of ass. Trust me. There are other women to fill your spot and cost me less.

Ginger: No, Jeremy, I'm sorry. Don't say that. I love you. Please don't do this. You're right. I'll be better for you, baby.

Jeremy: I'll talk to you when I return, and you better make it up to me. You might want to get to the gym while I am gone. I noticed you have put on a couple of lbs. I don't need a fat girlfriend.

Ginger: I'm sorry. Please, baby, don't be mad at me. I'll go to the gym. I love you.

I wanted to type into the phone that he was not worth this. Seeing the cruel words he wrote to Ginger, my heart hardened. He didn't deserve my guilt. He was a horrible person. I couldn't save Ginger, but maybe I could help. Picking up my phone, I knew what I needed to do to ease my guilt.

Caitlyn: I need a favor.

Jack: Anything.

Caitlyn: I have to go away for the weekend with my husband.

Jack: Is everything ok?

Caitlyn: No. Ready for this to end.

Jack: End it now. You don't need him.

Before I could even defend my reasons, another text appeared.

Jack: Sorry. I should mind my own business. How can I help?

I sent the picture of the conversation between Ginger and Jeremy. It took several minutes before he replied.

Jack: He's a real piece of work. I'll check on her. You're lucky to be free of that, Caitlyn. You deserve better.

Caitlyn: Thank you. I'll talk to you soon.

Jack: If you need anything, I'm here.

Caitlyn: Thanks.

Deleting the message, I threw on my clothes and carefully put on my makeup. I would be the trophy wife for a little bit longer. I would continue with my plan, even if it meant one last weekend away with a man I knew I could never love again.

TWENTY-THREE

Saturday, the men played golf while Vicky and I spent the day in the spa. By the time the men returned, we were both dressed and ready for a night out. Instead of relaxing, my mind had been spinning.

Step One - securing my finances was solid. I had a job and enough money to not worry about my security for a long time.

Step Two – shake up his world was in play. I had met the mistress. Now, I needed to bring it to a new level.

Step Three – tarnish his reputation, the thing that was most important to Jeremy. Without his reputation, he didn't amount to anything. This would take planting a seed of deception.

The night before, while Jeremy and I were getting ready for bed, I told him about the conversation Vicky and I had earlier that day. His eyes lit up at the suggestion of swapping partners.

“Would you be okay with me spending an evening with Tad while you were with Vicky?” I asked, nonchalantly.

“No strings? No guilt later?” I was surprised Jeremy was seriously considering my offer.

“Yeah, they're into this kind of thing, but Tad doesn't want to ruin your business relationship. Wouldn't it be weird to know he was doing things to me?”

“I trust you, babe. It would be one night of consensual fun between four adults.” Jeremy set the **Do Not Disturb** hanger on the door and frowned at me.

“Wait, I wouldn't have to touch him, right?”

“No. We’ll be in separate areas. You’re supposed to get with her and not let Tad find out. She told me he likes the idea of a secret affair, and he loves the power trip. The idea of getting one over on you gets him off, but you can’t get caught. I need to keep him so focused that he can pretend he doesn’t see you with Vicky.” Slipping into bed, I continued to rub lotion on my arms and casually said, “Oh, and she said Tad doesn’t want to talk about it afterwards. He wants it to be discreet. He calls it Sexy Saturday,” I explained.

“I’m game, babe. When is the exchange?” Jeremy’s eyes gleamed with greed. He looked like a kid on Christmas Eve thinking of all the toys and treats he would be receiving the next day.

“Easy. First, we’re going to have dinner and drinks. Maybe some dancing. I’ll tell you when it’s time.”

“You’ve become so adventurous, babe,” Jeremy climbed into bed and kissed me. “I like this new you.”

“There’s more to come, darling,” I promised. Yes, Jeremy. You will soon be incredibly surprised by what I am capable of.

Our dinner was delicious and the conversation friendly. The men talked more about business and Jeremy lit up as Tad gave him some new leads. The drinks kept coming. To keep my mind sharp, I got rid of them by discretely pouring mine into the plant behind us. I couldn’t have planned our seats better myself.

With the effects of the alcohol making itself known, I suggested we have the driver take us to downtown San Diego. Before the club, I changed into a black mini dress with a silver zipper that ran from my belly button to my pushed-up breasts. When I cared enough about pleasing Jeremy, I had ordered it from an online website known for dressing ‘the best of the best’ in the porn industry. I looked like a very expensive call girl. My costume was so convincing that I almost didn’t get Jeremy out of the room

Dressed for a night on the town, we went to a nightclub Thomas told me about. The description he had given me about booths in dark corners – where

couples hid away – had stuck in my memory. I knew its loud music and a sexy vibe would be perfect. The scantily clad waitresses and the free-flowing champagne excited Jeremy. I generously tipped the hostess and she found us a very discrete booth away from the crowd.

When we reached the table, Vicky cried, “God, I love this song. Come on, Tad. Dance with me.”

Tad wrinkled his nose as he looked at the crowd of dancers. “Not my thing, Vic.”

She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “Why are we here then?”

“Why don’t you dance with Jeremy? He loves this kind of music,” I suggested.

Tad sat down. “See, Vic, problem solved. Jeremy will shake it with you. Caitlyn can keep me company.”

Whispering in my ear, Jeremy said, “Is it time now, babe? Tad seems ready to tap that ass.” For emphasis, he picked me up. The sensation of cool air on my skin confirmed he was exposing my thong. If there had been something sharp at hand, I would have stabbed it in his eyeball.

I whispered in his ear. “Yes, just be discrete and make sure Vicky has a fabulous time.”

“Are we dancing or are you guys going to whisper all night,” Vicky whined.

Jeremy beamed at Vicky and let her drag him onto the dance floor. Tad watched me with a creepy look on his face as I slid into the booth next to him. Our ordered drinks arrived, and I took a long sip of the martini. Tad watched our spouses dancing to techno music. Jeremy winked at me and I blew him a kiss before turning my attention to Tad.

“This isn’t my kind of music,” I casually said.

Tad grunted in agreement.

“So, how was golf today? Did you like the course?”

Tad gave me a winning smile. I just asked him about his favorite thing – golf. He was delighted to have a new ear to listen to his detailed descriptions of his hobby. I glanced at Jeremy, who had slipped closer to Vicky. She threw back her head and I imagined her flirty laugh. She was smiling as he grew closer. I turned

it up a notch and focused on keeping Tad's attention on me while monitoring the seduction going on across from us.

I almost felt guilty I had lied to Jeremy. Vicky could end up being an innocent victim. I shouldn't feel bad if she responded to my husband's advances. She was a grown woman. However, I would do anything to ensure she looked innocent while still sabotaging my husband's reputation.

When Jeremy pulled Vicky into a dark part of the dance floor, and I was confident they were engaged in indecent foreplay, I slipped closer to Tad. Then, I tugged on the zipper of my dress. I grinned when he stared at my overly exposed breasts with interest.

Putting my hand on Tad's leg, I said in a smoky voice, "It doesn't seem fair they get to have so much fun dancing while we sit here. What can we do to make this a fun evening for us?"

"What?" he asked, trying to look around me at the dance floor.

I blocked his view by cupping his face, stroking his light beard. With his full attention, I placed his hand on my breast. His eyes widened as I slid my hand down his leg and started rubbing the growing spot between his legs.

His body responded to my touch, so I turned up my seductive game by taking his finger into my mouth and slowly sucking on it. His breathing became heavy and his hardness strained against the tight fabric of his pants. After several seconds, I let the tip of his finger dangle on my lip before clasping his hand and guiding it to my thigh.

I leaned closer towards him. "It's nice and private here. We're in the shadows and no one is watching. Can I be honest, Tad?"

He moaned, "Yeah."

"I've had my eye on you for a while. I would be lying if I didn't confess how I've been fantasizing about being with you ever since our sailing trip last year. You were so masterful." I pretended to shiver at the thought of how manly he looked. "If you're a good boy tonight, I could make you feel really good."

"I work with your husband," his eyes became wider.

"Please, it's not like you haven't heard about my husband's side interests. We have an open marriage. He does what and who he wants, and I do the same. And

I want you, Tad.”

His expression changed, and he scooted closer to me. “He won’t care if I do this?”

“He won’t even know. Imagine how powerful you’ll feel when he’s trying to screw you out of what you deserve. We both know what a prick Jeremy can be. During those *hard* negotiations, you’ll know you’ve fucked his wife right under his nose.” My mouth was an inch from his while I accentuated the keywords of my temptation.

His eyes grew cold and his lip curled as if he was imaging that very image. Grabbing me roughly, he unzipped my dress to my belly button, and moaned, “You’re so hot.”

Without any more hesitation, he began to kiss my breasts. Teasing him, I guided his hand closer to my panties. Like a teenage boy with no clue what to do, he was slobbering on my chest while awkwardly tracing his fingers up and down my silk undergarments. He acted as if he was giving me some sort of pleasure.

“Is that the way you like it? Does that feel good?”

“Mmm, you know what to do with your hands, but I think I need to check out the merchandise.” He shuddered as I unzipped his fly and slowly traced my fingernails along the flap of his silk boxers.

“What are we doing? Vic I’ll kill you,” he protested half-heartedly.

“It’s ok. I won’t tell her. It can be our little secret.” He didn’t resist as I slipped my hand inside the flap of his boxers and pulled out his surprising small erection. *No wonder Vicky wanted Jeremy.*

Tad shuddered as I gripped him. He moved from my breast and tried kissing me passionately. He really was an unskilled lover with his sloppy kisses and a lack of understanding as to how to satisfy me.

I broke away, and said, “If you work on my neck, I can work on you.”

Like an obedient student, he turned his slobbering mouth onto my shoulders and neck. After a brief moment, he looked up to confirm my approval.

“Mmm,” I moaned and gripped him tighter.

He jerked but returned to his assigned task. I wanted to stop, but I had to

keep up the charade for just a bit more. Jeremy was taking his sweet ass time with Vicky.

At first, the warm sweaty feeling of Tad repulsed me. However, as his body reacted to my touch, his awkward attempts at pleasing me turned surprisingly exciting. He would never bring me to any climax. I would get no release, but I held the power for this brief moment. I was in charge.

Overwhelmed with my efforts, he leaned his head back on the booth and closed his eyes. His moans grew louder, so I pressed my lips to his, silencing him.

God, Caitlyn. Is this who you're becoming? How far will this go? Giving a gross old guy a hand job?

I debated stopping, but he shivered violently as he finished. *Shit. Already?*

He kissed me back softly now and murmured against my mouth, "You're so sexy. I want to make you feel as good as you just made me feel."

Pulling away from him, I just smiled. The satisfied look he wore slowly began to change. The realization of what happened must have hit him. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and, in a panic, searched the dance floor.

Finally, he found Jeremy and Vicky in a corner. Jeremy had her pressed against the wall. I knew they were doing more than dancing.

