

SUGAR BABY

Amanda Feliciano



Copyright © 2026 by Amanda Feliciano

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is purely coincidental.

Contents

1. Prologue: The Education of Amanda Feliciano	1
2. Chapter One: Aspen	7
3. Chapter 2: The Gallery Owner's World	19
4. Chapter 3: Amalfi Coast Yacht Trip	28
5. Chapter 4: The Reserved Billionaire	37
6. Chapter 5: The Married Man	46
7. Chapter 6: The Gala	56
8. Chapter 7: The Hotel Magnate	67
9. Chapter 8: The Publisher	78
10. Chapter 9: The Gallerist	87
11. Chapter 10: Vienna	98
12. Chapter 11: The Studio	108
13. Chapter 12: The Opening	119
14. Coda: What Remains	130

Prologue: The Education of Amanda Feliciano

I tell people my name is Anya, but that's a lie I've been perfecting for three years.

The real name is Amanda. Amanda Feliciano, born in Des Moines, raised in a town so small the water tower doubled as a welcome sign and the only thing that ever happened was the annual corn festival. I was the girl who colored inside the lines, who memorized the names of Renaissance painters before she memorized the names of pop stars, who believed that if she was good enough and quiet enough, the world would reward her.

I learned that lesson wrong.

At sixteen, I learned what happens to good girls who go to the wrong party. I learned that the boys who throw the footballs and date the cheerleaders can do whatever they

want, because their fathers are judges and their mothers sit on the school board. I learned that when you scream into a pillow while three of them take turns holding you down, nobody hears you. And if they do hear, they look the other way.

The town covered it up. My parents sent me to therapy, which I hated, and then to a different school, which I hated more. I carried that night inside me like a bone that never healed right, a constant ache that I learned to walk around.

I thought college would be different. I packed my bags for the East Coast, for a university where nobody knew my name or what happened in that bedroom. I reinvented myself as the serious art history student—turtlenecks and thick glasses, buns so tight they pulled at my temples, a wall of textbooks between me and anyone who might look too long.

But the bone still ached. And I found that the only way to quiet it was to give it what it wanted.

I started dating older men. Men who wanted to control me, to own me, to take what they wanted without asking. I let them because somewhere inside, I believed that if I could survive it again, this time by choice, I'd finally feel in control. But control is a trick mirror. The more I submit-

ted, the less I had. I let a boyfriend choke me unconscious. I let another film me without my knowledge. I let a woman humiliate me in front of strangers because she said she loved me.

I was drowning in the very thing I thought would save me.

Therapy the second time was different. I found a therapist who didn't tell me I was broken. She told me I was smart, and that intelligence could be a weapon if I learned how to wield it. She asked me what I wanted, not what I deserved. And for the first time, I thought about the word choice.

I found the website during a sleepless night in my junior year. It called itself a "mentorship platform," but anyone with eyes could see what it really was. A marketplace. A bazaar of beautiful young women and wealthy older men, each pretending they were looking for something else. I signed up as a joke, as an experiment, as a way to prove to myself that I still had power.

The first message was from a man in finance. He was forty-seven, divorced, with a summer house in the Hamptons and a wine cellar he described in more detail than his

face. He offered me five thousand dollars to have dinner with him.

I said yes.

I showed up in a dress I'd borrowed from a friend, heels that pinched my toes, and a script I'd written in my head: I am interesting. I am desirable. I am in control. The dinner lasted three hours. He talked about his ex-wife, his portfolio, his fear of growing old alone. I listened. I asked the right questions. I touched his hand at the right moments. By dessert, he was looking at me like I was the first person who had ever seen him.

We went back to his apartment. I let him fuck me because I decided to, not because he took anything from me. And when I left the next morning with an envelope of cash and a promise to see me again, I felt something I hadn't felt since before that house party.

Alive.

That was three years ago. Since then, I've learned the architecture of this life. How to be the woman they want me to be—demure, dazzling, dangerous in just the right measures. I've learned that money is just a scorecard, that what they're really paying for is the fantasy of being desired by someone who could never truly want them. And I give

them that fantasy. I become their mirror, reflecting back the version of themselves they most want to see.

In exchange, they give me everything else: tuition, travel, apartments, access to worlds I never knew existed. They give me the safety of a contract, the clarity of a transaction, the power of a woman who can walk away any time.

I've had to draw lines. I walked out on a tech billionaire who tried to film me without my consent. I fired a hedge fund manager who thought "no" was negotiable. I've learned that the real currency isn't their money—it's my willingness to stay. And that willingness is something I choose, every single time.

The girl from Iowa, the one who screamed into a pillow while boys took turns, she's still in here somewhere. She's the one who writes the thesis on female martyrs in Renaissance painting, who wears thrift-store sweaters and drinks burnt coffee in the library. She's the one who still flinches when a man raises his voice, who checks the locks three times before she sleeps.

But she's also the one who walks into a penthouse in Aspen, who lets a wealthy stranger undress her with his eyes, who knows exactly how to make him beg. She's the

one who turned her trauma into a weapon and her body into a negotiation table.

They call me Anya Vance. It's a name I chose, like everything else in my life now.

This is the story of how I learned to stop surviving and start playing the game. This is the story of every suite, every secret, every skin I've touched and let touch me. This is the story of a girl who was broken, and then—piece by piece, choice by choice—built herself back into something that could never be broken again.

Chapter One: Aspen

The private jet cut through a sky so blue it looked fake, the kind of blue you only see in Colorado. I pressed my forehead to the cold oval window and watched the Rocky Mountains rise up like jagged teeth, their peaks dusted with fresh powder. Below, the valleys were ribbons of pine and shadow. I'd never been to Aspen. Never been on a private jet either, but I was learning that the first time for everything usually came wrapped in someone else's credit card.

Marcus was asleep across from me in a cream leather seat that reclined flat. His chest rose and fell beneath a charcoal cashmere blanket, one arm thrown over his face to block the light. He was younger than my usual benefactors—thirty-four, athletic, still carrying the hungry energy of a man who'd made his first billion before his prefrontal cortex finished developing. Machine learning. He'd sold

his company to a larger one and now spent his days angel investing, skiing, and, apparently, acquiring companions for long weekends.

I studied him while he slept. The sharp jaw, the slight stubble, the way his lips parted just barely. In sleep, he looked softer. Almost boyish. I wondered what his mother would think if she knew he flew strangers to luxury resorts. I wondered what mine would think if she knew I was the stranger.

My phone buzzed. A text from my advisor: Reminder: seminar paper abstract due Monday. Need your revised thesis statement by Friday.

I typed back: On it. Out of town till Sunday.

I didn't mention the town. I didn't mention the jet. I locked my phone and tucked it into my bag—a beat-up leather tote I'd bought at a thrift store in Iowa City, a world away from the Hermès scarf folded neatly in my suitcase. That was the duality I'd perfected: the studious graduate student in thrifted sweaters and the woman who could walk into a Chanel boutique and drop five figures without blinking. Both were real. Neither was the whole picture.

The jet began its descent. Marcus stirred, squinting at me through sleepy eyes.

"Almost there," I said.

He smiled, slow and lazy. "Ready for the best weekend of your life?"

"I'm always ready."

He laughed, and I saw the sharpness return to his gaze—the calculation, the appraisal. I was used to being looked at that way. I'd learned to look back.

The resort was a cathedral of glass and stone, tucked into a mountainside with views that made my chest ache. Our suite occupied the entire top floor: two bedrooms, a living room with a fireplace that ran on gas but looked real, a bathroom with a soaking tub the size of my dorm room. Marcus tipped the bellman with a hundred-dollar bill and didn't bother to hide it.

"You don't have to show off," I said, dropping my bag on a leather ottoman.

"Yes, I do. That's the whole point."

He poured two glasses of scotch from the wet bar, handed me one, and raised his in a toast. "To new arrangements."

I clinked my glass against his. "To clarity."

We drank, and the scotch burned warm down my throat. He stepped closer, his hand finding my waist, his breath ghosting across my cheek. The kiss was inevitable—I'd known it since the elevator at the private terminal. His lips were soft, insistent, tasting of oak and smoke. I let it happen, let my body melt into the familiar choreography. His hand slid down to my ass, squeezing. I pulled away gently.

"Dinner first," I said. "I'm starving."

He grinned, a little wolfish. "Fair enough."

Dinner was at a restaurant called Element 47, all white tablecloths and sommeliers who appeared at your elbow like ghosts. Marcus ordered a bottle of Burgundy that cost more than my monthly rent and told me about his latest investment—a biotech startup working on cellular rejuvenation.

"We're going to live forever," he said, swirling the wine. "Or at least until two hundred."

"And what will you do with all that time?"

"Collect experiences. Collect people." He looked at me over the rim of his glass. "Collect you, hopefully."

I smiled, but the words settled in my stomach like a stone. Collect you. I was used to being a line item in someone's annual budget, but the bluntness of it still stung sometimes. I sipped my wine and let the conversation drift to safer topics: the provenance of the art on the walls (a Calder mobile, a Rauschenberg print), the best ski runs, the time he'd broken his collarbone in Chamonix.

By the time we finished dessert—a chocolate soufflé so light it dissolved on my tongue—I'd decided how the night would go. I always decided. That was the secret nobody talked about in sugar baby forums: the illusion of submission is the ultimate form of control. I let him believe he was leading, but I was the one drawing the map.

Back in the suite, I excused myself to change. I slipped into something I'd bought specifically for this trip: a burgundy silk chemise that fell to mid-thigh, cut low enough to show the curve of my breasts. No bra. No panties. I walked out to find Marcus waiting on the leather sofa, a fresh scotch in hand.

"You're trying to kill me," he said.

"Not yet."

I sat beside him, close enough that our thighs touched. He set down his glass and kissed me, deeper this time, his

tongue sliding against mine. His hands found the hem of the chemise, pushing it up my thighs. I let him, arching into his touch.

"Tell me what you want," he murmured against my throat.

"I want you to fuck me against the window."

His breath caught. Then he was lifting me, carrying me across the room, pressing my back against the cold glass. The lights of Aspen glittered below, tiny diamonds on black velvet. I wrapped my legs around his waist and felt him hard against my thigh. He pushed aside the silk and entered me in one smooth thrust—no condom, which was against my rules, but I'd let him believe he'd forgotten. I had my own protections.

The sex was fast, hungry, the way I'd expected. Him gripping my hips, my nails raking down his back. The glass fogged with our breath. I came first, faking nothing, my body shuddering against him. He followed moments later, burying his face in my shoulder as he spilled inside me.

Afterward, we lay on the rug in front of the fireplace, a cashmere throw draped over us. He traced patterns on my stomach, lazy circles that made my skin prickle.

"You're different," he said.

"Different how?"

"Most girls I bring here want to talk about the future. What this means. Where it's going. You're just... present."

I turned my head to look at him. "The future is a trap. I prefer the now."

He didn't have a response to that.

The next morning, we took a private ski lesson. Our instructor was a woman named Soren, a blonde with shoulders like a swimmer and the kind of effortless beauty that came from growing up in the mountains. She was patient with my clumsy turns, correcting my posture with a hand on my hip that lingered just a beat too long.

I noticed Marcus noticing.

At lunch—a cabin perched at the top of a lift, serving grilled cheese and tomato soup that tasted like childhood—I watched Soren laugh at something he said. Her teeth were white, her eyes crinkled at the corners. I felt a familiar pull, that low thrum of attraction I'd learned to recognize but never fully explain.

Later, in the hot tub on our private deck, steam rising around us as snow fell in silent sheets, I brought it up.

"She's beautiful," I said, casual.

Marcus, floating with his arms spread along the edge, cracked one eye open. "Who?"

"Soren."

He didn't deny it. Instead, he watched me, waiting.

"I think she likes you," I said.

"I think she likes you too."

The statement hung in the cold air. I turned to face him, water sloshing over the edge.

"Would you want to find out?"

His eyebrows rose. "Are you serious?"

"I don't say things I don't mean."

He was quiet for a long moment. Then he pulled me close, his hands cold on my waist. "I've never done anything like that."

"Neither have I." A lie—but a small one. The truth was I'd orchestrated threesomes before, always as the architect, never the victim. It was another form of control: curating desire, directing the choreography.

He kissed me, and it tasted like chlorine and possibility.

Soren agreed to join us for drinks that evening. She arrived at the suite at nine, wearing jeans and a fitted turtle-neck, her hair still damp from a shower. Marcus poured

her a glass of wine, and we sat on the sofa, the conversation stilted at first, then loosening. She told us about growing up in Telluride, her season as a competitive skier, the knee injury that ended her career. I watched her hands as she talked: strong, calloused, capable.

At some point, Marcus excused himself to use the bathroom, and it was just the two of us. She looked at me, a question in her eyes.

"Is this weird?" she asked.

"Only if we make it weird."

She laughed, a little nervous. "I've never... I mean, I've been with women before. But not like this. Not with a couple."

"It's not a couple," I said. "It's a weekend. We're all just people looking for something good."

She considered that, then leaned in and kissed me. Her lips were soft, tentative. I deepened it, my hand sliding to the nape of her neck. She tasted like red wine and mint.

When Marcus returned, we were tangled on the sofa, my hand under her turtleneck, her breath coming faster. He stood in the doorway, watching. I met his eyes and smiled.

"Join us," I said.

