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By Lilah Pace

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Their arrangement is twisted. The sex is incredible. And—despite their attempts to stay apart—soon their emotions are bound together as tightly as the rope around Vivienne’s wrists. But the secrets in their pasts threaten to turn their affair even darker...

Reader Advisory: *Asking for It* deals explicitly with fantasies of non-consensual sex. Readers sensitive to portrayals of non-consensual sex should be advised.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lilah Pace is a pseudonym for a *New York Times* bestselling author. *Asking for It* is her first adult novel.

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Prologue

My fantasies always begin . . . normally. Whatever normal is.

The movie or TV show I'm watching features a sexy scene: a man and woman in a clinch, their lips silhouettes that almost touch. A ballad by Dinah Washington comes up on shuffle, raw and yearning. Hugh Jackman shows up shirtless on the cover of a supermarket magazine. The usual things get me started, I guess.

So then I'm in my boyfriend's bed (when I have a boyfriend) or alone between the sheets, or in the shower (when I don't). I close my eyes. I try to forget everything except the pulsing between my legs, the pressure and rhythm that's making my pulse race. The images in my mind jumble together, without narrative or emotion or sense—like a pornographic kaleidoscope of tongues and lips, cock and cunt, the heat of skin on skin. Usually I start to moan; I'm not one of the quiet ones. So far, so good.

But no matter how explicit and erotic the kaleidoscope gets, no matter how talented the guy's tongue is, or how constant my hand's pressure might be—it never, ever gets me off.

Only one fantasy does that.

I try not to think about it. I tell myself it's sick, it's wrong. A lot of times, when I'm with a guy, I just don't come. It's embarrassing to be this good at faking it.

When I'm alone—or when I'm with a lover and I want to get off *so bad* that I can't take it anymore—I have to go there.

In my mind, ropes wind around my wrists, my ankles. Or I'm rolled onto my stomach, hands pinned behind my back. Sometimes I'm blindfolded. Sometimes he makes me look at him. If I'm going down on a guy, I ask him to pull my hair, and the whole time I'm pretending that he's making me do this. Forcing me. In reality he says, *Baby* or *You're beautiful*; I imagine him saying, *Whore. Suck it, you cunt*.

I don't get off unless I'm imagining being raped.

Sometimes it's "softer"—a guy backing me against a wall at a party, or taking advantage when I'm sloppy drunk. Other times it's brutal. Tied down spread-eagled. Or in a ditch on my hands and knees.

At least I don't fantasize about weapons at my throat, or pointed at my head. Not yet, anyway.

I hate this about myself. I *hate* it. I've tried to change so many times; I've always failed. While I wish I could say I don't know why I'm wired this way . . . I do.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Lots of people have sexual fantasies they'd never act on, whether they're violent or perverse, silly or flat-out biologically impossible. If it's all in my head, and it makes me come, what's the harm?

(It makes me come *hard*.)

The harm is when the lines between reality and fantasy get blurred.

Like they did last night.

One

Highway 71 stretched in front of my car, black asphalt scrolling beneath my wheels. Seven hours into my drive back to Austin, I was wondering why I hadn't just flown Southwest.

Sometimes I like taking a long road trip by myself—listening to my music, relishing the freedom of knowing I absolutely, positively can't work on my thesis for a while. I'd enjoyed most of this drive back from New Orleans, but now that the sun had gone down and I still had an hour to go, I felt restless.

Maybe if you hadn't left your car charger at home, where it can do you exactly no good—

I groaned, thinking of my cell phone in my purse, dead for more than an hour now. Instead of putting on my favorite high-energy playlist for the final leg of my journey, I was at the mercy of the radio. Every station seemed dedicated to putting me to sleep.

Then again, it was late. After ten P.M. Most people were winding down, taking it easy as they listened to mellower music, maybe snuggling up to someone they loved.

A sultry Latin number began, soft guitar and thumping drums suggesting sensuality with every beat—and reminding me how long I'd been alone.