"What? No, Caitlyn!" Tad sat up straight and pushed me away. "That was sick and wrong. What the fuck is your husband doing with my wife? Did you know this was happening?"

"That was a little too fast for me, Tad. I thought you were going to make me feel good. You haven't even finished touching me." I frowned and tried to lure him back. "Forget about them. Why don't we slip away somewhere private? Let them have a little fun while I *blow your mind*."

"No, this is wrong." He removed his hand from between my thighs and zipped up his pants.

Shoving past me, Tad left the booth. He stormed onto the dance floor and yanked Jeremy off Vicky. "What are you doing?"

Jeremy grinned, not even hiding his erection. "'Sexy Saturday', man. I saw you had a taste of my Caitlyn. Isn't she sweet?"

Tad punched Jeremy in the face. “I don’t know what deviant games you play, but Vicky and I don’t swing that way.” Grabbing his wife roughly, he shouted, “Come on, Vic. We’re leaving now.”

Jeremy seized Tad by the arm and spun him around. “What the fuck is your deal? It was a fair exchange.”

“You’re sick, Whittaker.” Tad jerked his wife and placed both hands on her shoulders. “What have you done, Vicky?”

“Tad, it was nothing. We were just dancing. I would never...” Vicky clung to her husband and tears glistened in her eyes

“His cock is still out, Vic.”

Her eyes shifted downwards, and she feigned mock surprise.

Convincing. Vicky should have pursued an acting career, I smugly thought.

Watching the interaction from the table, I wasn’t sure if I was pleased with the result or if it had backfired. Disgusted with what I did, I wiped the evidence from my hand on a cocktail napkin and went to Jeremy’s side.

“I’m sorry. I know you wouldn’t, darling. We just made bad choices in friends.” Tad hugged Vicky, kissed her hand, and then started leading her off the dance floor. Turning towards us, he growled, “Make arrangements to get yourselves back to L.A. and when you’re there, stay away from us.”

Jeremy and I stared in shock as he stomped off, shoving dancers out of his way.

“What the hell just happened?” Jeremy yelled at me. “You said he wanted this...that it was a game. What did you say to him?”

“Nothing, I said we should find a quiet place to be alone. She said that was what he liked,” I lied. “I’ll talk to Vicky. This must be a big mistake. I really don’t know what happened.”

“You ruined my weekend with...” Jeremy stopped himself. “Caitlyn, this is a mess. Carlson is a big deal in L.A. He’ll ruin me.”

“I’ll fix it, Jeremy. Trust me,” I promised. “Maybe Tad was upset because of how quick he came? He didn’t complain when my hand was down his pants. It wasn’t until he got off that he panicked. He went crazy. It was kind of embarrassing how fast it happened.

Jeremy sighed. “That makes sense. He always seemed like he couldn’t hold his load.” Jeremy led me off the dance floor and paid the check. “What a prick. I bet you didn’t even get off. Fat, greedy bastard. No wonder Vicky couldn’t wait for me to get her to the bathroom before I fucked her.”

While waiting outside the club, Jeremy’s face grew dark. He was brooding as he always did when life did not go his way.

“Let’s get back to the hotel to get our stuff. We are heading home tonight. I’m ready to be in our own bed,” he growled.

Jeremy picked up his phone. “Peters, I want you to send a driver to pick us up. We are cutting this vacation short. Yes, now. No, not tomorrow – Now. Figure it out by the time I get back to the hotel and have my shit packed.

Within ten minutes, the local driver appeared, ready to take us to the hotel.

“What a cluster fuck,” Jeremy groaned, as he slipped into the limo.

Jeremy was surprisingly quiet as he texted frantically. I could only imagine what he was doing to try to stop the inevitable. I sent a quick message to Vicky.

Caitlyn: Sorry. I misread the signals. He was into it. He even got off.

Vicky: It’s ok. I knew he would flip if anyone touched me. I can’t say I understand why you would want anyone else after my 15 minutes in heaven with Jeremy. He’s eager to please.

Caitlyn: So you aren’t mad?

Vicky: Tad confessed everything. He was crying and pleading for me to forgive him. Good old Tad. Good for 2 min and then roll over and sleep. Sorry you didn’t get any. Tell Jeremy to make it up to you.

What the hell? She is talking to me like this was a casual thing. ‘Yeah, I just fucked your husband. Sorry, mine is a shitty lay. I could just die.’

Caitlyn: I’m sorry, Vicky. I didn’t mean to mess up your life. I had

stupidly told J about our convo and I guess he thought that meant it was a go. When I saw you kissing him, I thought it was ok.

Vicky: It was the most action I have had in ages. I'm ok but Tad left to get air. He's a dumb fuck. He doesn't think I did anything. I'm going to get a diamond bracelet out of this for sure.

Caitlyn: Oh?

Vicky: He thinks you two are at fault. He thinks your husband was taking advantage of me and you set it up. I'll let him cool down. I won't tell him your husband gave me the best O of my entire life. If Tad wouldn't have stopped me, I could have OO. You're a lucky bitch. Maybe the 3 of us should have a go?

Yeah, she is on her own. She doesn't need my protection. Poor Tad.

Caitlyn: Yeah. He does do that well. I hope Tad doesn't do anything rash.

Vicky: I'll tell him it was just a bad joke. We were all drunk. J and I just danced while he was getting serviced. He'll be embarrassed. I'll make him believe he took advantage of you.

Did she just call me a hooker?

Vicky: Night, hun. It will blow over. Maybe we can try again and leave Tad out of it. I have the perfect replacement.

Who is this person? She liked to talk, but I didn't think she would act. I hope she's right, and it will blow over, but not before Jeremy losses connections and gains a mark on his reputation.

Caitlyn: We are leaving tonight. Text me if you need me.

By the time we got to the hotel, Jeremy had turned from calm to a blind rage.

He slammed drawers, throwing things into our bags. I had never seen him so mad.

“This could have gone so well. You really fucked everything up, Caitlyn,” Jeremy snarled as he zipped up the bag. “Carlson is a big player. What are we going to do?”

“Jeremy, I just...she said...”

“No words, huh? No words because you just fucked our future. Ruined my career.”

“He wasn’t into me, I guess.”

“Then *you* did not try hard enough. Vicky didn’t have a problem writhing under my hand.”

“That’s not fair, Jeremy, and you know it.”

He took his hand and put it on his groin, and then roughly moved it up and down. “Is that how you did it? No one likes that. I should have known a little prude like you would fuck up an easy trade!”

“A little prude? That’s what you think of me?”

“Come on, Caitlyn. You’ve been a block of ice for years. All you do is lie on the bed and let me do all the work.”

I bit my tongue. I wanted to say, ‘What about the other women? Did they just lie there, too? You’ve been through enough of them.’

Instead, the words stayed in my mind. I kept my composure. I was almost free. There is no way I was going to blow everything I had done and planned for a year over one of Jeremy tantrum.

When our driver arrived, Jeremy was still fuming. I thought I would feel better knowing his career had been damaged. I single-handedly alienated his best ally. Maybe, when this was all over, I would send a note to Tad apologizing.

“You have to fix this, Caitlyn. You made this mess. Fix it!” he ordered.

You are almost out. Why are you staying for this? You already tarnished his reputation. What are you waiting for? Leave tonight.

No, I need to see it through.

Maybe Jeremy is right. Maybe I am bipolar?

No. I’m not. I’ve just had enough. I’ve lived too many years with his games

and deceit. Am I broken so badly I would sink to this level?

While my guilt and my inner dialogue were eating me alive, Jeremy texted different work contacts, casually talking about deals he had going on. He was testing the waters to see if Tad had said anything yet. I didn't like seeing him so upset. The years of love I had for him returned at the most inconvenient times.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I took his phone out of his hands. "Come on, Jeremy. This is more than being mad Tad overreacted. Aren't you a little disappointed everything ended too quickly?"

"I'm not in the mood for your games, Caitlyn."

I kissed his neck and started the seduction I half-heartedly tried on Tad. This time I was into it.

"The driver is right there, Caitlyn."

"Let him watch." I pushed Jeremy down and unzipped his pants. No matter how mad Jeremy was at me, this wasn't something he could resist. This was what made him tick. This part of him was his guide.

I was not the kind of wife to dole out blow jobs. It wasn't in my nature. Even over time, it still truly disgusted me. I didn't like to give them, and I didn't expect anything like that in return. I had no desire for that kind of intimacy with anyone. Tonight, performing the act I despised under the guise of pleasing him was about control.

How strange to trust me with your most prized possession? I hope the driver doesn't hit a bump and cause serious injury, I smugly thought.

Not giving him time to achieve climax, I climbed on top of him. Once again, I pretended I was with someone else. For the briefest moment, I was actually enjoying the interaction. That was, until Christopher flashed in my mind.

The fury for my rapist, which had been hidden inside me, came to life. This time, I was in control, and I allowed my feelings to strengthen me. As I ground on Jeremy, I became more infuriated. Instead of focusing on pleasure, I took out my frustration on him. This was angry sex, and I wanted him to hurt. Ripping his shirt open, I dragged my nails down his chest and bit his neck...hard.

"Ow, babe," he cried, but didn't stop me.

That only fueled me. The seduction of Tad had been my plan. I came up with

the idea, but I ended up being the one humiliated and angry. Not by Tad's response, he had been honorable in the end and didn't want to share his wife. He felt shame and true guilt.

Jeremy was eager for more. He had no qualms about having sex with someone else. Most men would have protested, at least a little bit. Not my husband. He wanted to know when and where. And the sad thing was, if I offered it up a second time, I had no doubt he would do it again. Even after the fallout.

I climaxed just as Jeremy was about to release. Instead of waiting for him to finish, I cruelly pulled off him.

Jeremy grunted his displeasure, but immediately took matters into his own hands. Finishing, he yelled at me, "What were you trying to do, Caitlyn? Break my dick?"

"Cramp," I lied.

The driver met my eyes and I licked my lips seductively. He quickly looked back at the road and I smiled.

"Damn it, you tore me up."

"Cat scratches." I shrugged, looking at the deep bleeding wounds. *I hope they scar.* "They'll heal. I'll put something on them when we get home."

Pretending to fall asleep, I rested my head on Jeremy's shoulder. Faking soft breathing, I waited for him to pull out his phone. As if it was in the script, he finally lived up to my expectations of him.

Jeremy: Crazy bitch ruined the trip. Huge mess to clean up. See you tomorrow. Early. I don't need any drama. Be sexy and waiting.

Ginger: I'll be ready, baby. Xoxo

Any guilt I felt, died Jeremy would deal with the consequences of his choices, as I would deal with mine.

By the time we arrived home, it was four in the morning. My fake sleep turned real. Jeremy woke me, and I silently followed him through the lobby. Like the walk of shame.

Safe in our home, we undressed and climbed into bed. We slept on opposite sides. I didn't want to be with Jeremy anymore, but he had never given me space like this before. It hurt, even though I didn't want him.