The rest of the night unfolded in fragments I'd remember later like snapshots: Soren's mouth between my thighs, her tongue working with the precision of an athlete. Marcus behind her, gripping her hips, the sound of skin on skin. The three of us in a tangle on the king bed, limbs and breath and sweat. I came twice—once from her, once from him, their mouths and hands overlapping in a rhythm I'd orchestrated but couldn't fully direct.

At one point, I straddled Soren's face while Marcus fucked her from behind, and I watched her eyes roll back, her fingers digging into my thighs. I leaned down and kissed her through her moans.

Afterward, we lay in a pile, the sheets kicked to the floor. Marcus was asleep within minutes, one arm thrown across both of us. Soren's head rested on my shoulder, her breathing slow and even.

I stared at the ceiling, feeling the ghost of pleasure still humming in my veins. It had been good. Better than good—it had been exactly what I needed. A reminder that I was in control. That I could conjure desire and dispel it at will.

But beneath the satisfaction, something else stirred. A quiet voice I tried to ignore.

You're still looking for something you won't find in hotel rooms.

I closed my eyes and willed the thought away. This was the now. This was enough.

The last morning, we had breakfast on the deck—eggs Benedict and mimosas, the sun warm on our faces. Soren had left at dawn, a quick kiss and a scribbled number on a napkin. Marcus was quiet, sipping his coffee, watching the mountains.

"Thank you," he said finally.

"For what?"

"For being real." He set down his cup and took my hand. "I know this is transactional. I know we're not... whatever. But I'd like to keep seeing you. Not just weekends. I'd like to fly you out to New York, take you to dinners, introduce you to people. And if you want to bring other people into it, I'm open to that too."

I looked at him—this young, rich man who had everything except the ability to say what he actually felt. I recognized the hunger in his eyes. It was the same hunger I saw in all of them: the desire to be seen, truly seen, by someone who wasn't impressed by their money.

"I have a seminar paper due Monday," I said.

He laughed. "I'll hire someone to write it."

"No, you won't. I'm a graduate student. I write my own papers."

He squeezed my hand. "So what do you say?"

I thought about it. The arrangement was good: open-ended, flexible, with a man who didn't want to own me, only to share experiences. It was the best kind of deal—one where I held all the cards.

"Let's try it," I said. "But no promises. And no expectations."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

We finished breakfast in comfortable silence. Inside, my phone buzzed: another email from my advisor. I ignored it. I watched the sun crest the mountains, painting the snow in shades of gold and rose. I felt the weight of the weekend settling into my bones, the stories I'd tell and the ones I'd keep.

Later, on the flight back to New York, Marcus slept again, and I pulled out my laptop. The abstract was due in five days. I had two thousand words to write about the iconography of female desire in Renaissance painting.

I smiled to myself and began to type.

Chapter 2: The Gallery Owner's World

Celeste found me at the Met, though that makes it sound accidental. Nothing about Celeste L'Amour was accidental.

I was standing in front of Caravaggio's *The Denial of Saint Peter*, notebook open, trying to articulate why the old woman's face—lit by that single, treacherous flame—made me think of my own reflection. The painting is about betrayal, about the moment you look at yourself and realize you've become someone you barely recognize. I knew that feeling intimately.

"You've been here for twenty-three minutes," a voice said from behind me. Low, smoke-and-velvet, a French accent softened by decades of Manhattan. "Most people spend forty-five seconds, take a photo, and move on."

I turned. She was in her late forties, maybe early fifties, with silver-streaked black hair cropped close to her skull and cheekbones that could cut glass. She wore a cream silk blazer over a black shell, tailored trousers that probably cost more than my monthly rent, and a single diamond on a leather cord at her throat. Her eyes were dark and sharp and slot-machine-greedy.

“I’m writing my thesis on Caravaggio’s treatment of shame,” I said, closing my notebook. “The denial scene is the turning point—Peter recognizes his failure, but the painting doesn’t let him off the hook. The old woman knows. She sees him.”

Celeste smiled. It was a slow, deliberate thing, like watching a predator decide you’re interesting enough to eat.

“I own one of his late works,” she said. “A small piece. A study for *The Flagellation*. It’s hanging in my library in the Village. Would you like to see it?”

I should have said no. I had a seminar at four, a stack of unread articles, a text from my roommate asking if I’d paid the electric bill. But the way she said library and study made it sound like a private ritual, an invitation into a world I’d only glimpsed in the pages of art magazines.

“Yes,” I said.

Her car was a black Maybach with cream leather interiors that smelled of sandalwood and something floral I couldn’t name. We drove in silence for the first ten minutes, the city blurring past tinted windows. She watched me the way she’d watched me in the museum—taking inventory, weighing something I couldn’t see.

“You’re a sugar baby,” she said finally. Not a question.

I kept my face neutral. “That’s an interesting word for it.”

“I prefer professional companion,” she said. “More accurate. Less pejorative. I know your profile—Anya Vance, art history graduate, fluent in French and Italian, references from three fairly powerful men whose names I won’t repeat out of respect for their discretion.”

I felt my spine stiffen. “You did background checks on me.”

“Of course I did. I don’t make investments blindly.” She turned to face me fully, and for the first time I saw the warmth underneath the steel—a flicker of something almost maternal. “I’m offering you a position. Not a night, not a weekend. A position. I need a cultural attaché—someone who can navigate the art world, charm

my clients, attend auctions and openings, and occasionally share my bed. The salary is competitive. The benefits include access to my private collection, unlimited travel, and a studio apartment in the West Village you can use as your own.”

I stared at her.

“You’re serious.”

“I am never not serious, *chérie*.”

The apartment was in a converted carriage house, narrow and six stories high, with a roof garden that overlooked the Hudson. The library took up the entire second floor—floor-to-ceiling shelves, rolling ladders, a fireplace burning pine logs, and above the mantel, the Caravaggio study. I recognized it immediately: the raw, unfinished quality of the brushstrokes, the way Christ’s body twisted in submission, the torturer’s rope cutting into his wrists.

I stood in front of it for a long time. Celeste stood behind me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of her body through her blazer.

“I like watching you look at art,” she said. “You treat it like a conversation, not a spectacle.”

“It is a conversation,” I said. “The artist is speaking. Most people just don’t know how to listen.”

Her hand settled on my hip. Light. Questioning.

I leaned back into her.

The kiss started slow—her lips soft and deliberate, tasting of black coffee and something minty. She took her time, mapping my mouth with her tongue, her fingers sliding up my ribcage to cup the weight of my breast through my sweater. I let out a sound I didn't recognize, something between surrender and hunger.

"I want to show you something else," she said against my neck.

She led me up a spiral staircase to the third floor, which was a single room—a bedroom, but not like any I'd seen. The bed was enormous, draped in white linen, and the walls were hung with paintings I'd only ever seen in textbooks. A Rothko. A de Kooning. A faintly glowing Agnes Martin that seemed to pulse in the dim light.

"This is where I sleep," she said. "And where I make love."

She undressed me slowly, like unwrapping a gift she'd been saving. When I was naked, she stepped back and looked at me—not with the hungry, transactional gaze I was used to from the men I entertained, but with something closer to reverence.

“You are beautiful, Anya,” she said. “But that’s the least interesting thing about you.”

She knelt.

I’d never had a woman kneel for me before. Men got on their knees, but always with expectation, with the weight of what they wanted next. Celeste knelt like she was praying.

She pressed her mouth to my stomach, just below my navel. Her tongue traced a wet line down, down, until she was parting my thighs with her fingers, her breath hot against my cunt. She looked up at me—those dark, slot-machine eyes—and said, “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to make me forget my name.”

She smiled again, that slow predator’s smile, and then her mouth was on me.

She was patient. That was the first thing I noticed. She took me apart like a scholar deconstructing a text—every fold, every nerve, every gasp I made was noted and cataloged. Her tongue circled my clit in a rhythm that built and receded, built and receded, until I was gripping her hair and begging in a voice I didn’t recognize.

“Please, please, please—”

She slid two fingers inside me, curling them against that spot that made my vision blur, and sucked my clit into her mouth at the same moment. I came with a cry that echoed off the Rothko's red expanse, my hips bucking against her face, her fingers working me through the aftershocks until I collapsed onto the bed.

She crawled up beside me, still fully dressed, and traced the line of my collarbone with her fingertip.

"That," she said, "was just the introduction."

I stayed for three days.

She introduced me to her world: private viewings at galleries where the wine cost more than my tuition, dinners with dealers and critics who treated me like a peer because she treated me like one. She bought me a black silk dress that made me look ten years older and a thousand dollars richer. She taught me how to hold a champagne flute, how to laugh at an artist's pretensions without being cruel, how to touch her under the table at a restaurant without anyone noticing.

On the third night, she brought me to a loft in Tribeca where a young painter named Ravi was hosting a small exhibition. His work was raw—acrylic on found wood, figures twisted into impossible shapes, sex and violence

and grace tangled together. I stood in front of a painting of a woman being devoured by wolves and felt my chest tighten.

“You see it,” Ravi said, appearing beside me. He was beautiful in that disheveled way artists cultivate—paint-stained fingers, a jawline that could cut, dark eyes that held too much. “Most people see violence. You see the surrender.”

“I see choice,” I said. “She’s letting them take her.”

Celeste appeared behind us, her hand settling on the small of my back. “Ravi, this is Anya. Anya, this is the genius I’ve been telling you about.”

They looked at each other over my head, and I felt the current pass between them—not jealousy, but alignment. Something they’d discussed before.

The threesome was not an accident.

Back at Celeste’s apartment, after champagne and the slow, deliberate undressing that had become her signature, she guided Ravi to the bed where I lay waiting. He was hesitant at first, looking to her for cues. She nodded, and he lowered himself over me, his mouth replacing hers, his hands finding the curves she’d already memorized.

Celeste watched. Then she joined us.

It was a symphony of bodies—his cock sliding into me from behind while Celeste knelt in front of me, her cunt pressed against my mouth, her fingers tangled in my hair. She taught me how to please a woman as I pleased her, how to read the tremors and adjust, how to make her come with my tongue while Ravi fucked me steadily, rhythmically, until the whole world narrowed to the wet heat of skin on skin and the sound of three voices crying out in the dark.

Afterward, we lay tangled in the white linen, the Rothko bleeding red over our heads. Celeste traced patterns on my stomach while Ravi slept, his head on her thigh.

“I love you,” she said. Not like a confession. Like a statement of fact, like the closing line of a deal.

I didn’t say it back. But I didn’t pull away, either.

I stayed.

Chapter 3: Amalfi Coast Yacht Trip

The yacht was called *Il Diamante*, and it was exactly as ostentatious as the name suggested—eighty meters of white fiberglass and polished teak, a helipad on the bow, and a crew of twelve whose sole purpose was to ensure that Marco Bellini never had to lift a finger.

Marco was sixty-four, Italian, and rich in the way that old European money is rich—quietly, confidently, with the unspoken assumption that the world existed to serve his pleasure. He'd found me through a referral from Celeste, which should have been my first clue that this was not a standard arrangement. Celeste didn't share her toys unless she had a reason.

"He needs someone who can hold a conversation in three languages, laugh at his jokes, and not flinch when he talks about his dead wife," Celeste had said, handing me a first-class ticket to Naples. "Can you do that?"

I could. I'd been doing it for years.

The first two days were idyllic. We sailed from Positano to Amalfi, past pastel villages clinging to cliffs, the Mediterranean so blue it hurt to look at. Marco was charming in that European way—kissing my hand when we met, insisting on calling me *bellissima*, filling my cabin with flowers that matched my dresses. He told me about his late wife, Sofia, with a tenderness that made my chest ache. They'd been married forty years. She'd died of cancer three years ago. He'd bought the yacht for her fiftieth birthday.

"Now I sail alone," he said, staring at the horizon. "Except when I find lovely companions to keep me company."

I touched his arm. "She must have been extraordinary."

"She was." He turned to me, his eyes wet. "You remind me of her. Not in looks—she was dark, like a proper Italian woman. But in the way you listen. She listened like the words mattered."

That night, we had dinner on the aft deck under a canopy of stars. The chef served octopus carpaccio and linguine with bottarga, and Marco opened a bottle of Sassicaia that probably cost more than my semester's tuition. I wore a white linen dress that Celeste had bought me,

simple and expensive, and I let my hair fall loose the way he seemed to like.

After dessert, he took my hand and led me to his cabin.

His bedroom was all white and navy, with a king-sized bed that had been turned down by a steward, a single orchid on the nightstand. He undressed me slowly, reverently, his fingers trembling slightly as he unzipped my dress. I let him. There was something about his vulnerability that made me want to be gentle, to give him the illusion that this was more than transaction.

He laid me on the bed and kissed my throat, my collarbone, my breasts. His mouth was soft, his beard rough, and he took his time, worshipping each inch of skin as if I were sacred. When he parted my thighs and lowered his head between them, I closed my eyes and let the sensation wash over me—his tongue tracing my folds, circling my clit with the patience of a man who had nothing to prove.

I came once, twice, three times, my fingers tangled in his silver hair, my hips rising to meet his mouth. He didn't stop until I was trembling, oversensitive, begging him to fuck me.

He entered me slowly, his cock thick and hard, and I wrapped my legs around his waist and let him take what he

needed. He fucked me with a kind of desperate tenderness, whispering Sofia's name under his breath, and I held him, kissed his cheeks, told him he was good, he was so good, until he came with a shudder and collapsed against my chest.

Afterward, he cried.