My last breakup had taken place four months before. Sometimes I missed Geordie, even though I knew splitting had been the right choice. At age thirty, he's still in party-hearty mode, while at twenty-five I already feel more grown-up than he probably ever will. We'd always been more friends than red-hot lovers anyway. Our sex life—well, I couldn't blame Geordie there. Probably most women would have been more than happy with what he had to offer. I was the one who had longed for something Geordie couldn't provide.

At least you told him what you really wanted. You finally trusted someone else enough to tell, and that alone counts for something, doesn't it? He just couldn't go there with you.

But I'd felt so shamed. So exposed. I'd confessed my deepest fantasies to Geordie, hoping he'd play along, and instead he'd freaked out. Oh, he tried to be sympathetic, all "But *why* do you think you feel this way?" That's what I pay my therapist for. What I needed from him was something a whole lot dirtier. A whole lot scarier. And gentle, funny Geordie couldn't give it to me.

Maybe I was being the rigid one. I figured I shouldn't condemn a guy for *not* getting off on the idea of forcing a woman. So I reminded myself, *Geordie gets to have limits too—*

The steering wheel jerked in my hands. I managed to keep my Civic from spinning out, but barely. It wobbled violently, pulling hard to one side as I guided it onto the shoulder. The hum of tires against highway gave way to jagged pops of gravel under my car. Once I'd cleared the road, I put the car in park, turned the key, and sat there for a moment, one hand held over my wildly thumping heart.

Shit. I've blown a tire.

I stepped out of my car, my sandals crunching in the roadside grit, as I inspected the damage. As I'd thought, the passenger-side front tire was completely blown out; strips of blackened rubber had peeled away, and it was already completely deflated against the ground.

Biting my lower lip, I glanced up and down the highway. I hadn't quite made it as far as Giddings, which was the closest thing to a real town in this part of Texas. The next outpost of civilization was probably at least half an hour's walk from here . . . in the dark, without even a streetlamp to guide me. Why hadn't I brought the stupid car charger? I'd have given a lot to have my cell phone with me so I could call for help. I could've bought another one in any gas station along the way; it wasn't like they were expensive. But I hadn't. So I was alone, in the dark, totally on my own.

Of course, as a modern, independent woman, I'd learned how to change a flat tire. I'd practiced so I'd be able to do it in a crisis. Except that the last time I practiced was eight years earlier, when I was a junior in high school.

I squared my shoulders. *Okay, Vivienne. You can do this. Let's make it happen.*

As I took the jack from the trunk, I decided to ditch the little cardigan I wore over my red sundress. In Texas in August, the weather was too warm to work hard while wearing extra layers, even this late at night. Besides, I didn't want to get grease all over my entire outfit if I could help it.

A truck's headlights appeared on the horizon, heading toward me. I was torn. *Wave for help or duck behind the car, so the driver doesn't see that I'm a woman out here alone?*

My fantasies were one thing. Reality was another. I wanted help really badly, but I walked behind the car.

Not that it mattered—the eighteen-wheeler barreled past me so fast my compact car rocked in its wake. The breeze blew my hair in my face and whipped the skirt of my sundress. Once the truck was well ahead of me, I took off my cardigan and tossed it into the front seat, then got down to business.

Okay. Obviously the first step was jacking up the car. I knelt beside the flat tire, angled the jack—and heard another car driving toward me.

Slowing down.

And stopping.

Headlights bathed me in their brilliance. I held up one hand, unable to see for the glare. Fear prickled along my skin. I took the lug wrench firmly in my fist as I stood, still holding my other hand against the light, and tried to keep my voice steady as I called, "Hello?"

"Looks like you've got trouble."

The driver stepped forward, the headlights silhouetting his tall, masculine form. As my eyes adjusted to the brightness, I could finally see his face.

Oh, my God.

All the adrenaline in my bloodstream changed. The fear was still there, sharper as I saw how broad his shoulders were, and the muscles in his arms—but now that fear was matched by excitement, raw and primal. This man . . .

He was tall, a couple inches over six feet. His jeans were slung beneath his almost impossibly tapered waist, which only exaggerated how muscular his thighs were. His black T-shirt clung to him tightly. Stubble shadowed his angular jaw, and his dark hair was cut almost military-short in a way that emphasized the strong lines of his face. His gray eyes raked over me, as I remembered why I'd worn the cardigan to begin with—my sundress was low-cut, and his gaze made it clear he'd noticed.