After lying in bed for the longest hour of silence I ever felt, the bed shifted as Jeremy got up and grabbed some clothes from his drawer. I didn't watch to see what else he grabbed. I knew where he was going. He probably had clothes at her condo. I didn't care. It was still dark outside when he left the penthouse. I closed my eyes and fell back asleep.

The morning sun filled the room, waking me. Begrudgingly, I checked the clock. Ginger wouldn't be at the gym this morning, and I had more important needs. I quickly showered and dressed. I needed to see Thomas.

TWENTY-FOUR

Thomas greeted me with open arms and a cup of coffee. “Jacob just baked some muffins. Come sit and tell me what the urgency is.”

What is it with everyone baking muffins?

Thomas was six feet two inches and lean. My friend maintained his physical appearance almost as intensely as I did. He was the complete opposite of his husband, Jacob, who was five feet nine and dressed like he was a seventies hippie. So different, but no one who spent any time with them could argue that they weren't a perfect couple.

While I told the men what happened over the weekend, they listened patiently for me to finish.

“Caitlyn, I can't believe you did that. You vixen.” Jacob laughed and refilled my coffee.

“I know. I have no idea what came over me. Honestly, it was like a house of horror in his pants. I was afraid of what I was going to find.” I sighed. Pouring more cream into my cup, I swirled the cloudy concoction. “Vicky got the better deal with Jeremy as a lover.”

“Good sex or not, you need out. And, I have a way to speed up your plans. What would you say to writing a book?”

“I haven't written anything,” I argued.

“But, you can write, and I have a unique opportunity waiting for you. Remember the wealthy old lady I told you about, the one who reached out to me because she wants someone to pen her memoirs of her salacious life? She wants

to get credit for being the author, so I thought you would be her perfect ghostwriter. The best part is, she wants you to come to her home and be her scribe,” Thomas informed me.

“Why me? You have other staff who have actually been published.”

“She asked for a female. Check. Someone who had a strong publishing career. Check. And someone who didn’t have a husband and kids to distract her. Check. Check.” Thomas dramatically checked his points off in the air.

“What about...?” I began to argue why I was not qualified.

“Stop. You’re my best editor. I know you can finish the two manuscripts you have left and be ready to head off to Montana, the Big Sky Country,” Thomas finished in a fake cowboy accent.

“You know they don’t speak like that in Montana. Your Texas accent is way off.”

“Caitlyn,” Thomas’ tone grew serious. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Vivian Wolf is a character. She made her fortune as a burlesque dancer, a stage actress, and from her many marriages. She said she left each marriage by burying and inheriting, or by divorcing and collecting enormous cash settlements. She’s a delight. If I could write, I would be there in a hot minute.” Thomas grinned.

“It sounds like the perfect arrangement, Cat.” Jacob buttered a muffin and handed it to me. “Picture it. You can move on, living in a beautiful home in the mountains of Montana. Show her the pictures, honey.”

Thomas handed me his phone, and I scanned through images. Vivian lived in a large dark wood house with brick accents. The green property, mountain backdrop, and the sparkling pond were tempting.

Each photo had a gray-haired woman posing. Standing by a chestnut-colored horse, I guessed she was just over five feet tall. She looked like a force to be reckoned with, but there was something about her green eyes that made me trust her.

“How did you say her husbands died?” I raised my eyebrows.

“I didn’t,” Thomas smirked. “And not *all* of them died.”

When I handed the phone back to Thomas, he smiled. “Vivian wants her

writer to come live with her and record her story before she's taken from this world. You know you're the perfect person to tell her story. This is your chance for a clean slate."

"You're right. Tell her I'll come," I conceded. *This is my chance to start over.*

"Can you be ready in one week?" Thomas took my hand and smiled.

"I can. One week, twelve hours, three minutes. Then, I'll be free," I declared.

"I guess I need to tell the lawyer to rush the paperwork."

I changed into my 'Justice' wardrobe. This would be the last time performing as the best friend to my husband's mistress. I wasn't sure how our last encounter would end. I considered telling her who I was. Even as I entered the gym, I didn't know what my end game would be with Ginger.

As usual, I found Ginger running on the treadmill. I did not receive the usual perky greeting. Something was wrong. Her eyes were dark and puffy.

Stepping on the machine next to her, I said, "Hey, Ginger, how was the weekend?"

"Fine."

One-word response? That isn't like her. Reaching over the bar, I pushed the buttons to turn her machine to a slower pace. "Come on. Tell me what is up."

Tears began to flow down her face. "It was horrible. He canceled on me for a business trip and he took his wife. He ended up coming home early because she had a psychotic meltdown and embarrassed him in front of one of his very important contacts. You wouldn't believe what she did."

"I wouldn't?" I asked. *Goodie, there is a story. I wonder what I did.*

"She lured his business partner to a quiet corner in a nightclub where she forced herself on the poor man. Of course, he had no choice. Men's bodies react differently than ours. When she was caught, she jumped up on the table and stripped off all her clothes. She tried to get his business friend to have sex with her, right there and then.

"Jeremy was mortified. He had to lead her out of the club half-naked. When

they were in the cab, she tried to climb over the seat to attack the cabbie. She clawed and scratched poor Jeremy. It was horrible for him. He is devastated. She ruined everything, and now, his business might be in trouble. He told me I might have to give up my condo and move to a cheaper apartment. I might even have to go back to work.”

“Oh, Ginger, that *is* horrible. He really should leave his wife.”

“He won’t. He feels responsible. But, J, there’s something even worse I have to tell you.” Ginger stopped the treadmill and reached into her bag. She pulled out a manila envelope, the same kind I had seen showing all of Jeremy’s affairs. I held my breath.

“Here, look, it’s horrible,” she cried.

Some women truly are ugly criers. I instantly felt guilty for the cruel thought.

Sliding the photos out, I forced a gasp of surprise. Flipping through another set of pictures, I saw a different woman, and this time, the pictures had a dominatrix. One picture even had two women in it.

“See this?” she cried, holding up the photo of him being spanked with a whip. “See the newspaper on the floor? It was two weeks ago. That means he was with her recently.”

Sinking to the floor, she began to sob. “I don’t know what I should do. I’d go back to Michigan, but I love Jeremy. I can’t leave him. I’m the only good thing in his life. You know, one day, his wife might end up killing him.”

“I doubt it. Sometimes, angry sex gets out of control.”

“Oh, no, they weren’t having sex.”

“Did she scratch his face?”

“Well, no.” Ginger paused, considering my implication.

“Oh, honey, a cheat will always be a cheat. You really should get out of that relationship. You deserve better than him.” I smoothed her hair off her face. I sincerely meant every word I spoke. “I don’t have much money, but I will give you what I have saved if it will help you get a fresh start.”

“I couldn’t take your money.” Ginger wiped her tears. “Anyway, Jeremy will have to pay for his mistakes. In seven months, he’ll have no choice but to support me.”

Stunned, I couldn't respond. Jeremy had gotten someone pregnant. My husband was going to be a father, and it was not my baby. An odd feeling of anger, relief, and pain filled me. In my wallet, I had two thousand dollars, money I hadn't added to my stash yet.

"Here. Do yourself a favor. Get on a plane far from here. Meet a nice man and raise your child with him. You don't want to be miserable for the rest of your life," I said, handing her the bills.

"I can't take your money," she argued.

"No, take it as a 'thank you'. You reminded me what's important." I hugged Ginger tighter than I thought I would. I really wished a better life for her than with Jeremy.

When I left the gym that day, I hoped Ginger would take the money and run. A part of me knew she would stay and fight for Jeremy. I saw the text messages he had sent. I knew she would never leave him willingly. Maybe I could find a way to help persuade her?

Leaving the gym, I returned home and showered. I shoved my costume in a bag. I would return it to Jacob. I would never go back to that gym. There was no need for more information. I had all I could handle and more. I didn't need to see Ginger. It would only make me want to save her.

Caitlyn: Thank you for sending the pics.

Jack: What pics?

Caitlyn: You know which ones. Thank you.

Jack: She needed to know.

Caitlyn: It doesn't matter anymore. She's pregnant.

Jack: Poor girl.

Caitlyn: I can't worry about her. I am leaving in 7 days.

Jack: Where are you going?

Caitlyn: Montana. I'm going to write a book. Don't worry. I'll still be

able to edit for you.

Jack: Good. No one will be able to fill your spot. I will quit writing.

Caitlyn: lol :) so hasty. I'll let you know when I return. Maybe we can pick up where we left off on my Tour of Hollywood.

Jack: I would like to see you again. Dinner and dancing. Sweet dreams, Caitlyn.

It made me sad there was one man I wanted to spend time with, and it was not my husband. Maybe, one day, the stars would align, and I would get the chance to explore my relationship with Jack. But, not this time. Maybe not ever.

The day finally came. Every day for a week, I left the house with a gym bag or a dry-cleaning bag full of my clothes and valuables and drove to San Diego in a rental car. If Jeremy looked in my closet, he would have known something was up.

Thomas let me put my money in his safe. I had no qualms about leaving such a hefty sum with my trusted friend. I set twenty thousand aside in an envelope and asked Thomas to deliver it to my mom. I set another twenty thousand aside for Thomas and Jacob and told them it was their babysitting fee. Thomas argued that I needed to keep my money, but I insisted.

“It’s the least I could give you for all the years of *therapy* you’ve given me.”

The next morning, Jeremy pulled me close and tried to rouse me to make love. I feigned sleep. While he showered, I made the best breakfast I had ever cooked. I knew I succeeded because he repeatedly commented on how delicious everything was.

Before he left for work, I didn’t ask about his plans for the day. We didn’t make idle chit-chat. I just kissed him goodbye.

As he left, he stopped and turned back to me. His hand still holding the knob, he sighed. “Sorry, I’ve been an ass. None of this was your fault. I let my other head get in the way. I’m not sure I’ll be able to fix the mess I made with Carlson, but there are other contacts. Other investors. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course, Jeremy,” I lied. “I didn’t really want to sleep with Tad. He’s so gross. I just wanted to make you happy. I haven’t felt like I have been enough for you for many years.”

“You’re more than enough for me, babe. I have so much to make up to you.” His eyes glistened with tears. “I love you, Caitlyn.”

As the door closed, I stared at it in shock. Once again, too little, too late. I was not falling for his words. It was just another instance of Jeremy playing with my emotions. I was going to start my new life. Sitting at the table, I knew I had one last loose end to tie up.

Hello Ginger,

We have not been formally introduced. You may know me as the crazy bitch you’ve heard so many wonderful things about. And, when you realize I have been your friend and confidant for the last few months, I know you won’t believe me when I tell you I am, in fact, quite sane. I promise you I don’t have violent episodes or rages. I have just been in a loveless marriage with a cheater for a very long time.

Do you know what Jeremy does if you confront him about cheating? He throws you away. He cuts off all your money. He isn’t getting rid of you completely. That would look bad to the outside world. No, he just wants to remind you who is in control.