I held him through it. That was what I was paid for, after all—not just the sex, but the aftermath. The staying.

The crew member's name was Luca.

He was twenty-eight, Sicilian, with dark curls and a jaw that could have been carved by Michelangelo. He was the first mate, which meant he was everywhere—adjusting sails, polishing brass, bringing drinks to the deck. He had a way of looking at me that made my skin prickle. Not leering. Knowing.

It started on the third day.

Marco was taking a nap below deck, and I was sunbathing on the bow, my bikini top untied to avoid tan lines. I heard footsteps and assumed it was the steward with my iced tea. But it was Luca.

“Signorina,” he said, holding out a glass of prosecco. “You look like you could use this.”

I sat up, keeping the towel over my chest. “Grazie.”

He didn’t leave. He stood there, silhouetted against the sun, and I could feel his eyes on my skin.

“You are not like the others he brings,” he said.

“What others?”

“The young ones. The ones who giggle and take photos of themselves and ignore the crew unless they need something.” He took a step closer. “You watch the sea. You read. You speak to the cook in Italian about the fish. You are real.”

I sipped the prosecco. “And what does that get me?”

“My attention,” he said, and smiled.

I should have stopped it there. Marco was paying for exclusivity, and I was a professional. But there was something about Luca—the way he moved, the quiet confidence, the fact that he saw me as more than a pretty accessory—that made me want to be reckless.

That night, after Marco had fallen asleep, I slipped out of his cabin and climbed the stairs to the upper deck. Luca was there, smoking a cigarette, watching the moonlight on the water.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked.

“Couldn’t stay.”

He stubbed out the cigarette and turned to face me. The moonlight caught the lines of his chest, visible through his open linen shirt. I stepped closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating off his body.

“Marco is a good man,” I said, my voice low. “But he’s old. And he’s sad. And I’m tired of being a substitute for a ghost.”

“So what do you want?”

I didn’t answer with words. I reached up, pulled his head down, and kissed him.

His mouth was nothing like Marco’s. It was hungry, demanding, his tongue sliding against mine with an urgency that made my knees weak. His hands found my waist, then my ass, pulling me against him so I could feel how hard he already was.

“Not here,” he breathed. “Too exposed.”

He led me down to the crew quarters, a narrow cabin with a single bunk. It smelled of salt and sweat and cheap cologne, and I loved it. He pushed me onto the bed, stripped off my silk robe, and knelt between my thighs.

“I’ve been watching you all week,” he said, his mouth hovering over my cunt. “The way you move. The sounds

you make when you think no one can hear. I want to taste every one of them.”

He didn't wait for permission. His tongue dove into me, greedy and skilled, licking and sucking like he was starving. I arched into his mouth, grabbing his hair, my hips grinding against his face. He slid two fingers into my pussy and curled them, hitting that spot that made me see stars.

I came with a cry that I had to stifle against my own hand.

He crawled up my body, his cock pressing against my thigh, and I reached down to guide him inside me. He was thicker than Marco, younger, harder, and he fucked me with a rhythm that was all instinct—fast and deep, his breath hot against my neck, his teeth grazing my shoulder.

“You feel incredible,” he gasped. “Like silk around my cock.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and let him take me, my nails raking down his back, my moans swallowed by his mouth. He came with a groan that sounded almost pained, spilling inside me, and then collapsed beside me on the narrow bunk.

We lay there in the dark, breathing hard.

"This can't happen again," I said.

"I know."

Neither of us moved.

It happened again the next night. And the night after that.

We were careful—so careful—but Marco was not a stupid man. On the fifth night, after I'd excused myself early from dinner with a headache, he followed me down the corridor and saw Luca slipping out of my cabin.

He didn't yell. He didn't even look angry. He just stood there in his silk bathrobe, his face unreadable, and said, "I see."

I opened my mouth to explain, to apologize, to offer some excuse about loneliness and proximity. But he held up his hand.

"You are not married to me, Anya. You are not my wife. You are a companion I pay for, and I have no illusions about what that means." He paused. "But I asked you for one thing. One thing only. I asked you to pretend, while we were here, that I was enough."

The guilt hit me like a wave. "Marco, I'm sorry. I—"

“No.” His voice was quiet, but it cut. “I don’t want your apology. I want you to leave.”

He arranged for a water taxi to take me to the airport in Naples. He paid me for the full week anyway, plus a bonus that made my eyes water. And when I stood on the dock, watching *Il Diamante* sail away without me, I felt something I hadn’t expected: shame.

Not for the sex with Luca. I didn’t regret that.

But for breaking the illusion. For reminding a lonely old man that even the best illusions are still lies.

I flew back to New York with the bonus burning a hole in my bank account and a text from Luca that read: If you ever come to Sicily, find me.

I didn’t reply.

But I didn’t delete the message either.

Chapter 4: The Reserved Billionaire

The call came three days after I got back from the Amalfi coast, while I was still picking salt spray out of my hair and trying to forget the look on Marco's face as his yacht disappeared into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Celeste's voice was brisk, businesslike. "I have someone for you. Different from the others."

"Different how?"

"He's young. Thirty-eight. Runs a hedge fund that most people have never heard of because he refuses to be photographed or interviewed. He's worth nine figures, maybe ten, and he's never had a sugar baby in his life."

I set down my coffee. "Then why now?"

"Because he's lonely, and he's terrible at doing anything about it. A mutual friend suggested he try 'companionship services,' and he asked me specifically. He wants someone

who can match his intellect and won't be intimidated by his silence."

"His silence?"

"He doesn't talk much. Especially at first. He's not rude—just... reserved. He needs someone who can fill the spaces without needing him to perform."

I thought about Marco's tears, about Luca's hungry mouth, about the way I'd left both of them wanting something I couldn't give. "When do I meet him?"

"Tonight. He's sending a car at seven. Wear something that says 'I belong in a boardroom but I'd rather be in your bed.'"

I wore a midnight-blue sheath dress, simple, expensive, cut low enough to show cleavage but high enough to suggest I didn't need to. Pearl studs. Hair swept up. No perfume—I wanted him to lean in.

The car dropped me at a building in Tribeca, a converted warehouse with a discreet black door and no signage. The elevator opened directly into his apartment, and I stepped into a space that felt more like a library than a home—floor-to-ceiling shelves, leather armchairs, a single abstract painting on the far wall that I recognized as a Rothko from the texture alone.

Julian Hawke stood by the window, a glass of whiskey in his hand, watching the city lights. He was tall, slender, with dark hair graying at the temples and a face that could have been carved from granite if granite could look that tired. He wore a charcoal sweater and jeans. No pretension.

"Anya," he said, without turning. "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for having me."

He turned then, and I saw his eyes—hazel, warm, holding a depth of sadness that made my chest tighten. He didn't look at my dress or my cleavage. He looked at my face, and he held my gaze for a long moment before offering a small, tentative smile.

"I don't know how to do this," he said.

"Neither did I, the first time. You learn."

He gestured to the sofa. We sat. The silence stretched, not uncomfortable but present, like a third person in the room. I didn't fill it. I let him find his way.

"I grew up in a trailer park in Ohio," he said finally. "My mother worked double shifts at a diner. I made my first million at twenty-two, trading derivatives from a dorm room. By thirty, I had more money than I could spend in

ten lifetimes." He paused. "I've never been in love. I've never had a relationship that lasted more than three months. I don't know how to let people in."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to understand what you're walking into." He set down his whiskey. "I don't want a transaction. I don't want a performance. I want someone who can sit in the quiet with me and not need me to be entertaining."

I reached across the space between us and took his hand. His fingers were cold, trembling slightly. "I can do that."

The first week was a careful dance.

We had dinner three times—once at his apartment, where he cooked me pasta that was surprisingly good; once at a tiny French bistro where the owner knew his name; once at a jazz club in the Village, where we sat in a corner booth and listened to a saxophone player bend notes like prayers. He barely spoke during the sets, but I caught him watching me, studying my reactions to the music. When the band finished, I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"You like jazz," he said.

"I like watching you listen to jazz."

That night, in the car back to his building, he asked if I wanted to come up. His voice was neutral, but his knuckles were white on the door handle.

"Yes," I said.

His bedroom was sparse—a bed, a nightstand, a single lamp. No art. No personal photos. He stood by the bed, looking uncertain, and I realized he had no idea how to initiate physical intimacy without a script.

So I gave him one.

I stepped out of my heels, crossed to him, and placed his hands on my waist. "You can touch me. Anywhere. Whenever you want. You just have to ask."

He swallowed. "Can I kiss you?"

"Yes."

His first kiss was tentative, almost chaste, his lips brushing mine like he was testing the temperature of water. I responded softly, letting him set the pace. His hands moved to my back, then my shoulders, then my hair. He deepened the kiss slowly, as if he was memorizing the shape of my mouth.

He undressed me with reverent hands, asking permission for each button, each strap. When I stood naked be-

fore him, he stepped back and looked at me—not with hunger, but with something like awe.

"You're beautiful," he said. "But you know that."

"Tell me anyway."

"You're beautiful."

I unzipped his jeans, pushed them down, wrapped my fingers around his cock. He was already hard, thick, the head slick with precum. I dropped to my knees and took him in my mouth, and he gasped, his fingers tangling in my hair.

"Any—"

I looked up at him, his cock still between my lips, and I held his gaze as I swallowed him deeper. He groaned, his hips twitching, and I felt the power shift—I was in control here, giving him permission to enjoy, to take without guilt.

I pulled back, stood, and led him to the bed. I laid him down, straddled his hips, and guided his cock to my entrance. I sank onto him slowly, watching his face transform from uncertainty to raw pleasure.

"Fuck," he breathed. "You feel—"

I started to ride him, slow and deep, my hips rolling against his. His hands found my thighs, gripping them, his

eyes locked on where our bodies joined. I leaned forward, letting my breasts brush his chest, and kissed him.

"Tell me what you need," I whispered.

"I need you to stay."

It wasn't a sexual request. It was the first honest thing he'd said all night.

I rode him until he came with a shuddering groan, his come spilling inside me, and I stayed wrapped around him, my cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow.

Over the next month, I became a fixture in his life.

I learned his rhythms: he woke at five, worked until noon, then had a window of two hours where he was reachable. He didn't exercise, didn't have hobbies, didn't know how to relax. I took him to hole-in-the-wall jazz bars, made him dance with me in his living room, taught him to cook something that wasn't pasta. He started sleeping better. He laughed more.

And at night, he fumbled with my clothes, asking permission for everything. "Can I touch you here? Can I kiss you there?" He was a fast learner. Within two weeks, he could make me come with his mouth alone, his tongue

patient and precise, drawing orgasms out of me until I was breathless.

But the emotional collapse came on a Thursday night, after a dinner at his apartment where I'd made him watch a bad movie with me—a stupid romantic comedy that I knew he'd hate. He'd sat through it stoically, but when the credits rolled, he turned to me with a look of such naked vulnerability that I knew something was breaking.

"I don't know how to do this," he said again, but his voice cracked this time. "I don't know how to have something good without waiting for it to end."

I pulled him into my arms. He held me tightly, his face buried in my neck, and I felt his shoulders shake. He cried without sound, the tears soaking into my skin, and I stroked his hair and whispered that it was okay, that he was safe, that I wasn't going anywhere.

He didn't believe me. I could feel it in the way his hands clutched my back, desperate and clinging.

I pulled back, cupped his face in my hands, and kissed him slow and deep. Then I stripped him, laid him on the rug in front of the fireplace, and climbed on top of him.

"Look at me," I said, as I guided his cock inside me. "Look at me while I fuck you."

He did. His eyes never left mine as I rode him, my hips moving in a steady rhythm, my hands pressed against his chest. He came with a sob, his body arching, his fingers digging into my thighs. I stayed on top of him, swallowing his gasps with kisses, until he was limp and trembling beneath me.

I curled up beside him on the rug, pulling the throw blanket over us. He was quiet for a long time, his breathing ragged.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," he whispered.

And I didn't say anything, because I felt it too—the crack in my armor, the dangerous warmth spreading through my chest. I kissed his forehead and held him until he fell asleep.

The next morning, he asked me to move in.

I said yes. And I spent the rest of the day trying to convince myself that I hadn't just made the biggest mistake of my life.

Chapter 5: The Married Man

Julian was asleep when I slipped out of bed at six, my phone buzzing on the nightstand with a text from an unknown number.

— Celeste gave me your contact. Dinner tonight? I'll send a car. No pressure.

No name. No prelude. Just the kind of casual entitlement that only extreme wealth produces. I almost deleted it—my body still warm from Julian's, the sheets still tangled with the evidence of a night that had felt dangerously close to something real.

But curiosity is a sharper drug than caution.

I texted back: Who is this?

The reply came in under a minute: James. You'll know me when you see me.

I didn't tell Julian. I kissed his forehead, made coffee, and left before he woke up, promising myself it was just

reconnaissance. I'd meet this James, assess him, and walk away. Julian had asked me to move in. I was supposed to be settling.

But settling has never been my strong suit.

The car arrived at seven-thirty—a black Maybach with tinted windows and a driver who didn't speak. We drove to a townhouse in the Upper East Side, a narrow four-story building with a brass plaque that read Private Residence and nothing else. The door opened before I could knock.

James was forty-five, maybe forty-six, with the kind of hair that was silvering gracefully and a face that had spent a lot of time in the sun. He was handsome in an understated way—not the sharp, calculated good looks of the tech billionaires I'd seen, but something older, more worn. He wore a perfectly tailored navy suit and no tie. His handshake was firm, his grip lingering half a second too long.