He set the stage for this punishment by insisting, early in the relationship, you don’t need to have a job. He needs you to be there for him anytime he wants you. Do you know, even as a married woman with no prenuptial agreement, I had to live with my mother for two months until I was willing to apologize to him for his indiscretions?

I never planned on being your friend when I dressed up as Justice. I just wanted to know the truth about my husband and the girl in the

picture. You were not what I expected. Instead of a homewrecker, I met a sweet woman who will be a wonderful mom soon. You and your child deserve better than Jeremy Whittaker.

I know what I am giving you is not enough to set you up for the rest of your life, but I want you to take it. I can't force you to stay away from Jeremy and start again. However, I encourage you to have a life with someone who loves you and makes you feel proud of yourself. Not a life of Jeremy's domination and second thoughts.

The pictures I sent you were just a taste of my dear husband's flings. You received a few months' worth. Imagine the album I could put together of all of his affairs.

While you were wearing my dress, I was hosting a women's luncheon on domestic violence. How ironic is that? But those are memories that should be buried and forgotten. Looking back when I am old and grey, I don't want to think I stayed around to be treated like I was nothing.

From your pregnancy, it is apparent Jeremy has become a little sloppy about practicing safe sex. As of today, I can confirm he has not passed on any STDs to me. Today. Let's hope that stays true.

This letter has become a little more preachy than I hoped. I just wanted to send you a friendly warning. No, not a threat. Not a leave my husband alone. Because if you want him still, he's yours. But I would say that no amount of money is worth what Jeremy will put you through. Find someone who will share a dessert with you and not make you wish you had ordered one yourself.

I wish you the best, Ginger. Really.

~ Caitlin Chase

A courier would deliver the letter and the cash to her. The choice she made was now all hers.

This was it. Time was up. I was free. One last letter, and I would go. I wasn't going to pretend I had been kidnapped or missing. I was going to leave him a message.

I placed a vase of black roses on the counter with a note below it.

Jeremy,

My senior year of high school, I went to a dance, and I came back broken. The details of the evening are not relevant... What is important is the way it made me feel about myself. Because of my own self-loathing, I was willing to do anything to keep a man that didn't really love me.

In the beginning, you loved the idea of me. I was the perfect accessory to your perfect life. As I aged, I lost that new car shine. No matter how hard I tried to keep my twenty-year-old body, I couldn't. You shamed me into believing I wasn't good enough.

A year ago, you sent me away, and when I came back, I hoped I could forgive and forget. However, nothing changed, except me. I have been waiting for a year to say these words to you.

It has been a painful twelve months, knowing the man you really are. I will no longer call the womanizing, business cheat, and basically horrible person you've become my husband. The man I thought I knew never existed. The fact is you lied about who you really were the entire time we were together.

The joke is that I can't be angry since I am a liar, too. I am not the perfect wife. I hid the parts of me that I knew you would never love away. I never truly believed you would love me if you knew who I really was. Deep down, you knew this, right?

The misery you put me through was not worth any of the fine things we had in life. I hope you treat the next one you catch you treat with more respect and love.

The divorce papers are on their way. I didn't want anything from you, but my lawyer pointed out that I deserved something for my years with you. You didn't make it to the top alone. Pay me in a lump sum or monthly payments – your choice. This time, I am leaving on my terms.

~ Caitlyn Chase

I left my wedding band, checkbook, credit cards, and the keys on the counter next to the copies of the pictures Jack took for me. Of course, my lawyer had a set to help with the settlement, but I had no need for them anymore. Today, I was putting Step Four into action. I was going to find Caitlyn Chase.

FINDING CAITLYN

TWENTY-FIVE

Relief flooded my soul when the plane lifted off. Nestled in the clouds, a strong feeling of freedom overtook me. This was my chance to release my pain from the past. Forgive and, each day, forget, more and more.

Soon, you will be free, my inner voice cheered.

No, I countered. I am free.

The plane landed at the tiniest airport imaginable. I stepped off the plane onto a tarmac, not the comfort of a large terminal. The crisp air burned my nose.

I had not checked the weather. Curse of living in California. I learned to open the door and look out to see what to expect. How easily I had forgotten the cold of Colorado.

The walk from the gated landing area led me into a small building. Inside, a sign with the words ‘Caitlyn Chase’ scribbled on it greeted me. The leathered cowboy holding it eyed me. His wrinkled skin, slender frame, and silver mustache told me he had to be over seventy years old.

Looking around, I felt overdressed in my designer clothes. I had not considered where I was going.

“Are you Caitlyn?” Just as I told Thomas, not a smidge of a southern accent came out of the man.

“I am.” I shivered. The freezing temperature was impacting my manners.

“I’m Ben Carver. Miss Vivian said you would be staying with us for a while,” he explained warmly. “Do you have any luggage?”

“I do have several bags,” I answered. “And there were quite a few boxes sent through the mail.”

“Yep, those arrived two days ago. I tucked them safe and sound in your room.” He motioned to the small café. “Do you want a cup of coffee or anything while we wait? God only knows how long it will take these guys to get your luggage. Slower than molasses on a good day.”

“No thanks. I think I’ll just go powder my nose.”

“Alright then. The bathroom is right over there,” he directed. “I’ll get your bags and wait right here for you.”

In the bathroom, I stared at myself in the mirror. I didn’t look like a woman who had just left her husband. Fixing my hair and touching up my makeup, I tried to put on a bright smile. Picking up my phone, I sent my first text message to Thomas.

Caitlyn: Where did you send me?

Thomas: To the promised land, dear friend.

Caitlyn: If I go missing, look for a cowboy.

Thomas: Cowboy? How delicious ;) Let me know if he’s a good lover.

Caitlyn: I am not looking for anything like that, T. Besides, he has to be 100!!!

Thomas: Purrfect. =^.^= Old cowboys make excellent lovers, but I hear they refuse to take off their boots >:)

Caitlyn: u r impossible.

Thomas: Pity about the cowboy. There’s something so sexy about spurs. TTFN. Needy authors calling >:(

Shaking my head, I laughed. There was no one in the world who could replace Thomas. I hesitated but sent the next text. It wasn’t wise, but I couldn’t help myself.

Caitlyn: I made it.

Jack: Did you get your honorary cowboy hat? Boots?

Caitlyn: Not yet. I think I'll be riding in a truck with a real cowboy soon.

Jack: I'm jealous.

Caitlyn: I just wanted to tell you I'm ok. Thanks again for everything.

Jack: Anytime, Caitlyn. I'm one text away, always.

Caitlyn: :)

Holding the phone to my heart, I sighed. No point in hanging onto the warm feeling he gave me. Jack was thousands of miles away, and one semi-make-out session didn't count as true love.

After I composed myself and left the restroom, I found Ben waiting.

"I thought you fell in. I was going to send help," he joked.

"I didn't rush. You said it would be a while."

"For once, they were surprisingly efficient." Ben harrumphed. "I found your luggage."

"How did you know these were mine?"

"Not many people have such fancy luggage when they come to visit. Plus, it had your name on it." Ben grinned.

Unable to resist, I laughed.

"Well, come on. Miss Vivian will be waiting for you." Ben led me to a black pick-up truck.

"This is what we are riding in?" I eyed the mud-covered vehicle.

"We could walk, but I think Miss Vivian would be impatient if we took that long to get you there." Ben chuckled and held the door open.

Sighing, I pulled myself up into the high truck. Inside, it had the smell of gasoline and Fritos. When he started it up, a burst of frigid air blew from the vents. A chill ran through my body.

"Can we turn on the heat?" I asked.

"It'll be toasty in no time. Just needs time to get going." Ben looked at me with pity. "Didn't Miss Vivian warn you about where you were coming? I hope you've some warmer clothes."

"My warmer clothes are in the boxes." I blushed at my ignorance. After composing myself, I decided to find out more about my new home. "Where are

we going, Ben?”

“Miss Vivian’s property is about thirty minutes that way.” He pointed towards a range of mountains in the distance. “Lucky for us, there hasn’t been a big snowfall.”

“What would snow mean?”

“That no one would be going out, and you wouldn’t be going in.” He chuckled at his joke.

“So, I am going to be trapped up there?”

“I promise you won’t feel trapped when you see Miss Vivian’s home.”

“What do you do for Miss Vivian?” I questioned, intrigued by his obvious affection for Vivian Wolf.

“I’ve been working for her about forty years now. I take care of the property and her horses. We’ve been through a lot together. I’m sure she’ll let you know all about that. Do me a favor and paint her in a good light.”

“Of course. This is her story,” I promised.

We rode in silence down the two-lane highway. We passed by small stores and modern conveniences along the first ten miles. Then, the landscape turned to snow-covered trees. We went for miles and miles before I would see a house set back from the road.

I held my breath as we began a windy ascent up the mountain. Ben must have sensed my tension as the two-lane highway turned into a one-lane road with four-foot piles of snow on each side.

“I’ve been driving this for years. You are safe, Miss,” he assured me.

“Well, what do you think?” Ben’s voice was filled with pride.

We pulled through iron gates, and he drove down a cobbled stone path. The property was even more spectacular than the pictures showed. The dark wood and stone house looked more like a ski lodge than a home.

“It’s beautiful,” I gushed.

From the distance, I saw an indistinct figure standing in the doorway. The

closer we got, the more the shape morphed into a small woman, who I guessed to be Vivian Wolf. My assumption about her height had been right.

After Ben opened the door and helped me out of the truck, she called to us. “I worried you wouldn’t make it here before the storm hit.”

“Bah,” Ben grumbled. “There is not a cloud in the sky. You better stop watching that channel. You mark my words, no storm is comin’ tonight.”

Vivian had the brightest green eyes. They sparkled with delight at his coarse comment. She waved Ben off and turned her attention toward me. “My, aren’t you a beauty.” Vivian clasped my face in her hands and continued greeting me. “I’ve heard nothing but wonderful things about you, Caitlyn. I’m so excited for you to tell my story, but of course, I insist my name is on it.”

“Of course. I couldn’t imagine it any other way.”

She chuckled and released me. There was something so welcoming about her. She was so alive that you got swept up in her presence.

“Sofia has the day off, and I have been busy getting everything ready for your arrival. Let’s see if Ben can bring your bags up before we eat. I whipped up one of my favorite lunches for you.” With a smirk, Vivian said, “Ben, please move the rest of the boxes up to her suite when they arrive. I would have unpacked for you, but I thought that would be a bit brazen.”

“It took everything in you to not go through her bags, didn’t it, Viv?” Ben’s eyes gleamed with mischief.

She swatted at him. “Go on. You know I would never go through someone’s bags. A lady needs her secrets.”

She smiled at him, and he looked back at her adoringly. I watched their brief interaction. *Now that’s probably part of her story.*

“Get her things up to her suite, love,” Vivian ordered, and then gave Ben a big smile.

“Already on my way,” he said.

“Well, hurry up then. I made my famous chicken salad.”

He grinned and imitated preparing for a race. His arms, back, and body lunged forward; it looked like he was waiting for the starter gun to go off.

“You old fool. Go on.” She chuckled. “All right, come on in. You must be

freezing. You don't even have a jacket. I didn't prepare you for our type of weather, did I? I'll order you some warmer clothes."

"Well, it's not that cold in California yet," I said.

"You thought you were coming to the warm weather of California?"

I laughed. "Yes, it's easy to live in the world of no seasons when you're there."

"Delicious, isn't it? However, I think you will grow to love seeing the four seasons here," Vivian said.

"Will I be here long enough to see them all?"

"That depends on how good my story is, I guess." Hooking her arm in mine, she said, "I have been waiting ages to meet the famous Caitlyn Chase Whittaker."

"Just Chase," I corrected. "Whittaker *was* my married name."

"Oh, I know all about married names. As long as they ended with a healthy number of dollar signs after them, I'll smile at the sound of any of their names. Did you see dollar bills at the end of your marriage?"

"Papers have just been sent, but I have taken care of myself," I answered.

"That sounds like a story. A lunch conversation or best saved for a nightcap?"

"Definitely a nightcap." I laughed.

TWENTY-SIX

Taking this chance was exactly what I needed. My new life was off to a perfect start. The house was large but gave off a cozy feeling. It was filled with exquisite furniture, wall hangings, and tchotchkes. I knew each item had a story. Most of all, it felt like home.

Glad I had brought a second set of clothing in my carry-on bag, I quickly changed into a sweater and jeans and returned to the entryway, where I followed the voices. Vivian and Ben were in the kitchen. I took my seat, which gave me the perfect view of the mountains.

“Every Tuesday, my boy, Grant, insisted I make my famous chicken salad,” Vivian bragged.

I understood why her son said it was the best. It definitely was the most delicious lunch I had ever eaten.

“Is Grant your only child?” I asked.

Vivian’s eyes grew sad. “Yes, I was blessed to carry him to full term. The gods have been cruel to me in regards to bringing children into this world, but I am grateful for my baby boy. It took husband number four to give me this blessing. Of all my marriages, I can truly say that one broke my heart when it ended. Burying Jackson almost killed me until I found out I was pregnant.

“When my blue-eyed baby arrived, I vowed I wouldn’t marry again. I had the money I needed to live a rich life, and I would never need another man to take care of me. Now, don’t get me wrong, there have been men in my life to satisfy a need or two.” Her eyes met Ben’s. Once again, I saw something

unspoken between them.

“Will I get to meet any of these men?” I asked coyly.

“Oh my, no. There will not be any strange men coming in and out of my sanctuary.”

Will she confide in me later about her relationship with Ben? I wondered. Pushing away my detective hat, I decided Vivian would share what she wanted at her own pace. For now, I just wanted to enjoy her company and share the story she wanted to tell. My curiosity was pushed to the back burner.

After lunch, Vivian told Ben to bring me to my suite since she had an appointment with her hairstylist, followed by her daily massage.

“I’ll see you for dinner, honey. Make yourself at home and let me know if you need anything,” she called as she whisked away.

When I walked into my room and was able to take it in, I was so pleased. It was colorful and bright with pictures hung on the walls. No more bare white walls with no personality. It was warm and inviting, unlike the home I had come from.

As I was hanging up my clothing, Ben arrived with another box I had mailed. My promise to not investigate was broken. I decided to cut to the chase. “Are you and Vivian a couple? Watching you, it seems like there’s something between you.”

His eyes narrowed. “The stories Miss Vivian wants to share are hers and hers alone.”

“Ben, this isn’t for the book. I just saw love between you two. It is clear there’s something there,” I said gently.

His face softened. “You’re right. I love Viv. And that, Miss Nosy, is all you need to know.”

I smirked at his scolding confession. “I understand. Maybe, one day, you will feel comfortable enough to confide in me?”

“Humph,” was the only thing he said before turning and leaving.

Chuckling as he walked away, I felt confident that I was going to like this chapter in my life. Ben was an upfront guy who I could see becoming friends with. Thinking of friends, I picked up my phone.

Caitlyn: I am in ♥ with this place. All well in LA?

Thomas: So glad. That jerk, Jeremy, showed up threatening to beat my queer ass if I didn't tell him where you went. What decade is he living in? To his surprise, Jacob was there to scare the crap out of him.

Caitlyn: OMFG. I am so so sorry!

Thomas: No worries, Cat. Has he contacted you?

Jeremy did send several text messages I had not read. Thankfully, I had been smart enough to transfer my phone number onto my own plan. He couldn't disconnect my service or use it to find me.

Caitlyn: There are messages but I am not reading or answering. TTYL
K?

Thomas: xoxo

I sat down on one of the lounge chairs by the window and stared at the mountains. It was peaceful here. I understood why Vivian called it 'her sanctuary'.

My mind felt clear. Clear enough to acknowledge I had left a mess I needed to fix. As much as Jeremy deserved to be hurt, I wasn't a better person for trying to ruin his life.

Caitlyn: Tad, I need you to stop slandering Jeremy's name. If he has to take you to court, I'll have to be honest about everything, including personal details like size and stamina. I am not sure you want court documents to be available with that kind of information. It was a mistake and you need to just leave it alone.

Tad: The whole thing was a mess. You're right. I overreacted. I'll back

off with the smear campaign.

Caitlyn: I'm sorry I dragged you into my sick marriage, but it's over now.

Tad: I want to see you again, Caitlyn. I haven't felt so alive in a very long time. I don't want you to be just a cheap fling. I need to see you again.

Caitlyn: Sorry, Tad. I'm out of the game now. I'm a new woman.

Setting the phone down, I stared again at the clouds floating in the blue sky over the mountain range. There wasn't anything I could do to change what I had done. I didn't owe Jeremy anything else, and revenge left a sour taste in my mouth. One I never wanted to sample again.

TWENTY-SEVEN

October flew by. My first fall was truly magical. Trees shed their leaves in California, but it felt different here. It was like the season slowly turned for me. I wanted to be here for my first true Christmas, too.

My days were filled. Vivian only allowed one hour a day to talk about her life and two hours for writing. During our talks, I confessed to Vivian what I had done too. She listened without judgment.

In late November, I had just finished typing up the chapter about Viv's second husband when she came bouncing into the room. Yes, Vivian was so full of energy when she was excited. Sometimes, it felt like her teenage-self came to life in front of me.

"Do I have a surprise for you." She swayed dramatically. "A Thanksgiving present."

"It is that time already?"

"Can you guess what your present is?"

"We will be eating turkey." I smirked.

Vivian threw back her head and laughed. "Yes, we're having turkey and the rest of the spread. Your surprise is that Thomas and Jacob will be joining us."

My heart fell. That meant my mother would be alone on the holiday.

"You don't look pleased. Did you not want to see them?" She sat next to me and patted my hand.

"No, I want to see them. It is just my mother will be..."

“Oh, honey, did I forget to say your mom was coming with them? What a scatterbrain I am. Grant always said I was the worst at surprises. Who makes such an announcement and leaves out all the details?”

Distracted, Vivian picked up the notebook I had been typing from. She grinned as she glanced over the notes.

Not able to be irritated at her flighty behavior, I resumed our conversation. “You talked to my mother?”

Viv’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I’ve been talking with Hillary for a week. She is such a delight and has wonderful ideas on how to make the day go off with a bang. It is going to be a holiday to be thankful for.”

Impulsively, I threw my arms around Vivian. Tears filled my eyes as I hugged her. “Viv, you’re too good to me.”

“Oh honey, it has been a blessing having you here. You brought more life to my home than it has seen for such a long time,” she said, kissing me on the cheek. “Oh, I almost forgot. In less than a week, you will finally get to meet my baby boy. He’s flying your family here.”

“You didn’t mention he was a pilot.”

“My boy has many talents, like his mother.” Viv did a little tap dance and then removed an imaginary veil as she said, “He’s a true man of mystery. You’ll love him. We won’t be having a Charlie Brown event in my home. Get some sleep. I’ll wake you bright and early to begin with the festivity planning.”

Instead of our usual evening chats by the fire, we called it an early night. Vivian had big plans of baking and prepping for our Thanksgiving feast over the next few days. She beamed as she told me, “Tomorrow, let’s go over what we’ll do to ensure the best holiday ever for our guests.”

I smiled and nodded in agreement. Of course, it would be fantastic. Vivian had such a big heart, and she put it into everything she did. When I first moved in, she checked on me during the night, tucking the covers around me, and even adding another blanket on the really chilly evenings. She had such a sweet soul that I couldn’t view her actions as weird.

For some reason, Jeremy filled my mind that night. It might have been a result of hearing Vivian talk about her exes. Even though she painted them in a

good light, many of the things they had done had made me despise them. Through her, I began to understand how we can love parts of people while not liking the entire package. It was difficult comparing Jeremy to the man I loved and the man he had become. We both had changed. I wasn't as big of a liar as he was, though I had deceived him. I was not perfect, and I shouldn't have pretended I was for so long.

I avoided looking at his text messages, afraid of what he had said. If I was honest, I was more afraid of how I would respond. When I last checked, my lawyer said the papers had not been returned yet. Avoiding the issue seemed the best way to move on, but I needed to deal with him, one day.

It might as well be right now. I sighed. Pulling out my phone, I slowly began to go through the messages from the beginning.

Jeremy: WTF, Caitlin. How long have you been planning this? Was San Diego part of your plan? Mess up my life and dump me? When did you become such a bitch?

Jeremy: You're crazy if you think you're getting a dime of my money. Tell your lawyer, I have dirt on you, too.

Jeremy: Answer me!!!!

The texts went on – several times – daily, threatening me and calling me every crude thing he thought of. He even sent pictures of him holding his penis, as if that would make me come running home. Flipping through the texts, I stopped on a series of them that started six days ago. These had a different tone.

Jeremy: Babe, I am sorry. I need help. I need you. Please, Caitlyn, come home to me. I'll stop it all. NO MORE WOMEN. Only you. I'm dying inside without you.

Jeremy: Caitlyn, answer me. Please. I love you.

Jeremy: Fine, you bitch. I signed your papers. Don't come crawling back to me. I hope you enjoy your new life. When I'm done telling everyone what you've done, no one will want anything to do with you.

Jeremy: Oh God. I didn't mean it. It was the booze. I'm a mess without you. I signed the papers, but you can come home, Babe. Remember our last night? Remember how great we are together?

Setting the phone down, I stared out at the night sky. *How do you respond to someone who's such a narcissist?* I had been at peace. I shouldn't have read his messages. It just reopened my old wounds.

I had been broken for so long. I always felt I had to be the perfect woman, when in reality, I was far from it.

For the past year, I denied the fact that I once loved Jeremy. At one time, there had been something good in him that brought me to him. What changed, sending us off into this spiral? How could you love someone so much, one moment, and then forget they existed, the next?

Caitlyn: You know we're NOT good together. There has been too much damage done by both of us. You have a family to take care of now, Jeremy. Yeah, I know about Ginger. She's your chance to be a good man. Invest your energy in her and your child. She loves you, even though you don't deserve it.