"Anya," he said, his voice low and warm. "You're even more beautiful than Celeste described."

"She's prone to exaggeration."

"She's prone to accuracy." He stepped aside, gesturing into the foyer. "Come in. I've had dinner prepared."

The townhouse was a museum of old money—crown molding, a marble fireplace that looked original to the 1880s, paintings that I recognized from auction catalogs. A Monet water lily hung above the mantel. A Degas pastel of a dancer occupied the hallway. I stopped to look at it, and James watched me with a knowing smile.

"You recognize it?"

"The pastel series from the 1880s. He was going blind when he made these—you can see it in the way the edges blur." I turned to face him. "This one sold at Christie's two years ago for four point two million."

"Four point six, actually. You know your art."

"I'm studying it."

"So I heard." He led me into the dining room, where a table was set for two with bone china and crystal. "What's your specialty?"

"Renaissance religious iconography. The way the church used visual narrative to consolidate power."

He laughed. "A woman who understands how images are weaponized. I like that."

Dinner was a slow seduction disguised as conversation.

He told me about his work—hedge fund, emerging markets, the kind of opaque language designed to sound impressive without revealing anything. I asked questions that made him feel clever, and he refilled my wine glass each time it dipped below half. The food was exquisite: oysters, truffle risotto, a lamb that melted on the tongue. He watched me eat with an intensity that should have been unnerving but felt, instead, like worship.

"Celeste said you're selective," he said, pushing his plate aside. "That you don't take just anyone."

"I don't."

"So why did you come tonight?"

I met his gaze. "Because you didn't give me a choice. You told me I'd know you when I saw you. That's the kind of confidence that either comes from genuine power or profound delusion. I wanted to find out which."

"And what's your verdict?"

I set down my fork. "Let's talk about what you want, James. Not the polite version."

He leaned back in his chair, studying me. "I'm married. Twenty years. Two kids in boarding school. I love my wife—not in the way I should, but I love her. She doesn't

know about these... arrangements. She doesn't want to know. I keep my life compartmentalized."

"You want a mistress."

"No." He said it firmly, almost sharply. "I don't want a mistress. I want someone who can be my equal when I'm tired of being the powerful one. Someone who can take control when I need to let go." He paused. "I've been the man in charge for thirty years. Sometimes I want to be the one who's told what to do."

The admission hung in the air between us. I felt a flicker of interest—not just professional, but personal. A man who wanted to submit. That was rare, and dangerous, and incredibly tempting.

"What would that look like?" I asked.

"Tonight, if you're willing." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small velvet box, sliding it across the table.

"A gift. No strings."

I opened it. Inside was a Cartier tank watch, white gold, the dial a deep navy blue. It must have cost thirty thousand dollars at minimum. I closed the box and set it down.

"I don't accept gifts before I've earned them."

"You've already earned this by being here. By being honest." He stood, walked around the table, and knelt beside

my chair—not in a dramatic gesture, but with the quiet dignity of a man who had made peace with his desires. "I want you to take me to your bed. I want you to tell me what to do. I want to surrender, just for one night."

I looked down at him. Fifty feet away, the Degas dancer pirouetted in eternal stillness. Somewhere across the city, Julian was probably waking up to an empty bed, wondering where I'd gone.

I made a choice.

"Stand up," I said. "Take me to your bedroom."

His bedroom was a study in restraint—gray walls, a bed with white linens, no art. He stood by the bed, waiting, his hands clasped behind his back. I circled him slowly, letting him feel my gaze on his body.

"Undress," I said.

He did, methodically, folding each piece of clothing and setting it on a chair. When he was naked, I saw the evidence of a life lived hard: a scar across his ribs from some surgery I didn't ask about, the softness of middle age around his waist, the way his cock was already half-hard despite his apparent submission.

"On the bed," I said. "On your back."

He obeyed. I undressed slowly, deliberately, letting him watch. When I was naked, I climbed onto the bed and straddled his chest, my knees on either side of his ribs. I leaned forward, letting my hair brush his face, and whispered:

"You wanted to be told what to do. So here's your first instruction: you don't touch me unless I say you can. You don't come unless I give you permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

I traced a finger down his chest, over his stomach, to his cock. I wrapped my hand around it, feeling the heat of him, and he gasped.

"Good boy."

I lowered my mouth to his chest, kissing a path down his torso. I took him in my mouth, just the head, tasting salt and precum, and he moaned, his hips twitching. I pulled back.

"Stay still."

He clenched his jaw. I went down on him again, taking him deep, my tongue working the underside of his cock. He was thick, and I had to relax my throat to take him all the way down. He whimpered.

"Please," he said.

"Please what?"

"Please—I need—"

I released him, sat up, and positioned myself above his face. I lowered my pussy onto his mouth. He understood immediately—his tongue found my clit, lapping at it with an eagerness that bordered on desperation. I rode his face, grinding against his mouth, and he moaned into me, the vibration sending sparks through my pelvis.

I came quickly, my thighs clenching around his head, my cry muffled by my own hand. He didn't stop until I pulled away, breathless.

"Your turn," I said. I turned around, straddled his hips, and guided his cock inside me. I fucked him slowly, deliberately, watching his face contort with pleasure. He reached up to touch my breasts, and I slapped his hand away.

"I didn't say you could."

"Sorry," he gasped. "Sorry, I'm sorry—"

I rode him harder, my hips slapping against his thighs, my pussy clenching around him. He came with a shout that he tried to swallow, his hands fisting the sheets, his body arching beneath me.

I stayed on top of him, catching my breath, feeling his cock soften inside me. He was trembling. I leaned down and kissed his forehead, his nose, his mouth.

"Good boy," I whispered.

He laughed, a broken sound. "Fuck. I needed that."

"I know."

I left at midnight, taking the watch. He pressed a thick envelope into my hand at the door—cash, no expectation of counting it. "Next week?" he asked.

"Text me."

In the car, I opened the envelope. Ten thousand dollars, crisp and untraceable. I tucked it into my bag and looked out the window as the city slid past, glass and steel and the lights of a million sleeping strangers.

I thought about Julian, waiting for me in his silent apartment, his sad eyes and trembling hands. I thought about James, on his knees, surrendering power he'd spent decades accumulating. I thought about the girl I'd been at sixteen, pinned to a mattress, learning that her body wasn't hers.

It was hers now. Every piece of it. Every cock she chose to take, every mouth she rode, every man who begged.

And that, more than the money, more than the watches and the envelopes, was the thing that made it all worth it.

Chapter 6: The Gala

The invitation arrived on cream-colored card stock, engraved with gold lettering that probably cost more than my monthly rent.

The Whitmore Foundation requests the honor of your presence at the Annual Gala for the Arts —

I didn't read the rest. I already knew what it was. Celeste had called the day before, her voice honeyed with the particular satisfaction she got from playing matchmaker.

"He's a client," she'd said. "Very private, very particular. He needs a companion for the Whitmore Gala. Black tie. Two hundred million dollars in one room. He wants someone who can hold her own."

"Does he have a name?"

"David. David Ashford. I'll send you his file."

The file arrived by courier an hour later: a slim folder with a photograph clipped to the front. David Ashford,

fifty-two. Founder of Ashford Capital. Divorced, twice. Two adult children who didn't speak to him. His face was handsome in a severe way—sharp jaw, gray eyes, a mouth that looked like it didn't smile often. The dossier noted his philanthropic work: arts education, museum endowments, a scholarship program for underprivileged students.

It also noted his preferences: intelligent conversation, discretion, and a "willingness to play a role."

I called Celeste back. "What role?"

"He wants someone who looks like she belongs with him. Someone who can make the other men jealous and the other women curious. He'll pay fifty thousand for the weekend. Plus expenses."

"Fifty thousand."

"He's desperate. His ex-wife is attending with her new husband, a tech billionaire thirty years her junior. David needs armor."

I thought about Julian, who had texted me three times since I'd left his apartment. I thought about James, who had sent flowers that morning—white orchids, no card. I thought about the envelope in my bag, the Cartier watch

on my wrist, the careful architecture of a life built on transactions.

"Tell him I'll do it," I said.

The gala was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which meant I got to spend the afternoon wandering through the Egyptian wing in a designer gown that David had sent over—a Vera Wang column dress in deep emerald, slit to the thigh, backless. He'd included heels, a clutch, and a diamond tennis bracelet that I assumed was a loan but turned out to be a gift.

The car picked me up at six. David was already inside, a silhouette against the tinted window. He stood when I entered, and I saw him take me in—the dress, the hair, the practiced confidence of a woman who knew she was being evaluated.

"Any," he said, extending his hand. His grip was cool, measured. "You're exactly what Celeste described."

"I hope that's a compliment."

"It is." He gestured for me to sit. "We have twenty minutes before we arrive. I should brief you."

"Brief me?"

He pulled out a leather folder. "The attendees, the seating arrangement, the key players. My ex-wife will be at table seven. Her husband, Marcus, will be at table seven. I'll be at table three. I need you to make it look like I've moved on in every conceivable way."

"You want me to perform."

"I want you to be convincing." He met my eyes. "I'm not interested in a performance. I'm interested in authenticity. If we're going to do this, I need you to be present. Not playing a role. Being the woman who would choose me."

I felt a flicker of something—respect, maybe. He wasn't asking for a puppet. He was asking for a partner.

"Then you need to tell me the truth," I said. "Why did your marriage end?"

He was quiet for a long moment. The car slid through traffic, past the bright windows of Upper East Side apartments.

"I couldn't give her what she needed," he said finally. "She wanted visibility. She wanted a partner who would stand beside her in the spotlight. I wanted... privacy. I wanted to be seen by one person, not by the world. We couldn't reconcile those needs."

"And Marcus?"

"He gives her the spotlight. He's young, charismatic, hungry for attention. They're perfect for each other." He paused. "I'm not jealous. I'm... lonely. There's a difference."

I reached out and took his hand. He flinched, then relaxed, his fingers curling around mine.

"Then let's make sure you don't feel lonely tonight," I said.

The Met was transformed—chandeliers in the Great Hall, a string quartet playing in the Temple of Dendur, champagne towers that glittered like frozen waterfalls. David kept his hand on the small of my back as we walked through the crowd, introducing me to trustees, collectors, artists. I remembered names, asked questions about their collections, laughed at their jokes. I was good at this—the performance of belonging, the careful choreography of making powerful people feel interesting.

I saw her before David did: a tall woman in red, her dark hair swept into an elegant updo, a diamond choker at her throat. She was laughing at something Marcus was saying, her hand on his chest. She was beautiful in the way

that expensive things are beautiful—polished, untouchable, designed to be admired from a distance.

"Table seven," I murmured to David.

He didn't flinch. "I see her."

"Do you want to say hello?"

"No." His jaw tightened. "I want to get through dinner without making eye contact."

I squeezed his arm. "I can help with that."

I leaned up and kissed his cheek, letting my lips linger. When I pulled back, I saw his ex-wife watching—a flicker of something in her eyes that might have been curiosity, might have been jealousy. I smiled at her, a small, private smile, and turned back to David.

"She's looking at us."

"Good."

At dinner, I sat beside him, my hand resting on his thigh beneath the table. I could feel the tension in his muscles, the way he held himself rigid. I leaned in, my lips brushing his ear.

"Relax. I'm right here."

He exhaled slowly. "I'm not used to this."

"To what?"

"To being taken care of."

I let my hand slide higher, my fingers tracing the line of his cock through his trousers. He inhaled sharply, his hand covering mine.

"Not here," he said, but his voice was rough.

"Then get me out of here."

The car was silent. David sat beside me, his hands clasped in his lap, his breathing steady but shallow. I watched the city lights slide across his face, trying to read him.

"Your apartment or mine?" I asked.

"Mine." He gave the driver an address on Central Park West. "I don't share my space easily."

"Then I'm honored."

The apartment was a penthouse—floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the park, a library with bookshelves that reached the ceiling, a fireplace that had probably been original to the building. He poured us both whiskey, handed me a glass, and stood by the window, looking out at the city.

"You were perfect tonight," he said.

"I was playing a role."

"No." He turned to face me. "You were you. That's what made it work. You weren't pretending to be someone else. You were just... fully present. I felt seen."

I set down my whiskey. "I want to see more of you."

He crossed the room, his hands cupping my face. He kissed me slowly, deliberately, his tongue sliding against mine. I tasted whiskey and something else—vulnerability, maybe, or the sharp edge of longing.

He pulled back. "I don't do this often."

"Do what?"

"Let someone in."

I took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

His bedroom was sparse—a bed, a nightstand, a single painting on the wall. A Rothko, if I wasn't mistaken, the colors bleeding into each other like a sunset in slow motion. I turned to face him, unzipping my dress and letting it fall to the floor. I stood before him in nothing but heels and the diamond bracelet, watching his eyes travel down my body.

"You're beautiful," he said.

"I know."

He laughed, a genuine sound. "Humility isn't your strong suit."

"Neither is pretending." I stepped toward him, reaching for his belt. "I want you to fuck me, David. But I want you to do it like you mean it. Not like a transaction. Like you're trying to forget every woman who ever made you feel small."

His hands found my waist, pulling me against him. He kissed me hard, his mouth demanding, his hands gripping my ass. He pushed me onto the bed, climbing over me, his body heavy and warm.

He fucked me like he was starving.