You don't have to break someone you love to keep them. I want to forget the last five years. I want to remember the Jeremy I met in San Diego. The man I fell in love with. The man who left my heart a long time ago. Goodbye, Jeremy.

The next afternoon, I checked my email and found good news. I smiled as I reread the confirmation I needed. The lawyer wrote, "Jeremy Whittaker has agreed to all terms of the divorce papers. The papers were filed on November 13th."

I would be a free woman in April. California's six-month waiting period meant the divorce would be final in the spring. *A perfect time for a new life to begin.*

I slept like a baby that night. This time, I didn't even wake when Vivian came in to add another blanket.

TWENTY-EIGHT

After two days of endless decorating and food preparation, Vivian woke me up bright and early the next morning. “Come on, sleepyhead. We have a lot of baking to do this morning before our guests arrive. Take your time and get ready before you come down. I want everyone to see how happy and healthy you are here.”

“Or show them how you fattened me up,” I contradicted.

“Pshaw, you are still as skinny as a rail,” she scolded. “Whoever got in your head needs to get out.” She flittered off, calling, “Get ready, but don’t dawdle, love.”

By the time I made it to the kitchen, Vivian and her housekeeper, Sofia, were mixing, rolling, and chopping.

“Sorry, I took so long. Where do I start?” I asked.

“Grab an apron and start coring and peeling apples,” Vivian directed. “You look very pretty today, Caitlyn. Dark red really is your color.” Even bossing someone around, she took the time to smile brightly and throw in a compliment.

“Thank you, Viv.” I smiled back. “You look lovely, as always.”

Vivian was so excited about everything we were cooking and made sure to tell me how much her son loved each recipe. “With our head start on the feast, we will be able to just enjoy the day tomorrow.”

I was intrigued to meet this man she spoke so highly of. I couldn’t image a son of Vivian’s not being as great as she described. I was surprised there were no photos around of him besides the baby pictures.

“I can’t wait. Thank you for asking my mother to join us. She hasn’t been on a trip since my father died,” I said.

“That’s so sad. She’s so young and full of life. Hillary has more to experience before her time is up,” Vivian said.

I hadn’t thought about how young my mother actually was. At thirty-three, turning fifty didn’t seem as old. Being around Vivian, who was in her mid-sixties, had given me a new perspective on aging.

“I can’t imagine having any more life than you, Viv.” I kissed her on the cheek and stole one of the raspberries she just washed.

“Save those for my cheesecake.”

Laughing, I chopped the pecans she insisted we needed for her crumble cake. When I finished, I wasn’t sure what else to do. “The nuts are chopped. What is my next task?”

“Bring me some more flour, brown sugar, and butter. I need more, and then the recipe will be great,” she chuckled. “If we have time, I want to make a coconut cake. No holiday is complete without coconut.”

Vivian was a whirlwind of excitement. The rich aromas of cinnamon, vanilla, and spices filled the air. It smelled like the holidays. I truly had so much to be thankful for this year. While we were working on the treats, Sofia started prepping the various salads Vivian insisted were necessary.

“Sofia’s potato salad is the best!” Vivian declared.

“We’re going to have so much food you’ll have to roll us out of here.” I giggled. “There’s too much food for just us.”

“I was thinking we need to bake a few more things,” Vivian said seriously as she examined the overflowing countertops.

“Really? There are only nine of us.” Counting off on my fingers, I said, “Thomas, Jacob, Mom, me, you, your son, Ben, Sofia, and her husband. Am I counting wrong?” I counted again.

“Sweetie, Thanksgiving is more than our small group. Last count we were at thirty-six,” Vivian said.

“Thirty-nine,” Sofia corrected.

“Right, thirty-nine. We might need to invite one more to make it an even

number,” she mumbled as she continued taking inventory. “Sweet sassy, I almost forgot the chocolate chip cookies. Those are Grant’s favorites.”

“I can’t wait to meet your son. You always say such nice things about him. I can’t imagine how a son of yours would be anything, but amazing.”

“He is pretty special. He’s a lot like his father. Even down to the salt and pepper hair at such an early age. I’ve been trying for years to convince him to let my girl dye it.”

“It can be sexy on the right man,” I winked as I thought about one man that did look great with silver in his hair.

Vivian shrugged. “I guess I should be proud he is comfortable in the hand he has been dealt.” Her smile grew as she thought about her son. “I think he has the best of both Jackson and me.” Shaking off her memories, she returned to her bowl with fervor and began to mix chocolate chips into her cookie dough.

While the cookies baked, we sipped coffee and talked. Vivian told me stories about her last husband, Jackson, but I didn’t take notes. This felt too special to write about. It didn’t feel like it was for the world to hear. Maybe, later, she would share it again, and it would be recorded. For now, it was just a confidence between friends.

The alarm sounded, and Vivian removed the cookies from the oven. As we began putting them on racks to cool, a loud sound filled the air outside. It sounded like a helicopter above the house.

“They’re here,” she exclaimed. Checking her reflection in the window, she cried, “Oh my, I’m a mess. I better go change.”

Five minutes later, Vivian returned. Not only was she wearing a different outfit, but she had also styled her hair and refreshed her makeup.

“How did you do that so fast?” I asked, not hiding my surprise.

“The stage, darling. Remember, the show must go on, and the audience must never wait.” She bowed with a flourish. When she came back up, she looked at me and gasped, “Oh my, you’re a mess.”

Peering down at myself, I was grateful I wore an apron. I was covered in all the ingredients of our baking. Taking off the smock, I said, "I'll be fine. Thomas and Jacob have seen me in much worse condition than this."

When we stepped outside, I was met with frantic waves from my best friends as they exited the helicopter. My mother walked behind them at a more cautious rate. I hadn't considered how she would do flying. She was always a nervous traveler. When she saw me, her face brightened, and it was her turn to frantically wave. I had been so focused on reuniting with my family that I hadn't realized they were not alone. My mother was walking with someone.

I smiled brightly at the unknown guest until I realized he was not a stranger. My hazel eyes met his silver for a moment. Then, I looked him up and down. Jeans and a tight-fitting black t-shirt replaced the suit I last saw him wearing. Suddenly, my heart stopped.

"Grant, come give your mother a hug," Vivian called. When he reached us, she said, "Caitlyn, this is..."

"Jack," I said softly.

"Oh, that's right. I give you the beautiful name of Grant Jackson, and you go by Jack." She frowned.

"It's good to see you, too, Mom." He picked up the tiny woman and wildly kissed her cheeks. After he set her down, he nodded his head at me. "It's nice to see you again, Caitlyn."

I was stunned. No words formed.

"Cat!" Thomas interrupted the awkward exchange. He swooped in and wrapped me in a bear hug.

"Are you in on this deception?" I hissed.

"Oh, Caitlyn, there is no deception." Thomas set me down and looked at me with pity in his eyes.

"I can't believe this. Was this all a set-up? Did you plan this with him?" I pulled Jack aside.

“No, that’s not what this is at all.”

“Then, what is this, Thomas? Save the poor divorcée?”

“Don’t be like that. It’s Thanksgiving,” Thomas begged. “Right now, I’m just so glad to see you. I haven’t seen my girl in a long time.” He held me out, looking at the length of my body. “Cat, you’re glowing. I’ve never seen you so beautiful and healthy.”

I had changed since I came here. There was no need to put on a show anymore. I wore jeans and t-shirts without feeling judged, even though the t-shirts I owned were mainly Marc Jacobs. I felt beautiful – more real, more alive.

“There isn’t much need to get dressed up here.” I would rip him a new one when we were away from prying eyes.

“Well, keep up whatever you’re doing. You look great,” Thomas complimented and squeezed my hand. “You can tell me all about it later. But now, I need to freshen up after such an adventure.”

“Come on, everyone, I’ll take you to your rooms.” Ben stepped in and escorted the new guests away.

Vivian slipped her arms into mine. “Let them settle in, and you can help fix an early dinner for our new arrivals.”

I forced a smile and nodded. I was afraid of what I would say. The anger inside me was on a slow burn waiting to release.

With me in charge of assembling the sandwiches, Vivian whisked off to check on the dining table. As I was putting the last sandwich together, I found Jack staring at me from the doorway.

“How long have you been spying on me?” I asked coldly.

“I just got here.” He walked towards me and reached over me to pick up a radish.

I felt like the air had been sucked out of the room as we stood impossibly close.

“You have a little something...” He cupped my face and wiped it gently with

his thumb. “Mother’s chicken salad?”

“Yeah,” I said, barely above a whisper.

“It’s nice to see you looking so well, Caitlyn.” Jack leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

Heat grew inside me. I wanted to wrap my arms around his neck and pick up where we had left off. I could pull him into one of the spare rooms and live out the fantasies I had held for the past year. I could do many things, but I suddenly remembered he had lied to me.

“Don’t fall for another liar, Caitlyn. It’s good you found out now.”

Moving away from him, I snapped, “Lunch is ready. We don’t want to keep everyone waiting.”

The hurt in his eyes felt like I had ripped my own heart out, but I wouldn’t let his deception make me feel bad.

While we ate our meal, I answered any questions Jack asked me but asked none of my own. Not giving less or more than what was polite. I focused on everyone at the table, except for him, unless forced to. He made it difficult for me to ignore him. I felt him watching me. Relief filled me when we were done eating, and I could break away from his gaze.

Quickly, I began to clear the dishes with the hope of hiding in the kitchen.

“Let me help you.” Jack tried to take one from me.

“I got it.” I jerked the plate away.

“Grant, will you help me with this?” Vivian called, holding out a platter.

“Sure,” he said, giving me a look of disappointment.

What did he expect from me? Was I supposed to run into his arms, crying, ‘Thank you, White Knight, for slaying the dragon’?

Jack tricked me. He lied to me. Did he get me this job to save me, to protect me from myself or from Jeremy? Or was he looking for a broken girl to be the hero for – to clean up... fix? He was such a good man that he wouldn’t even sleep with me when I threw myself at him.

Pain filled me. “He is a good man. He would never want to be with someone like you. Not the liar and whore you’ve become.”

When I put the last dish in the dishwasher, Vivian came into the kitchen.

“What is going on, honey? You seem upset. Are you not happy to see your family?”

Exhaustion overcame me, but I needed the truth. “No, I’m really happy to see them. Can I ask you a question, and will you answer me honestly?” I asked.

“That’s the only way I know how to answer a question.”

“Did Jack tell you to bring me here? Did he tell you about the poor, broken married woman who needed to be saved?”

“Not at all. Jack suggested I talk to Thomas about finding a ghostwriter for my book. He mentioned how great you were as his editor, and that’s it. Honey, Thomas told me you were in trouble, but that’s not why I asked you to come here. I saw your work. I asked you to come because what I read was good, and you came highly recommended. I think we both came into each other’s lives at the perfect time.”

“And what about Jack?”

“My son is a good man.”

“Of course, you’re going to say that,” I huffed.