His cock slid into me, thick and hard, and I gasped, my legs wrapping around his waist. He fucked me with a rhythm that was almost punishing, his hips slapping against mine, his breath hot against my neck. I came quickly, my nails digging into his shoulders, my cry muffled against his mouth.

He didn't stop. He flipped me onto my stomach, pulled my hips up, and drove into me from behind. I pressed my face into the pillows, moaning, my pussy clenching around him. He reached around and found my clit, rubbing it in

circles while he fucked me, and I came again, harder, my body shuddering.

He came with a groan, his cock pulsing inside me, his weight collapsing onto my back. We lay there, breathing together, the sweat cooling on our skin.

After a long moment, he pulled out and rolled onto his back. I turned to face him, tracing a finger down his chest.

"Better?" I asked.

"Better." He caught my hand, kissed my palm. "Stay tonight."

"I was planning to."

I woke at three in the morning to find him gone. The bed was cold, the sheets tangled. I found him in the library, sitting in a leather armchair, a glass of scotch in his hand, staring at the Rothko.

"Can't sleep?" I asked.

"Never could." He didn't look at me. "I've been thinking about what you said—about forgetting every woman who made me feel small."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes." He finally turned to face me. "I don't want to forget them. I want to stop needing them to define me."

I crossed the room and sat on the arm of his chair. "You don't need them. You need to stop giving them power."

"How do I do that?"

I took the scotch from his hand, set it aside, and straddled his lap. I pressed my forehead against his, my hands cupping his face.

"You let me take care of you tonight," I said. "And tomorrow, you wake up and remember that you're the one who chose to let me in. That's the power. Not the taking. The choosing."

I kissed him, soft and slow, and he exhaled against my mouth, his hands finding my hips.

I rode him in the armchair, my pussy sliding over his cock, his head thrown back, his hands gripping the armrests. He watched me with something like wonder, like I was a ghost he'd been waiting his whole life to see.

When he came, he said my name. Not Anya. Not the sugar baby, the performer, the goddess in the backless gown.

Just my name.

And for a moment, I let myself believe I was exactly who he thought I was.

Chapter 7: The Hotel Magnate

I met Lucien at a private viewing at Sotheby's, standing in front of a Monet that was probably worth more than my entire future. He was tall, silver-haired, with the kind of weathered handsomeness that spoke of years spent in boardrooms and on yachts. His suit was Italian, his watch was Patek Philippe, and his eyes—dark, intense, intelligent—followed me as I circled the painting.

"You're looking at the light," he said, stepping beside me. "Most people look at the price tag."

"I already checked the price tag," I said, not turning. "It's vulgar. The light is what matters."

He laughed, a low, genuine sound. "Celeste told me you had taste. She didn't mention you had wit."

"Celeste tends to undersell me. It keeps the surprises coming."

His name was Lucien Moreau. He owned hotels—dozens of them, from Paris to Tokyo to a private island in the Maldives that didn't appear on any map. He was sixty-three, divorced twice, with a reputation for being demanding, perfectionist, and intensely private. His last sugar baby had lasted six months before "retiring" to a villa in Tuscany that he'd gifted her. The rumor was that she'd cried when she left.

"Why me?" I asked, over drinks at the Carlyle.

"Because you're not looking for a way out." He swirled his whiskey, studying me. "You're looking for a way through. You want to see how far you can go before you break. I want to see how far I can push before you bend."

"And if I don't bend?"

"Then we'll have a very interesting time finding out."

The first trip was to his private island in the Maldives. A seaplane picked me up from Male, flying low over turquoise water and coral reefs that looked like submerged constellations. The island was small—maybe a dozen villas, all empty except for his staff. He met me on the dock, barefoot, linen shirt unbuttoned, a glass of champagne in his hand.

"Welcome to my sanctuary," he said. "No phones, no internet, no interruptions. Just us and the ocean."

For three days, we did nothing but talk, swim, and fuck. He was patient in a way that surprised me—taking his time, learning my body, mapping every inch of my skin with his mouth and his hands. He fucked me on the beach at sunset, my back against the warm sand, his cock sliding into me with slow, deliberate strokes. He fucked me in the infinity pool, my legs wrapped around his waist, the water lapping at our chins. He tied me to the bed with silk scarves and took me apart piece by piece, his fingers and tongue finding every spot that made me gasp.

But it was the conversations that stayed with me. He talked about his first hotel, a rundown property in Lyon that he'd bought with borrowed money and turned into a seven-star destination. He talked about his ex-wives—one who'd loved him too much, one who'd loved him not enough. He talked about his daughter, who refused to speak to him after he'd missed her graduation for a business meeting.

"Do you think you can fix it?" I asked, lying beside him, my head on his chest.

"I don't know." His hand traced lazy circles on my back. "I don't know if I want to. Some things are too broken to mend."

"You're not broken. You're just... unfinished."

He turned to look at me, his eyes searching mine. "And you? Are you finished?"

I thought about the girl in Iowa, the basement, the boys who took what they wanted. I thought about the grad student in oversized sweaters, hiding her beauty so she could be taken seriously. I thought about Anya Vance, the woman who walked into rooms like she owned them.

"I'm still becoming," I said. "Every day."

He kissed me then, soft and slow, and I felt something shift in my chest—a crack in the armor I'd built so carefully.

The whirlwind began after the island. He flew me to Tokyo for the opening of his newest hotel, a glass-and-steel tower in Ginza. I wore a custom Chanel gown, sat beside him at a dinner with the Japanese prime minister, and smiled through conversations in three languages I barely understood. That night, in the penthouse suite overlook-

ing the neon city, he fucked me against the window, my palms flat against the glass, my breath fogging the view.

"You're playing a role tonight," he said, his cock buried deep inside me, his hand gripping my hip. "But I want to see the real you."

"This is the real me," I gasped.

"No." He pulled out, spun me around, and pressed me against the glass. "The real you is the one who cried when I told you about my daughter. The real you is the one who asked the bellboy his name and remembered it the next day. The real you is hiding, Anya. And I want to find her."

I didn't answer. I pulled him into a kiss, hard and desperate, and let him fuck me until I forgot every question he'd asked.

Paris was next. He had a penthouse on the Avenue Montaigne, a sprawling apartment filled with art that could have stocked a museum. He took me to the opening of the Fondation Louis Vuitton, introduced me to artists and collectors, watched me charm them with my knowledge of Impressionism and my careful, practiced grace. At the after-party, I found myself talking to a woman—a

gallery owner from Berlin, sharp and beautiful, her hair cropped short, her eyes the color of winter sea.

Her name was Ingrid. She touched my arm when she laughed, leaned close when she spoke. I felt the familiar pull, the electric current that ran through me when a woman's attention settled on my skin.

Lucien noticed. He said nothing, but I saw him watching from across the room, his expression unreadable.

Later, in the apartment, he confronted me.

"You're attracted to her."

"I'm attracted to a lot of people."

"Are you going to act on it?"

I shrugged, unbuttoning my dress. "That depends. Are you going to stop me?"

He crossed the room, his hands closing around my wrists, pinning them above my head. "I'm not going to stop you. I'm going to watch."

The next night, he arranged it. A private dinner in the apartment, candles and champagne and a view of the Eiffel Tower. Ingrid arrived in a black jumpsuit, her lips red, her smile knowing. We talked through dinner, the three of us, the air thick with anticipation. When Lucien excused

himself to take a call, Ingrid leaned across the table and kissed me.

Her mouth was soft, insistent. Her hand found my thigh beneath the table. I moaned into her kiss, my fingers tangling in her short hair.

When Lucien returned, we were tangled on the couch, my dress pushed up, Ingrid's mouth on my neck. He watched from the doorway, his hand on his cock through his trousers.

"Don't stop on my account," he said.

I didn't.

Ingrid fucked me with her fingers and her tongue, her body pressed against mine, her breath hot in my ear. I came with my legs wrapped around her waist, my cry muffled against her shoulder. Then Lucien joined us, his cock sliding into me from behind while Ingrid kissed me, her taste still on my lips. It was a symphony of skin and sweat and pleasure—his rhythm, her mouth, my surrender.

Afterward, we lay in a tangle of limbs, the city lights flickering through the window. Ingrid had fallen asleep, her head on my chest. Lucien was still awake, his hand tracing patterns on my hip.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked.

"You know I did."

"I'm not asking because I need validation." He turned to face me. "I'm asking because I want to know what you want. Not what you think I want to hear. What you want."

I was quiet for a long moment. Then: "I want to feel something real. I want to stop performing."

"You performed tonight. You performed for her, for me, for the cameras at the opening. But there were moments—when she kissed you, when you came—when you forgot to perform. That's what I want. More of those moments."

"Can you give them to me?"

"I can try." He kissed my forehead, a gesture so tender it made my chest ache. "But you have to let me in first."

The complex feelings crept in like a tide. In Hong Kong, at the rooftop bar of his Peninsula suite, he told me about his daughter's wedding—how he'd watched from the back row, how she'd refused to dance with him. I held his hand and said nothing. In London, after a charity gala, he fucked me with a desperation that bordered on grief, his face buried in my neck, his breath ragged. I held him after-

ward, stroking his hair, feeling the weight of his loneliness pressing down on both of us.

"I'm falling for you," he said one night, in the dark of his Paris bedroom.

I froze. "You're not supposed to say that."

"Why not?"

"Because this isn't supposed to be real. It's supposed to be a transaction. I give you companionship, sex, the illusion of intimacy. You give me money, travel, experiences. We both get what we want without the mess."

"What if I want the mess?"

I sat up, pulling the sheet around me. "Lucien, I can't give you that. I'm not built for it. I've spent years learning how to keep people at arm's length. If I let you in, I don't know what happens."

"Neither do I." He reached for my hand. "But I'm willing to find out."

I pulled my hand away. "I need to think."

I spent the next day alone, walking through the Tuileries Garden, the autumn leaves crunching beneath my feet. I thought about Marcus, Julian, David—the men I'd fucked and left, the ones who'd tried to hold on and the ones I'd pushed away. I thought about the girl in Iowa, the

one who'd learned that love was a weapon and intimacy was a trap.

And I thought about Lucien. The way he looked at me like I was the only person in the room. The way he remembered every detail I told him. The way he pushed me to be real, even when I fought it.

That night, I went back to the apartment. He was in the library, reading, a glass of wine beside him. He looked up when I entered, his expression careful, guarded.

"I have a condition," I said.

"Name it."

"If we do this—if we try to make this real—you have to promise me something. You don't get to own me. I'm not yours. I'm not anyone's. I choose to be with you, every day, and I can choose to leave. That's the only way it works for me."

He set down his book, stood, and crossed the room. He took my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing my cheekbones.

"I don't want to own you," he said. "I want to earn you."

I kissed him, and for the first time in years, I didn't know if I was performing.

That night, he made love to me—not fucked, not taken, not conquered. He made love to me slowly, reverently, his mouth tracing every curve, his hands cupping my face as he pushed inside me. My pussy gripped him with a tenderness that surprised me, and when he whispered my name—Anya, not a role, not a fantasy—I felt the crack in my armor widen.

I came with my legs wrapped around his waist, my fingers tangled in his silver hair, my tears mixing with his sweat.

"I'm not sure I know how to do this," I said afterward, my voice barely a whisper.

"Neither do I," he said.

It was the most honest thing either of us had said all week.

Chapter 8: The Publisher

I met Simone at the Venice Biennale, three weeks after I left Lucien's Paris apartment. The decision hadn't been dramatic—no screaming, no tears, just a quiet morning where I woke up beside him and realized I didn't know who I was when I wasn't performing. I needed to find out before I could give him what he wanted.

He understood. He kissed my forehead, wrote me a check that made my breath catch, and said, "Come back when you're ready. I'll be here."

I took the money and booked a flight to Venice alone. No clients, no arrangements, just me and a city built on water and lies.

The Biennale was a fever dream of art and excess. I spent three days wandering pavilions, drinking prosecco, letting my hair down in ways I hadn't allowed myself in years. I

wore thrifted dresses and no makeup, blending into the crowds of students and critics. For the first time since Iowa, I felt invisible—and it was liberating.

Then I saw her.

She was standing in front of a video installation, a loop of a woman drowning and resurfacing, drowning and resurfacing. She was tall, perhaps fifty-five, with silver-streaked black hair pulled into a severe bun and cheekbones that could cut glass. She wore a tailored white suit, no jewelry except a single platinum band on her left thumb. Her posture was perfect, her expression unreadable. She looked like she owned the building, the city, maybe the entire country.

I found myself walking toward her, my feet carrying me before my brain caught up.

"It's about repetition," I said, stopping beside her. "The way we keep returning to our traumas, hoping this time we'll stay afloat."

She turned to look at me. Her eyes were gray, like winter clouds, and they held mine with an intensity that made my skin prickle.

"Interesting interpretation." Her voice was low, accented—French, but not Parisian. Southern, perhaps. "Most people say it's about climate change."

"Most people are boring."

Her mouth curved, just slightly. "And you are not boring, I suspect. What's your name?"

"Anya."

"Anya." She tasted the word. "Russian?"

"American. Midwestern, actually."

"Even better. Americans bring such refreshing directness to places like this." She extended her hand. "Simone Durand."

The name hit me like a wave. Simone Durand. Founder of Durand Media, one of the most powerful publishing empires in Europe. She owned magazines, newspapers, a film production company, and an art collection that rivaled most museums. She was notoriously private, rarely photographed, never interviewed.

I shook her hand. Her grip was firm, warm, and she held it a beat longer than necessary.

"I know who you are," I said.

"And yet you approached me anyway. Either very brave or very foolish."

"Both, probably."

She laughed—a genuine sound, rough and surprised. "Dinner. Tonight. My hotel. The Gritti Palace. Eight o'clock. I'll have my driver pick you up."

It wasn't a question.

I should have said no. I should have remembered my rules: vet the client, set the terms, maintain control. But something about Simone made me want to surrender the reins. Maybe it was the way she looked at me—like she saw through every mask I'd ever worn and found them amusing. Maybe it was the exhaustion of years of calculating every move, every word, every breath.

I wore a black silk slip dress, no bra, heels that made my legs look endless. I let her driver escort me to the Gritti Palace, let the concierge lead me to her private suite on the top floor.

The room was all velvet and Murano glass, chandeliers casting fractured rainbows across the walls. Simone was on the terrace, a cigarette burning between her fingers, looking out at the Grand Canal. She turned when I entered, and her eyes traveled down my body with deliberate slowness.

"You came," she said.

"Did you doubt I would?"

"I never doubt. I just observe." She stubbed out the cigarette and walked toward me. "You're nervous."

"I'm not."

"You are. Your left hand is trembling. You're holding your breath." She stopped inches from me, close enough that I could smell her perfume—sandalwood and bergamot, clean and sharp. "You don't have to perform with me, Anya. I'm not interested in what you think I want to see. I'm interested in what you're trying to hide."

My throat tightened. "And what's that?"

"The girl who's still learning how to say 'no' without apologizing for it."

I should have walked out. Instead, I let her take my hand and lead me to the dining table, where a private chef had prepared a tasting menu. We talked for hours—about art, about power, about the architecture of desire. She told me about her wife, who had died of cancer five years ago. She told me about the empire she'd built from nothing, about the loneliness that came with success.

"You remind me of her," Simone said, refilling my glass. "Not physically. But the way you hold yourself. Like you're waiting for someone to tell you it's okay to let go."

"Maybe I am."

She reached across the table and touched my wrist. Her fingers were cool, her touch light. "I can teach you that. If you want."

"What's the price?"

"Your honesty. Nothing more, nothing less. I don't need your body, Anya. I need your trust."

Later, she led me to the bedroom. The sheets were Egyptian cotton, the lights dimmed to amber. She undressed me slowly, reverently, her hands tracing the lines of my collarbone, the curve of my hip, the dip of my waist. She kissed me—soft at first, then deeper, her tongue sliding against mine with practiced ease.

She laid me on the bed and explored me like a curator examining a masterpiece. Her mouth found my breasts, my stomach, the inside of my thighs. She parted my legs and looked at my cunt like it was something precious.

"You're beautiful like this," she murmured, her breath warm against my skin. "Open. Willing."

"Simone..."

"Shh." She lowered her head, and her tongue touched my clit with featherlight pressure. "Let me show you what it feels like to receive without giving anything back."

I tried to protest—it wasn't in my nature to be passive—but she pinned my hips down with her hands and continued, her tongue circling, dipping, teasing. I moaned, my fingers tangling in her silver-streaked hair. She fucked me with her mouth, slow and deliberate, building a rhythm that had me arching off the bed, gasping for air.

"Don't hold back," she said, lifting her head just long enough to meet my eyes. "Let me hear you."

I came with a cry that surprised even me—raw, unguarded, my whole body shuddering. She didn't stop until I was whimpering, oversensitive, pulling her up to kiss me, tasting myself on her lips.

"You didn't let me—" I started.

"I told you. This is about you." She lay beside me, her hand resting on my stomach. "You've spent years giving yourself away in transactions, pretending it's empowerment. But true power isn't in what you give. It's in what you allow yourself to receive."

Tears prickled at my eyes. I blinked them away.

"I don't know how to do that."

"I know." She kissed my forehead. "That's why you're here."

The week that followed was unlike anything I'd experienced. She didn't ask for sex every night—some nights we just talked, or read, or walked through Venice in comfortable silence. She introduced me to her world: editors, artists, politicians. She spoke about me with a pride that made my chest ache. "This is Anya," she'd say. "She's going to be extraordinary."

She taught me how to accept a compliment without deflecting. How to sit in silence without filling it with chatter. How to let someone take care of me without feeling indebted.

And when we did make love, it was patient and tender. She worshipped my body with her mouth, her fingers, her words. She made me come until I couldn't speak, and then she held me while I cried.

On the last night, she fucked me with a strap-on—slowly, deeply, her hand around my throat, her eyes locked on mine. "You're not performing," she whispered as I came undone. "This is real. You're real."

When I left Venice, I felt lighter than I had in years. She didn't ask me to stay. She didn't offer money. She just kissed my cheek and said, "Come find me when you remember who you are."

I didn't know if I would. But for the first time, I wanted to try.

Chapter 9: The Gallerist

I came back from Venice hollowed out in a way I hadn't expected. Not empty—scoured clean, like a wound that had finally been allowed to drain. Simone had given me something I didn't know how to hold. Permission to exist without performing. Permission to want without bargaining.

The problem was, I didn't know what to do with it.

I threw myself back into my coursework. Renaissance iconography, the symbolism of light in Caravaggio, the economics of the Florentine art market. I sat in the library for hours, my laptop open to the same page, my mind elsewhere. I cancelled my next weekend with Derek—a first—claiming a family emergency. He was gracious about it, but I heard the pause in his voice, the calculation. I was breaking the rhythm.

I needed money. That was the truth I couldn't outrun. My savings from the Aspen weekend and the Paris trip were dwindling. Tuition was due in two months. Rent was never not due. And Simone hadn't offered me anything except a lesson I was still trying to understand.

So when the email arrived, I told myself it was just business.

Ms. Vance—

I was given your information by a mutual acquaintance who spoke highly of your intelligence and discernment. I am organizing a private exhibition of newly acquired works by Egon Schiele, to be held at my gallery in Chelsea next Thursday. I find myself in need of a companion for the evening—someone who can discuss the work with genuine insight, not just smile and hold a champagne flute.

My acquaintance described you as "unforgettable." I hope you'll prove them right.

Dinner afterward, should you be amenable.

—Julian Croft

Croft Gallery, Chelsea

I Googled him before I replied. Julian Croft, 47, owner of one of the most respected private galleries in Manhat-

tan. Yale School of Art graduate. Divorced, no children. His net worth wasn't publicly available, but his gallery had sold a single Basquiat for forty-two million the previous year. He was photographed often—at auctions, at biennales, at dinner with curators and critics—always in impeccably tailored suits, always with a different woman on his arm. The women were never the same twice.

I wrote back agreeing to the arrangement. Professional fee: five thousand for the evening, plus expenses. He countered with seven. I accepted.

The gallery was a converted warehouse in Chelsea, all exposed brick and track lighting and white walls that seemed to breathe. I arrived in a forest-green velvet dress that showed my shoulders and fell to mid-thigh, my hair loose, my makeup minimal—a deliberate choice. I wanted to look like I belonged in the room, not like I'd been rented for it.

Julian met me at the door. He was taller than his photos suggested, with salt-and-pepper hair swept back from a high forehead, dark eyes that moved over me with quiet assessment. His suit was charcoal, his tie the color of dried blood. His handshake was firm, brief, professional.

"Anya. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for the invitation. Your Schiele acquisitions—I've been following the auction rumors. The Portrait of Wally provenance, specifically."

His eyebrows lifted. "You follow provenance documentation as a hobby?"

"Part of my graduate research. I'm in art history at Columbia."

"I know." A faint smile. "I did my homework too."

We walked the gallery together, and I let the art do the talking. Schiele's figures were raw, angular, sexual in a way that felt almost violent—bodies contorted, limbs too long, ribs visible beneath translucent skin. I stopped in front of a charcoal study of a woman's spread thighs, her cunt exposed, her face a mask of exhaustion and defiance.

"He was arrested for obscenity," I said. "In 1912. The court burned one of his drawings in the courtroom."

"And yet here we are, a century later, paying millions for the privilege of looking." Julian stood beside me, close enough that I could smell his cologne—cedar and leather, something ancient. "Do you think he would have been less talented if society had accepted him?"

"I think he would have been less interesting. Trauma makes art sharper. It's the only gift pain gives you."

He looked at me then, really looked, and I saw something shift in his expression. Interest, yes. But also recognition. Like he'd found a locked door and suddenly realized he had the key.

The dinner was at a private club in the Village, all dark wood and stained glass and waiters who refilled your water before you noticed you'd taken a sip. We ate oysters and drank Burgundy and talked about everything except what was happening between us.

He told me about his ex-wife, a curator who had left him for a sculptor. He told me about his mother, who had died when he was twenty-two, and how he'd poured his inheritance into the gallery because he didn't know what else to do with grief.

I told him about Iowa, edited for consumption. A scholarship. A desire to see the world. I didn't mention the basement. I didn't mention Derek or Marcus or any of the men whose money had paid for my education. I let him believe I was just a brilliant, ambitious girl who had clawed her way out of the Midwest on merit alone.

"I want to show you something," he said, after the plates had been cleared.

He took me to the back of the club, down a narrow staircase, into a private room that smelled of old paper and dust. The walls were lined with paintings—not for sale, he explained, but his own collection. Pieces he couldn't bear to part with.

And in the corner, half-hidden behind a velvet curtain, was a portrait of a woman.

She was young, maybe my age, with red hair and green eyes and a body that seemed to be emerging from the canvas itself. She was naked, her legs parted, her hand between her thighs, her mouth open in what might have been pleasure or pain. The brushwork was erotic, tender, obsessive.

"Her name was Catherine," Julian said quietly. "She was my first love. She died of an overdose when we were twenty-four. I've been painting her ever since."

I looked at the painting, then at him. His face was unreadable, but his hands were trembling.

"Why are you showing me this?"

"Because you asked about Schiele. Because you understand that art is made from wounds." He stepped closer,

his voice dropping. "Because I think you have wounds too, Anya. And I want to know what you've made from them."

The kiss happened before I could decide whether to allow it. His mouth was warm, insistent, tasted of wine and salt. His hands found my waist, pulled me against him, and I felt the hard line of his cock through his trousers. I should have stopped. I should have remembered my rules—keep it professional, keep it controlled.

Instead, I let him push me against the wall, let him hike my dress up around my hips, let him press his fingers against the damp silk of my underwear.

"You're wet," he murmured, his breath hot against my neck.

"You have that effect."

He laughed, low and rough, and then he was on his knees, pulling my underwear down my thighs, lifting one of my legs over his shoulder. His tongue touched my clit and I gasped, my head falling back against the wall.

He ate me like he studied me—with focus, with patience, with an artist's attention to detail. He found the rhythm that made my breath catch and held it, his tongue

circling, dipping, pressing. I came with my fingers tangled in his hair, a sound escaping me that I didn't recognize.

He stood, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and kissed me again, letting me taste myself on his lips.

"Your turn," I said, and dropped to my knees.

I undid his belt, his trousers, freed his cock—thick, cut, already slick with pre-cum. I took him in my mouth slowly, savoring the weight of him on my tongue, the way his hips stuttered when I swallowed him deep. He tasted like salt and skin, and I worked him with practiced efficiency, my hand stroking the base while my mouth moved over the head.

"Fuck, Anya." His voice was strained. "Where did you learn—"

I didn't answer. I just took him deeper, let him fuck my throat, let him spill down my neck as he came with a groan that echoed off the gallery walls.

Afterward, we lay on the Persian rug, my head on his chest, his hand tracing patterns on my shoulder. The portrait of Catherine stared down at us, her painted eyes unreadable.

"This can't be a regular arrangement," I said quietly.

"I know."

"I have rules. I have boundaries. I need—"

"Control." He finished my sentence. "I know. I read your file."

I went still. "What file?"

"The mutual acquaintance who recommended you. Marcus Chen. He told me everything." Julian's voice was gentle, careful. "He said you were the best he'd ever had. Not because of the sex. Because you made him feel seen."

I sat up, my heart pounding. "Marcus broke confidentiality."

"Marcus wanted to help you. He said you're too good at what you do. That you'll burn yourself out if you don't find someone who sees the real you." Julian reached up, touched my cheek. "I'm not asking for a contract, Anya. I'm asking for a connection. On your terms. Whatever that looks like."

I stared at him, my mind racing. Marcus had broken the first rule of the sugar world—never expose another arrangement. But he'd done it to help me. Because he'd seen something in me that I'd been trying to hide.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I want to take you to Vienna next month. The Schiele museum. A private viewing of the archive. No sex unless you want it. No strings unless you tie them." He smiled, faint and crooked. "I want to see what you look like when you're not performing."

I thought about Simone, and what she'd said in Venice. True power isn't in what you give. It's in what you allow yourself to receive.

Maybe it was time to learn what that meant with someone who was willing to learn too.

"Okay," I said. "Vienna. But I have conditions."

"Name them."

"I choose the hotel. I choose the schedule. And if I want to leave, I leave. No guilt, no negotiation."

"Done."

"And I want to see more of your paintings. The ones you don't show anyone."

Julian's eyes softened. "That might be the most intimate thing anyone's ever asked me."

I leaned down and kissed him, slow and deep. "Good. Intimacy is the only thing I can't buy."