Viv’s green eyes glistened with tears. “Now, Caitlyn, I think you’re being a little bit irrational. You should sleep on it before you say anything too hurtful.”

The anger that had been keeping me upright had dissipated. Suddenly, I felt too tired to go on. “Fine, I’ll go to my room. Can you tell everyone I have a headache and I am going to bed early?”

“Why don’t you take something from the cabinet for your headache? I am sorry if you feel hurt, but you have no reason to. You were brought here because you’re talented.”

“Night, Viv.” I squeezed her hand, not wanting to continue the conversation.

“Sweet dreams, love.” She touched my cheek.

TWENTY-NINE

Locked in my suite, I turned on the water to the bathtub and began to cry. I didn't know where the distrust and anger came from. If Jack recommended me to work with his mother, he had to believe I was capable of doing the job. Even if his intentions were well meant, it felt too much like another man controlling me. I thought he wasn't like that. He was honorable. He was the good guy. What did he bring me here to be? A holiday fling?

No, Vivian was right; I had to be overreacting. *You're too broken for anyone, Caitlyn. Leave Jack alone. He doesn't deserve that. He deserves way better than you. You are Christopher's leftover trash. You deserve someone like Tad.*

Shuddering at that thought, I dunked under the water. I held my breath, like I did as a child, staying under the water as long as I could until I had to burst out for air. I stayed in the water until the cold drove me out.

After I dried my hair, I put on my pajamas and looked out at the dark night sky. In the distance I saw a bench, one that I had never noticed before. Something about it beckoned me. Putting on a sweater and some Uggs, I walked through the empty house. The clock on the microwave said it was after midnight.

The cold wind blew against me as I stepped outside, and I shivered. Again, I hadn't dressed for the weather.

It is only a short distance. You'll be fine, I prodded myself to keep walking.

A short distance from the house, light snow began to fall. I tipped my head back and stuck out my tongue, trying to catch snowflakes, like I had seen in the

movies.

Giggling at my absurd behavior, I began my quest again. It didn't seem like it would be this far from the house. By the time I reached the white stone bench, the snow had begun to fall in heavy flakes, and the wind was howling.

You're a damn fool, Caitlyn. You came this far to see a mysterious bench, I scolded myself.

"Well, I'm here now so I better check it out," I said aloud and wiped away the layer of snow covering the bench.

Inspecting it, I saw engraving in the stone. Tears filled my eyes. Kneeling down, I read the words of William Shakespeare that I knew well. I had written a paper about Sonnet 116. It had always spoken to me. Softly, I began to read the words aloud:

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;*

A shadow fell over the bench and I stopped reading. Jack's husky voice began to read the rest of the sonnet:

*Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.*

“Why are you here, Jack?” I asked without looking at him.

“Caitlyn, you were not brought here to be saved, but you’re here for a reason. My mother loves you. You’ve been so wonderful for her...giving her the ability to tell her story...to share her life. I appreciate the gift you have given her...have given me. I don’t think anyone else would understand her story like you do.”

“Jack, why do you even care about me?” I demanded, finally facing him. “Do you want to fuck me, right now and here, and move on?”

“You know that is not what I want. If that is all I wanted, I wouldn’t have stopped us that night in the car.”

“Right, the night I threw myself at you. I am damaged,” I screamed. “You don’t want someone like me. You don’t know what I have done. You don’t know what he did –,” I collapsed with those words.

“You really don’t think you deserve to be loved, do you?” He wrapped his arms around me and stroked my hair. “Caitlyn, why wouldn’t I want you? Why wouldn’t I care about you? Ever since that night we had dinner together, I’ve kicked myself daily for not telling you to stay with me. I’ve longed to be a part of your life, but I let you walk away. Determined to see you again, I promised myself that I wouldn’t let you go. I was going to show you what it was like to be loved – truly, deeply loved.”

I pulled away from him. “Jack, you don’t know the things I’ve done...what I let happen.”

“I don’t care what you’ve done.”

“I’ve done horrible, unforgivable things.”

“I don’t believe that.” Jack reached out for me.

I shrunk away. “If you only knew the things I did. What I put myself through to leave that marriage...I was too full of spite to just walk away. I had to destroy lives on the way out.”

“But, you left him. Caitlyn, I can’t pretend I know our future. I won’t lie to you and say we’ll date, and in five months, I’ll get down on my knees and beg you to marry me. I don’t know what will happen in the future. I don’t know if you’re ready to be loved like I want to love you. For this moment, right now, I

want you to take a chance and open your heart to me.”

Jack caught my hand and held it gently. “Can you trust me? I need you to know my intentions are genuine...that I just really need to get to know the woman you are. Not the one you think you have become.”

“You...don’t...know...me. I’m used. Damaged. I’m no good for you...for anyone. Go find a nice woman, who isn’t broken,” I ripped my hand out of his and yelled. I ran from him, not knowing where I was going.

Blinded by the tears and the snow, I heard him call after me. “Caitlyn, don’t run that way. It’s cold out here.”

The snow became so thick I couldn’t see more than a foot ahead of me. My chest burned from the run...from the frigid air. Falling to the ground, I began to cry. Soon, my soft cries turned into deep sobs. Wails of pain.

It’s time to give up. Stop fighting to hang on. You are not fixable, the small voice in my mind taunted.

“You’re right,” I whispered and collapsed.

THIRTY

The sound of soft snoring woke me. I found Jack sitting in a chair next to the bed. Confused, I didn't know where I was. Glancing around at the rich blue hues—from the comforter to the curtains and the walls covered with pictures of Jack and Vivian—I guessed I was in his room.

“You're finally awake,” Jack said in a sleepy voice. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he cupped my face. “You gave me such a scare, Caitlyn.”

“I don't know why I keep doing things to hurt everyone, myself included,” I said, tears falling from my eyes.

“Don't cry, love,” Jack urged, hugging me. “We're going to take this slow, Caitlyn. Every day, I'm going to show a little more of what it means to be loved.”

He kissed me softly, and a need to be closer to him rose inside me. I crushed my lips to his, running my fingers through his hair. Sliding under the blankets with me, Jack embraced me and continued to kiss me... so tenderly.

My hand under his shirt, the hardness of his abdominal muscles and tight chest left me aching with need. I pulled at the button to his jeans, and he took my hands in his.

He pressed his mouth to my ear. “Just kiss me. Connect with me. What you're reaching for isn't what you want. Let me love you, Caitlyn. I want to show you what it's like to be loved and respected.”

“I don't understand you, Jack. You obviously changed me out of my wet clothes,” I said defensively. The situation angered me. Once again, I felt rejected.

Once again, unconscious, I had been manhandled.

“Thomas and Jacob changed you,” he said. “I meant it when I said I want to take this slow, showing you what it means to be loved. When it’s the right time, we’ll know it. Until then, can’t you just trust me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with two consenting adults enjoying each other. I don’t understand why you keep rejecting me.”

“Really search inside yourself. Is that what you want? You’re right. There’s nothing wrong with us making love, but I feel you’re doing it out of fear. Let me hold you. Let go of your fears.” He pulled me back into his arms and held me tighter.

“I was hurt before by Christopher Ross,” I murmured.

He didn’t ask me questions. He just held me tighter, “I won’t let him hurt you again,” he promised.

Lying in his arms, his words played in my head, and I knew he was right. I had gone to the place I knew well and controlled. *My only bit of power in my marriage.* I was afraid I would never be able to love anyone. *I am broken. I don’t know if I can be fixed, but this isn’t the way to do it. Love isn’t about control or power.*

That night, Jack and I fell asleep in each other’s arms. I wanted to tell him everything. Confess my fears, but he had been right. I needed to figure out what I wanted, not what I thought was expected of me. Only then, could I move on.

The next morning, I left the bed before Jack woke. I didn’t have time to worry about our relationship. Whatever the future held, or even what I needed to fix within myself, wasn’t going to happen overnight. Jack never said I was broken, but he should have. The past year had been full of lies, deceit, and revenge. All of it had changed me. It made me cold. The need to win drove my actions.

If I had made love to Jack, it wouldn’t have given me the control I longed for. In the end, it would have given him the power over me. I didn’t want that. I wanted to have love. The kind they wrote about in books. Not the ones where

lovers ended up dead. Maybe, I didn't want the love story. No, I just wanted to explore what Jack and I could be. I wanted the mystery that had the happy ending.

"Those look really good, sweetie," Viv admired the plate of appetizers I made. "See, you're quite the cook."

"I know my way around the kitchen, but I am not much of a baker."

"Well, that's not true. Look at what we made together."

"Under your very careful guidance." I laughed.

"Are we good now?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"I will be. Thank you for forgiving me for my outburst."

"It happens to the best of us," she said.

"I saw the bench. I didn't know you liked Shakespeare. Is there a story behind it?"

"It was a gift from my Jackson. He was the true Shakespeare fan. I can still hear him reciting the sonnets to me," she said wistfully. Taking my hand, she continued, "Once upon a time, I needed to be saved from myself, Caitlyn. I was a lot like you. Then, I met Jackson and he taught me what love meant. My time with him was brief. Maybe he would have ended up in my collection of yester-husbands, but I like to think it wouldn't have turned out that way."

"But, you have Ben now."

"I do have Ben," she said, her eyes brightening, partly from the tears that welled in them as she spoke about Jackson and partly from her love for Ben.

"You are good together. Why didn't you marry?"

"Who says we didn't?" Vivian asked.

"You did?" I gasped in disbelief. "Does Jack know?"

"I can't give away the ending quite yet." Picking up the platter, she avoided my questions. With a wink, she said, "Let's get these out to our guests."

Everyone being here to celebrate Thanksgiving felt right, surrounded by people who didn't expect me to be anything. I wasn't the trophy wife or the perfect woman. I was just Caitlyn Chase—a work in progress. I was thankful for the places I had been and the places I would be going.

THIRTY-ONE

Jack kept his word and went slowly. During our time together, he showed me so many things I never thought I would experience in my lifetime. Exploring nature. Learning to fish. Cross-country skiing. Identifying trees, plants, and animals. Building a fire without matches. There were so many things I never imagined I would have tried. Jack showed me the world was big, and I needed to see all of it. I wanted nothing more than to see it all with him by my side.

With time, I grew stronger. Slowly, I allowed myself to open up. I even told him about the abuse I endured while drugged. In a way, I was glad Christopher was dead. The fury in Jack's eyes told me he would have made sure no one else was ever hurt by him. My confession about my revenge plan in regard to Jeremy was received differently. Jack laughed when I told him how far I went and even asked if he could meet Justice.

Jack and my mother stayed on after we said goodbye to Thomas and Jacob. For the first time since I was a child, I really celebrated Christmas. As we rang in the New Year, I reflected on my past but focused on our present. Jack treated me like I was special and important. He taught me there was no rush. Our relationship was in the moment. No past. No future. Just the now.

"You're going to be late," my mother called, interrupting my reverie.

"Oh, we don't have set plans. Do I look okay?" I asked.

"Beautiful. I am proud of you, Caitlyn." She sat on the edge of the tub while I finished applying my makeup. "I've wanted to talk to you. I think I'm ready to

go home.”

“But, you love it here. You’ve made a home here.”

“I do love it here and being with you. I feel I’ve also grown while being here. This has been the best time in my life, but I think I’ve become too comfortable. It’s easy to get lost in Viv’s sanctuary. It’s time to return to the commitments I made in San Diego. Honey, I know I wasn’t a good example of how to be a confident woman or wife.”

“That’s not true,” I denied. Setting my mascara on the vanity, I sat down next to her. Anger filled me. *Even from the grave, my father is still convincing her she was at fault.*

“Let me finish,” she demanded gently. “I wasn’t. After your father died, you found out about his affairs and I didn’t say anything. I sat back as he told me, over and over, he would change. Maybe that is why you didn’t tell me about Christopher.”

“No,” I gasped. “I couldn’t. I –”

“I knew the day after Prom that something horrible had happened. I was too afraid to ask, to make you tell me. When I sent Nick to help you, I had no idea how badly you had been hurt. When I saw the newspaper, I understood everything. If he wasn’t already dead, I would have found and killed him myself.” Her eyes blazed with anger, and she ground her clenched fist into her leg.

“Maybe that’s why you ended up with Jeremy? They say some women end up marrying their fathers, and I think we both did. I’m glad you’re stopping the cycle. You have Jack now, and he’s nothing like them.”

“He is a good man, but I don’t quite have him yet,” I said with a smile. “I’m just enjoying the time we spend together.”

Relief flooded me. The secret I had been carrying was finally lifted. I hadn’t realized how important it was for my mother to know what happened to me. *If only I purged these demons years ago.*

Hugging me, she said, “Ok, you better finish getting ready. I love you, Caitlyn.”

“I love you, too,” I said, hugging her tighter.

“Where are you going tonight? Anywhere special?” my mother asked.

“Jack’s taking me by helicopter to a restaurant, and to see the areas of Montana I missed from the ground,” I answered.

“Well, that sounds exciting. I’ll expect an update tomorrow.” My mother kissed me on the forehead.

“I am going to miss you, Mom.”

“I won’t be far, honey. I’ll be an airplane ride away,” she said. “Lucky we know a pilot.”

Examining my reflection, I realized I chose the dress I wore the first time I met Jack. I smiled, remembering the dinner we shared. That woman wasn’t here anymore. I didn’t need a designer outfit to define my worth.

When Thomas left, he told me I had a choice: to be happy or miserable. I knew he would be pleased to see I had chosen to be happy. Finally ready, I went downstairs to where Jack was waiting for me. No matter how many times I saw him, my heart always skipped a beat.

“You look beautiful.” His voice was husky and seductive.

“And, you’re as handsome as usual,” I said softly.

Smiling, he said, “Are you ready?”

“I am. Am I overdressed?” I asked nervously.

“You look perfect.”

“This will be my first helicopter ride. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t. So, I’ll have to make it special.”

“You being there makes it special enough, Jack.”

My nerves settled as the helicopter lifted. I felt safe with Jack as he flew us above a range of mountains that seemed endless. When we reached a flat area on the top of the mountain, he hovered over a log cabin.

“This was my father’s cabin. I would love to show you his favorite hideaway,” Jack explained.

“I would love to see it,” I said.

Jack lowered the helicopter. When it touched the ground, we waited in silence as the blades slowed, and then went still.

“Will we miss our reservation?” I hesitated.

“No, I accounted for stopping here.”

The cabin was nothing spectacular. It looked like the kind of hunting lodge you would see in movies. On the porch, there was a wooden bench with *Her passions are made of nothing, but the finest part of pure love* carved on the seat.

“Your father did love Shakespeare. This was from Antony and Cleopatra.” I traced the words, taking in the romance of them.

“Did you hear that?” Jack frowned and looked towards the door. “Stay here. I need to check it out.”

“Shouldn’t I come with you?”

“No, it might be a raccoon. I’ll check and come back for you,” Jack said, mumbling about the pain in the ass rodents.

Sitting on the bench, I stared into the snowy distance. “Jack, I’m getting cold,” I called.

Not hearing an answer, I decided to find him. I slowly opened the door, expecting the worst. Instead of a destroyed cabin, there was a row of tea lights lining the floor. I followed the trail to a heart made from more candles. Standing next to a candlelit table, Jack beamed at me. He was holding a bouquet of flowers. Not roses, but gorgeous, meaningful daisies.

He held out the flowers and kissed me gently on the cheek, then pulled out a chair. My place setting had a bowl of red soup with a white heart made from cream. Popping the cork on a champagne bottle, he poured me a glass, and then one for himself.

Sitting down, we toasted.

“To us,” he said softly.

I took a slow sip of the bubbly drink and stared into his silver eyes, eyes that always held so much love and affection for me. “How did you do all of this?” I asked.

Jack just grinned at me before his eyes narrowed. “Caitlyn, we’ve spent time together and I couldn’t be more delighted to see the person you’re growing in to.

You're getting stronger each day. I once told you I couldn't promise we would take this relationship to another level." He stood. "But, I've been thinking hard about us. If I am reading things correctly, we have reached the end of the line."

Is he breaking up with me over champagne and a candlelit dinner?

Kneeling before me, he reached into his pocket. "Caitlyn, it's time to start a new chapter. I know this is quick, but I want to be with you every day for as long as I'm still breathing. I can't imagine a world without you by my side."

He held a box with a yellow cut diamond encircled by beaded diamonds. "Caitlyn Chase, I want you to be my forever. I want to be the man you love for the rest of your life. Will you marry me?"

I stared at the ring, my eyes welling with tears. "No," I murmured.

Jack was on bended knee before me. A moment I had longed for...hoped for and the only word I could say was no?

"I understand," he said, beginning to stand.

Pushing my chair back, I knelt in front of him. "No, I don't mean, 'no, I won't marry you'. Yes, Jack, I'll marry you."

"Why did you say no?" he asked.

"I was tongue-tied. Ask me again, I'll do it right this time."

"You did it perfectly the first time, Caitlyn." He slipped the ring onto my finger, and then kissed my hand. "I want to apologize you're not having the fancy meal I promised."

I took his face in my hands and kissed him. He returned my kiss with a soft, slow, breath-stealing one. A warm feeling grew inside me.

Whispering between kisses, I said, "I want you, Jack. I want you to show me what love is."

Jack scooped me up but quickly set me down. Frantically, he began to blow out the candles.

Laughing, I helped. "Always the safety man."

When he blew out the last flame, he picked me back up and kissed me. "Now where did I leave off?"

Our eyes met, and I saw all the unspoken words. The love he had for me.

"Oh yeah," Jack's voice grew husky. "Above all, I promise you will always

know you're loved.”

In a log cabin high on a mountain in the middle of Montana, for the first time in my life, I found out what it truly meant to not only be made love to but to be loved.

EPILOGUE

“Grammie, Grammie, we are home!” the small boy yelled, running into the kitchen.

Picking up the child, Vivian said in a singsong voice, “Oh, my sweet Jackson, I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Do I have a surprise?” Jackson asked. His eyes grew wide in anticipation.

“What do you want the most for your birthday?” Vivian asked.

“A pony?”

“Besides a pony,” she said, grinning.

“Chocolate chip cookies?”

She set him down and handed him a plate of small cookies, then said, “Of course.”

“He’s going to have a sweet tooth, like his father, if we’re not careful,” I laughed.

Vivian patted Jackson on the head. “Why don’t you go sit with Grampie.”

“Come sit with me, boy, and we can share your cookies,” Ben said, pouring two glasses of milk.

“How are you feeling?” Vivian asked, wrapping her arm around my waist.

“The helicopter ride was interesting,” I said, rubbing my extended belly, “but the doctor said everything looks good. He said Jackson’s sisters will be here anytime now.”

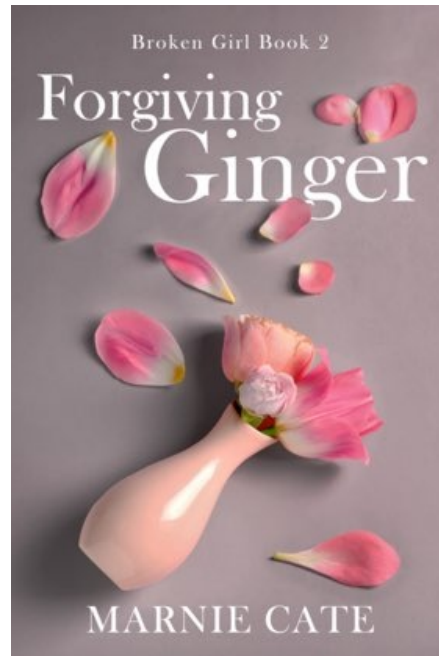
“Twin girls,” Vivian exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Oh, Caitlyn, you’ve brought so much joy to my life.”

“As you brought to mine.”

“Are you two getting emotional?” Jack asked from the doorway.

Looking at my husband, the love of my life, I smiled. In the five years we’d been married, I was thankful for every moment. There was no longer a need for me to chase after something to fulfill the emptiness that was inside me. With Jack, I had finally seen all four seasons and found my Winter.

Next in the Series:
Forgiving Ginger
(Broken Girl Book 2)



Every mistress has her story, but not every story has a mistress like Ginger.

The second book in Marnie Cate's Broken Girl series, FORGIVING GINGER explores the life of Ginger - the character introduced in book one. A woman with a haunting past, Ginger was raised by an oppressive foster mother.

Her life takes a dramatic turn after she meets a man who embodies her dreams. But his intentions are dangerously misleading, resulting in her transformation from an innocent girl to a mistress, living a heated life of lies and passion.

A tale of self-discovery, redemption and challenging stereotypes, FORGIVING GINGER explores the concepts of love, identity and forgiveness.

[Forgiving Ginger](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marnie Cate is a writer of coming-of-age and urban fantasy novels. Born in an Irish mining town in Montana, she always had a flair for the dramatic and a vivid imagination and spent her childhood lost in the elaborate worlds she created with the help of her dolls.

One day, Marnie Cate was struck by a powerful image in her mind. This seed created the world of Starten and the complicated world of goddesses and their touch on the mortal world.

Inspired by the actress Dame Judi Dench, she pursued her dream of sharing the stories that were brewing in her mind. With the urging of friends and family, she wrote in every spare moment she had.

After countless weekends spent at the local coffee shop typing away and people-watching, Marnie finished her first novel, “Remember: Protectors of the Elemental Magic.” With the world of elemental magic and the humans they lived in released, the stories have just begun.

“Chasing Caitlyn” inspired Marnie to expand her writing genre to include Adult Fiction. When not writing, Marnie enjoys drinking iced tea, playing on her Switch, and spending time with her beloved kitty. She lives in Arizona.

To learn more about Marnie Cate, visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).