That night, I walked back to my apartment in the early morning light, the streets of Manhattan quiet and gray. I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time: anticipation. Not for the money, or the sex, or the luxury. But for the possibility of being known.

I unlocked my door, kicked off my heels, and sat on my bed with my laptop open. I pulled up the email from Julian and typed a response before I could second-guess myself.

Vienna. Send me the dates.

—A

Then I closed the laptop, lay back on my pillows, and let myself imagine what it might feel like to stop performing long enough to let someone truly see me.

I wasn't sure yet if I was ready.

But for the first time, I wanted to try.

Chapter 10: Vienna

The flight to Vienna was seven hours of first-class champagne and careful conversation. Julian sat across from me in the cabin, his laptop open to a spreadsheet of upcoming acquisitions, but his eyes kept drifting to me—measuring, wondering, like I was a painting he hadn't yet decided how to hang.

I wore a cream silk blouse and tailored trousers, my hair in a low ponytail, my makeup so minimal I looked almost barefaced. A deliberate choice. I wanted him to see the version of me that existed beneath the performance. The grad student. The girl from Iowa who still sometimes woke up expecting cornfields outside her window.

He caught me looking and smiled. "You're nervous."

"I'm assessing."

"Same thing, in your case." He closed his laptop. "What are you assessing?"

Whether I can trust you. Whether I can let you see the parts of me I've been hiding since I was sixteen. Whether this is another transaction dressed up as something more, or whether you actually mean what you said about wanting to know me.

"I'm assessing whether you'll still respect me after you've seen me cry," I said instead.

His expression softened. "I'd respect you more."

The hotel was the Hotel Imperial, a former palace that smelled of beeswax and old money. Julian had booked the Schubert Suite—two bedrooms, a sitting room with a grand piano, windows that faced the Ringstraße. I chose the smaller bedroom, setting my suitcase on the antique chair, arranging my toiletries in the marble bathroom with methodical precision. Creating order. Creating boundaries.

He didn't push. He gave me space to settle, then knocked on my open door.

"Dinner at seven. There's a restaurant I want to take you to. Small, private, not in any guidebook."

"What should I wear?"

"Something that makes you feel like yourself."

I chose a black dress, simple, with a neckline that dipped just below my collarbone. No jewelry except the small gold studs I'd worn since college. I wanted to be seen, not adorned.

The restaurant was in the seventh district, hidden behind an unmarked door, a single room with eight tables and a kitchen open to the dining area. The chef was a friend of Julian's—a wiry Austrian woman with tattoos up both arms and a laugh that filled the space. She brought out course after course: venison with juniper, trout with dill, a dessert of elderflower foam and gooseberries that tasted like spring.

We talked about everything. His childhood in Connecticut, his first gallery job in SoHo, the year he spent in Tokyo studying ukiyo-e woodblocks. I told him about Iowa, edited for truth this time—not the sanitized version I gave my clients, but the real one. The silos. The gossip. The way I'd felt like an alien in my own skin, longing for a world I'd only seen in movies.

"Did you have anyone?" he asked. "Anyone who saw you?"

"My art history teacher, Mrs. Kowalski. She was the one who told me I could get out. That I was smart enough, if I was willing to work."

"And you believed her."

"I had to. The alternative was staying."

He reached across the table, his fingers brushing mine. It was the first time he'd touched me since we'd left New York. The contact was light, almost hesitant.

"And when you left," he said, "did you find what you were looking for?"

I thought about the basement. The boys. The way I'd learned to use my body as a shield and a weapon. The way I'd turned trauma into a skillset and called it empowerment.

"I found a way to survive," I said. "I'm still figuring out the rest."

After dinner, we walked along the Danube Canal, the lights of the city reflecting off the black water. The air was cold, and I shivered, and Julian put his arm around me without asking. I leaned into him, letting myself feel small.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"You can ask. I may not answer."

"You said Marcus told you I was the best he'd ever had. What did he mean by that?"

I stopped walking, turned to face him. The canal lights caught his face, carving shadows into the angles of his jaw.

"He meant that I didn't just fuck him. I listened. I paid attention. I learned what he needed and gave it to him in a way that made him feel like he was the one in control, even when he wasn't." I paused. "It's not a compliment, Julian. It's a description of a skill. Like being good at chess."

"Is that how you see it? A game?"

"Everything is a game when you've been the board."

He was quiet for a long moment. Then he stepped closer, his hands settling on my waist, his forehead resting against mine.

"I don't want to play games with you, Anya. I want to show you my paintings. I want to take you to museums and watch your face when you see something that moves you. I want to fuck you in a way that makes you forget you ever learned to perform."

My breath caught. "That's a lot to promise."

"I'm not promising. I'm hoping."

I kissed him then, slow and deep, my fingers tangling in his hair. His mouth tasted of elderflower and wine, and

when his tongue slid against mine, I felt something loosen in my chest—a lock I hadn't known I'd been holding closed.

Back at the hotel, we undressed each other in the sitting room, the grand piano a silent witness. He took his time, unbuttoning my dress one button at a time, pressing his lips to each inch of skin as it was revealed. When I was naked, he stepped back, looking at me with an intensity that made me want to look away.

"You're beautiful," he said. "But you know that."

"I know what my body can do. That's not the same thing."

He knelt, his hands on my hips, his mouth on my stomach. He kissed his way down, past my navel, into the thatch of blond hair between my thighs. His tongue found my clit and I gasped, my hands gripping his shoulders.

He ate me like he was learning me—not with the practiced efficiency of a man who knew exactly what to do, but with the curiosity of someone discovering a new language. He explored, tested, adjusted. When I moaned, he repeated the motion. When I arched, he pressed harder.

"Julian—"

He didn't stop. His fingers slid inside me, two of them, curling upward, finding the spot that made my vision blur. I came with my thighs trembling around his head, a cry escaping me that I couldn't control.

He stood, his beard glistening, and kissed me so I could taste myself. Then he lifted me onto the edge of the piano, the ivory keys sounding a dissonant chord beneath my weight.

"Now," he said, his voice rough, "I want to fuck you until you forget your own name."

He pushed into me in one slow, deep stroke. I was so wet that there was no resistance, just the overwhelming fullness of him filling me, stretching me. He set a rhythm—deep and deliberate, each thrust hitting the back of my cunt, making me gasp.

"Look at me," he said.

I forced my eyes open. His face was flushed, his pupils blown, his jaw tight with restraint.

"You're not performing," he said. "You're just here. Just you."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to say that I was always performing, that I didn't know how to stop. But his cock was hitting a rhythm that scrambled all my thoughts, and

when his thumb found my clit and pressed, I came again, harder, my nails digging into his shoulders.

He followed a moment later, his hips stuttering, his groan muffled against my throat. I felt him pulse inside me, hot and deep, and for a moment, I let myself believe that this was all there was—just bodies, just pleasure, just two people finding each other in the dark.

Afterward, we lay tangled on the Persian rug, the piano keys still humming softly beneath us. Julian's hand traced lazy patterns on my thigh.

"I meant what I said," he murmured. "About showing you my paintings."

"Show me tomorrow."

"Not here. In New York. I have a studio in Brooklyn. I've never let anyone see it."

I turned my head to look at him. "Why would you show me?"

"Because you see things. You don't just look. You understand." His hand stilled. "And because I think you've been hiding something too. Your own paintings. The things you've made from your wounds."

I thought about the notebook in my bag—the one I'd been filling with sketches for years. Abstract, distorted, full of raw edges and broken lines. I'd never shown anyone.

"Maybe," I said. "But not yet."

He kissed my forehead. "Whenever you're ready."

The next morning, we went to the Schiele museum. I stood in front of *The Embrace* for twenty minutes, studying the way the two figures seemed to merge into one, their limbs intertwined, their faces almost indistinguishable.

"What do you see?" Julian asked.

"Two people trying to become one person. And failing." I pointed at the gap between their bodies—a sliver of canvas where the paint didn't quite touch. "There. That's the truth. You can't ever fully merge with someone. There's always a space. The question is whether you're brave enough to let it exist."

Julian was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, "I think that's the most honest thing anyone's ever said to me."

I looked at him, and for a moment, I let myself feel the weight of that honesty. I let myself imagine a version of my life where I didn't have to hide—where I could be

Amanda and Anya at the same time, without the constant calculation.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?"

"For not making me perform."

He took my hand, and we stood there, in front of the painting, not saying anything. Just existing in the space between.

And for the first time in years, I didn't feel the need to fill it.

Chapter 11: The Studio

The Connecticut house was everything I'd expected and nothing I'd prepared for.

It sat at the end of a winding driveway lined with old maples, their branches skeletal against the November sky. Victorian, painted a soft gray with white trim, with a wraparound porch and a turret that made it look like something from a children's book. The kind of house that held generations of secrets in its walls.

Julian parked the car and sat for a moment, hands still on the wheel.

"I haven't been here in three years," he said. "Not since my mother died."

I didn't ask why he'd chosen now. I knew the answer was somewhere in the space between us—the one I'd pointed out in the Schiele painting. He was letting me see the gap.

The inside was frozen in time. Persian rugs faded to subtle peach tones. Bookshelves crammed with art monographs and first editions. A grand piano in the living room, its keys yellowed with age. Photographs in silver frames on the mantel: Julian as a boy, gap-toothed, holding a fish; Julian as a teenager, lanky and awkward, standing next to a woman who must have been his mother—tall, severe, beautiful in a way that suggested she'd never been soft.

"She was a painter too," Julian said, picking up the frame. "Better than me. She just never believed it."

"What happened to her?"

"Cancer. Slow. She spent her last year in the studio, painting what she called her 'goodbye series.' Landscapes of places she'd never been. Imaginary countries." He set the frame down carefully. "I inherited the house and the guilt."

"Guilt for what?"

"For not being here. For being in New York, building my empire, while she was dying alone in a house full of ghosts."

I crossed the room to him, took his hand. "She had the paintings. That's not alone."

He looked at me, and something in his face cracked—just slightly, just enough for me to see the boy he'd been. The one who'd loved his mother and hadn't been able to save her.

"Come," he said. "I'll show you the studio."

It was a converted carriage house in the back, heated by a wood stove and lit by skylights. The space smelled of turpentine and linseed oil, of years of creation. Canvases leaned against every wall, stacked three deep. A table held tubes of paint in every color, brushes caked with dried pigment, palette knives worn smooth by use.

I walked the perimeter, pulling out canvases one by one. Abstract expressionist work, mostly, with a precision that reminded me of Rothko—blocks of color that seemed to vibrate with emotion. But there were figures too. Women, mostly, their bodies rendered in fragmented lines, as if he'd been trying to capture something just out of reach.

"This is the series I never showed anyone," he said from behind me. "I started it after my mother died. I was trying to paint grief, but it kept turning into desire."

"They're beautiful."

"They're unfinished. I couldn't find the end."

I turned to face him. The wood stove had warmed the room, and I shrugged off my coat, letting it fall onto a worn armchair.

"Maybe the end isn't something you find. Maybe it's something you choose."

He crossed to me, his hands finding my waist, his forehead resting against mine. "You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"I am."

"Show me."

I knew what he meant. Not here, not now—but the notebook. The sketches. The things I'd made from my wounds.

"Not yet," I said. "But soon."

He kissed me, soft and slow, and I felt the tension in his shoulders ease. I let my hands slide up his chest, into his hair, pulling him closer. The kiss deepened, his tongue finding mine, and I felt the familiar heat begin to build.

"I want to fuck you here," he murmured against my mouth. "In this studio, surrounded by all the things I've never shown anyone."

"Yes."

He turned me around, bending me over the table, sending tubes of paint clattering to the floor. My hands gripped the edge, and I felt his fingers at the waistband of my jeans, unbuttoning, unzipping, pulling them down along with my panties. The air was cold on my bare skin, and I shivered.

"Tell me what you want," he said, his voice rough.

"I want you to fuck me like I'm one of your paintings. Like you're trying to understand me."

His hand came down on my ass, hard, the sting electric. I gasped, my hips pushing back against him.

"Like this?"

"Harder."

He spanked me again, and again, until my skin was warm and tingling. Then I felt the head of his cock pressing against my wet slit, and he pushed in, slow, deliberate, filling me inch by inch.

I cried out. He was thick, and I was tight, and the stretch was exactly what I needed—that exquisite pressure that made me feel claimed, owned, but only because I'd chosen it.

He fucked me over the table, his hands gripping my hips, his thrusts deep and measured. I could hear the wet

sounds of his cock sliding in and out of my cunt, could feel my own arousal dripping down my thighs.

"Look at the paintings," he said. "Look at what I've made."

I forced my eyes open, focused on a canvas across the room—a woman's body rendered in blues and grays, her limbs elongated, her face a swirl of color. She looked like she was drowning, or flying, or both.

"Is that what you see when you look at me?" I asked.

"I see someone who's been holding her breath for years. Waiting for permission to exhale."

His hand slid around my hip, his fingers finding my clit, pressing in firm circles. The pleasure built, sharp and urgent, and I let myself fall into it.

"I'm giving you permission," he said. "Exhale."

And I did. I came with a sob that was equal parts pleasure and release, my body shuddering, my fists clenching. He followed a moment later, his groan low and raw, his come spilling inside me, hot and deep.

Afterward, we lay on the worn Persian rug in front of the wood stove, the fire casting shadows across the studio.

Julian's arm was under my head, his other hand tracing patterns on my stomach.

"I want to show you something," he said.

He got up, naked, and crossed to a stack of canvases in the corner. He pulled one out, brought it back, set it against the armchair.

It was a portrait of a woman—young, with blond hair and blue eyes, her face half in shadow. She was looking over her shoulder, her expression caught between defiance and vulnerability. She was beautiful, but more than that, she was real.

"Is this me?"

"It's the first time I tried to paint you. After our first dinner. I couldn't get your face out of my head."

I stared at the painting. At the way he'd captured the light in my hair, the curve of my jaw, the something in my eyes that I'd always tried to hide.

"You see me," I said, my voice barely a whisper.

"I do."

I turned to him, and I felt the walls I'd built around my heart start to crumble. Not all at once, but in pieces—small enough to be manageable, large enough to let the light in.

"I think I'm ready," I said.

"Ready for what?"

"To show you my sketches."

I brought the notebook from my bag, sat cross-legged on the rug, and opened it. The pages were filled with drawings—abstract, distorted, raw. Bodies twisted into impossible shapes. Faces that were half-erased. Lines that bled into each other, dark and angry.

I'd never shown these to anyone. They were the things I couldn't say, the things I couldn't perform. The sixteen-year-old girl in the basement. The college girl with bruises on her throat. The woman who'd learned to turn her body into a weapon and wondered, sometimes, if she'd lost herself in the process.

Julian looked at each page in silence. He didn't comment, didn't analyze. He just looked.

When he reached the last page, he closed the notebook and set it aside.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For trusting me with the parts of you that aren't polished. The parts that hurt."

I felt tears prick my eyes. I blinked them back.

"I don't know how to be anything other than what I've made myself," I said. "I don't know if I can stop performing, even when I want to."

He pulled me into his arms, his chin resting on my head. "Then we'll practice. Together. One exhale at a time."

We stayed in Connecticut for three days.

We cooked meals in the old kitchen, the pots and pans inherited from his mother. We walked the frozen grounds, our breath misting, our hands clasped. We made love in every room of the house—on the Persian rug in the living room, against the wall of the master bedroom, in the claw-foot bathtub with steam rising around us.

On the third night, he took me to the studio again. He set up a blank canvas and handed me a brush.

"Paint something," he said. "Something from inside."

I took the brush. I stood in front of the white expanse, and for a long moment, I was frozen. Then I thought of the Schiele painting. The gap between the lovers. The space that couldn't be closed.

I dipped the brush in black paint and made a single line, vertical, running from the top of the canvas to the bottom. Then I stood back and looked at it.

"What is it?" Julian asked.

"It's the space between who I was and who I want to be. It's the only honest thing I know how to make."

He came up behind me, his arms wrapping around my waist, his chin resting on my shoulder.

"It's perfect," he said.

"It's not even finished."

"Neither are we."

I turned in his arms, my brush still in hand, and I kissed him. I kissed him with all the words I didn't know how to say, all the trust I was still learning to feel, all the hope I'd been too afraid to name.

And when we made love that night, on the floor of the studio, surrounded by half-finished paintings and the ghosts of his past and mine, I didn't perform. I didn't orchestrate. I didn't calculate.

I just let myself be touched. Let myself be seen. Let myself exhale.

The morning we left, I stood on the porch and looked at the house one last time. The gray paint, the white trim, the turret that looked like something from a fairy tale.

"Will you come back?" Julian asked.

"I think I have to. There's still so much I haven't painted."

He smiled. "Then we'll come back together."

I took his hand, and we walked to the car.

I was still Anya Vance. Still the strategist, the survivor, the woman who'd turned her trauma into a currency. But I was something else now, too. Something I was still learning to name.

I was the woman in the portrait. The woman who'd been seen.

And for the first time in my life, I didn't want to look away.

Chapter 12: The Opening

The gallery was packed. New York's art world had turned out in force—collectors in bespoke suits, critics with sharp eyes, curators clutching champagne flutes like talismans. Julian stood near the entrance, his posture deceptively relaxed, a glass of whiskey barely touched in his hand.

His first solo show in five years.

I'd watched him prepare for this night. The sleepless hours in the studio, the arguments with the lighting designer, the way he'd repainted three canvases the week before because they "didn't breathe right." He was terrified, though he'd never say it. I could read it in the set of his jaw, the way his thumb kept rubbing the condensation off his glass.

I crossed the room to him, my heels clicking on the polished concrete. I'd worn a black dress—simple, backless,

with a slit that ran high enough to remind everyone what they couldn't have. My hair was down, my lips painted the color of wine.

"You look like you're about to bolt," I said, slipping my hand into his.

"I might." He managed a thin smile. "You look dangerous."

"That's the point."

His laugh was short, almost lost in the murmur of the crowd. "I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

"Because you're ready. And because I'm here."

I squeezed his hand, then let go and stepped back. He needed to face this alone—to stand in front of his work and let the world have its opinion. I'd be close, but not in the way. That was the balance I'd learned: presence without interference, support without control.

The exhibition was called Echoes. Twenty-three paintings, each one a conversation between memory and desire. I'd seen them all before, in the studio, but seeing them here—framed, lit, arranged in sequence—was different. They told a story. His story. And mine.

I stopped in front of a painting near the center of the main wall. It was the portrait he'd made of me after our first dinner, the one I'd discovered in Connecticut. But it wasn't alone. Beside it hung two more canvases: one of me lying on the studio floor, limbs tangled, eyes closed, caught in a moment of surrender; another of me looking directly at the viewer, naked, my hand between my legs, my expression a blend of defiance and invitation.

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. He'd painted me exactly as I was—as I'd let him see me.

"Remarkable work, isn't it?"

I turned to find an older woman at my elbow, silver-haired, dressed in a tailored suit. She held a catalog in her hand, and I recognized the name on her badge: Eleanor Vance, critic for Artforum.

"Vance," I said, my voice catching on the coincidence. "We share a last name."

"Perhaps we're distant cousins." She smiled, the lines around her eyes crinkling. "I've been following Julian's career for a decade. This is his most honest work yet. These paintings—they have a rawness that's been missing. As if he's finally stopped hiding."

"He's been learning how to let people in."

"And you know this how?" Her gaze sharpened, assessing.

I met her eyes. "I'm his muse. Or one of them."

Eleanor Vance laughed, a low, throaty sound. "Well, then you've inspired something extraordinary." She nodded at the portrait. "He sees you as a woman who's been through fire and emerged with her edges intact. That's rare in an era of soft, curated vulnerability."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Thank the painter." She touched my arm lightly and moved on, disappearing into the crowd.

I stood there, looking at the painting of myself, and felt something shift in my chest. Not the familiar armor clicking into place, but the opposite—a loosening, a softening.

I wasn't just the woman in the portrait anymore. I was the woman who'd sat for it, who'd let herself be seen in all her contradictions. And I was still here.

The after-party was at a loft in SoHo, all exposed brick and low lighting and a DJ playing something with a pulsing bass. I found Julian cornered by a collector, nodding politely while the man explained why his favorite painting

should have been priced higher. I rescued him with a kiss on the cheek and a whispered, "Come with me."

I led him up a spiral staircase to a mezzanine that overlooked the party. There was a small balcony, empty, the door slightly ajar. I pulled him outside.

The night air was cold, sharp against my bare shoulders. Below us, the street gleamed with rain-slicked asphalt, taxis sliding past like fish in a dark river.

"You did it," I said.

"We did it."

"No. This was you. I just watched."

He turned to me, his eyes dark in the dim light. "You did more than watch. You were in every brushstroke."

I rose on my toes and kissed him. Slow, deliberate, tasting whiskey and the faint salt of his skin. His hands found my waist, pulling me against him, and I felt his cock stir through his trousers.

"I want to go home," I murmured against his lips. "I want to be naked in your bed and I want you to fuck me until I forget my own name."

His breath hitched. "That can be arranged."

His apartment was a fifteen-minute cab ride, and we barely made it through the door before our clothes were off. I let him push me against the wall, his mouth on my throat, his hands cupping my breasts, thumbs teasing my nipples until they were hard peaks.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice ragged. "Every time I think I've seen all of you, you show me something new."

I reached down, wrapped my fingers around his cock. It was thick and hard, the head slick with pre-cum. I stroked him slowly, watching his eyes flutter shut.

"I want you inside me," I said. "Now."

He lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, my back pressed against the wall. I guided him to my entrance, and he pushed in, the stretch making me gasp. He filled me completely, and I felt my cunt clench around him, hungry and wet.

"Fuck, Anya."

He fucked me against the wall, his thrusts deep and steady, his mouth on mine, swallowing my moans. The friction was perfect, the angle hitting that spot inside me that made my vision blur. I dug my nails into his shoulders, urging him faster.

"Harder," I breathed. "Fuck me harder."

He drove into me, his breath ragged, his forehead pressed to mine. I could feel him everywhere—his heat, his weight, the way his hips slammed against my thighs. The pleasure built, coiling tight in my belly.

"Look at me," he said.

I opened my eyes, met his gaze.

"I love you," he said.

The words hit me like a shock wave. I came instantly, clenching around him, my body shuddering, a cry torn from my throat. He followed, groaning my name, his come spilling hot inside me.

We stayed there, locked together, his forehead against mine, both of us breathing hard.

"Did you mean that?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

"I don't say things I don't mean."

I kissed him, soft and trembling. I didn't say it back. Not yet. But I felt it—a seed planted in the wreckage of my heart, sending roots down into the dark soil.

Later, in bed, the sheets tangled around our legs, I traced the lines of his chest with my fingertips. The streetlight cast

a pale glow through the window, painting shadows across his skin.

"I met someone tonight," I said. "An art critic. Eleanor Vance. Same last name as mine."

"What did she say?"

"That these were your most honest paintings. That you'd finally stopped hiding."

He was quiet for a moment. "She's right. I have you to thank for that."

"I didn't do anything."

"You let me see you. That's everything."

I felt tears prick my eyes. I blinked them back, but one escaped, sliding down my cheek. He caught it with his thumb.

"Hey," he said softly. "What is it?"

"I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to be loved without waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"There is no other shoe. Just this. Just us."

"Promise me."

He rolled onto his side, facing me. "I promise. And if I break that promise, you can ruin me. Publicly. Painfully. I'll give you the ammunition myself."

I laughed, wet and broken. "I might hold you to that."

"Good."

He kissed the tears from my cheeks, then my lips, then my throat. I felt his hand slide down my stomach, between my legs. I was still slick with his come, and his fingers found my clit, tracing circles that made me arch into him.

"One more," he said. "Then sleep."

"You're going to exhaust me."

"I'm going to worship you."

And he did. He spread my legs and lowered his mouth to my cunt, his tongue lapping at me with a reverence that made my chest ache. He licked and sucked, his fingers curling inside me, until I came again, my hands fisted in his hair, his name on my lips.

When I was spent, he pulled me into his arms, and we lay there, skin to skin, breathing together.

I woke at dawn. The city was quiet, the sky outside the window a pale gray. Julian was still asleep, his arm heavy across my waist.

I slipped out of bed, pulled on his shirt, and walked to the living room. The walls of his apartment were bare—no paintings, no photographs. He'd never put his own work up. He'd never needed to.

But on the dining table, propped against a vase of white roses, was a small canvas I hadn't seen before. It was the black line I'd painted in Connecticut—the vertical stroke that ran from top to bottom. But now there was more. A second line, horizontal, crossing it in the center. A plus sign. An intersection.

Beneath it, in Julian's handwriting: Where we meet.

I touched the canvas, tracing the lines with my fingertip.

The space between us wasn't empty anymore. It was filled with something I still didn't have a name for. Trust, maybe. Or hope. Or love, in its most fragile and furious form.

I heard him stir behind me, felt his arms wrap around my waist.

"Good morning," he said, his voice rough with sleep.

"Good morning." I leaned back into him. "I like what you did with the painting."

"It's our painting. You started it. I finished it."

"Just like us."

He kissed my shoulder. "Just like us."

And for the first time in years, I didn't calculate my next move. I didn't strategize. I didn't prepare for the moment when everything would fall apart.

I just stood there, in my lover's arms, and let myself be held.

Coda: What Remains

The book is closed, but my story isn't over.

I sit at the window of Julian's apartment, the first light of morning painting the city gold. The small canvas—our intersection—rests on my lap. I trace the black lines with my fingertip, feeling the texture of dried paint, the weight of everything that brought me here.

I think of the men and women I've known. The ones who taught me power, who held me, who used me, who loved me. The ones who saw pieces of me and called it whole. They're all in me now, etched into the architecture of my desire.

I think of the trauma that shaped me—those boys in high school who took without asking, who taught me that power could be stolen. I've spent years reclaiming it, one transaction at a time. Every cock I've sucked, every cunt

I've licked, every hand that's gripped my hips or my throat or my hair—I chose it. I chose them.

There will always be more.

More nights in penthouse suites with men who smell of old money and desperation. More women with knowing eyes and soft hands who undress my secrets. More cities glittering in the dark, more strangers who become lovers, more moments when I forget to breathe and remember only to feel.

My phone buzzes. A message from an unknown number: I've heard about you. I'd like to make an arrangement.

I smile, set the canvas aside, and type a reply.

There is always another story waiting to be written. Another bed to be tumbled in. Another heart to be broken or mended. Another man or woman to kneel before, or to make kneel before me.

I am not finished.

I'm only just beginning.

And when dawn breaks over the city, when the last page turns and you sigh, there is only one truth that matters:

The best stories are the ones that never truly end.