My hand tightened around the wrench.

"What seems to be the problem?" He took a step closer.

"It's just a flat tire. I've got a spare." I sounded breathless. Afraid. Would that encourage him to help me, or make it clear just how much power he had over me at this moment?

One of his eyebrows lifted. Clearly he'd picked up on the fact that I was nervous. It seemed to amuse him. "Can you change a flat?"

"Of course." That was possibly not the entire truth, but I figured I could manage if I had to.

"Do you have any help on the way? Triple A?" His gray eyes met mine again, but it was difficult for me to make out his expression with his headlights shining in my eyes. "A boyfriend?"

Is he trying to find out if I'm single, or trying to find out if anybody would know if something happened to me?

No one would.

I tried to smile; I probably failed. "Yeah. Triple A said they'd be here in—oh, another fifteen minutes or so." My voice sounded sharp, borderline rude, but I couldn't worry about that. All I could think was, *Why did I say that? Fifteen minutes was too long. Fifteen minutes is more than enough time for him to . . .*

His smile was a quick flash in the darkness, as hard-edged as a straight razor. "I can change that flat in five. That is—if you're not too proud to ask for help."

"Proud?" This guy had pulled over next to me in the dead of night, started interrogating me, and wanted to lecture me on my attitude? Fuck being afraid; I got mad. "Listen, if you think it's *funny* that I'd be worried about a stranger in this situation, I'm afraid you don't understand some very basic, sad facts of life."

He drew back, his gray eyes narrowing, almost like I'd slapped him. Had he taken my fear as an insult? Maybe it was one; I'd as good as said I thought he couldn't be trusted. However, when he spoke again, his deep voice was gentler. Meant to soothe. "I wasn't thinking. Here. Let me take care of this for you and get you on your way."

He held out his hand for the wrench. Obviously he'd need it to change my flat. But it was also the only

potential weapon I had.

Do I trust this guy?

I took one step closer to him, squinting to see. Now his body blocked the headlights a little more, and I could examine his face more carefully. Strong brow. Firm, straight nose like a slash through his perfectly symmetrical face. A surprisingly full lower lip. He looked powerfully, almost aggressively masculine. Like someone who took what he wanted. And yet his eyes never glanced away from mine, as though he had nothing to hide—

Even though I wanted to trust those eyes, I couldn't. This man was a total stranger. What it boiled down to was this: If he was a good guy, then I could rely on him. If he was a bad guy, he could probably get the lug wrench away from me any time he wanted.

I hesitated one instant longer, then handed him the wrench.

He took it and stepped past me to get to work.

During the next few minutes, while he worked in silence except for the clanking of metal, I stood awkwardly in front of his dark sedan. Even now I found it difficult to relax around this guy. What if he was just toying with me? Trying to get me off my guard?

Oh, come on, I told myself. Like any rapist on earth would go to the trouble of changing a flat tire first.

But those fears weren't the main reason I found it hard to relax. What got to me was that I found my rescuer sexy as hell. And he'd been sexy to me even when I'd been scared of him.

Just what did you think he was going to do to you?

What did you want him to do to you?

As I watched him—his strong arms wrestling with the wheel, the headlights shining on the muscular expanse of his back or his stern profile—my mind filled with visions I didn't want to want. Visions of him bending me over the back of my car, pushing up the skirt of my sundress. Of him pulling me into the backseat, putting my hand on his cock, whispering, *Time to thank me*. His hands fisting in my hair as he towed me down on my knees—

Stop it.

I shook my head, pushing the loose strands of my hair back from my face. My cheeks felt hot. My pulse still raced, thumping in my chest, throbbing between my legs. I was turned on and confused and angry with myself. I wanted him to finish changing my flat so I could get back into my car and drive the rest of the way home, pretending I'd never had a bigger problem than crappy music on the radio.

Then I could also pretend he hadn't made me feel so hungry. So ashamed.

"Okay," he said. A few clicks of the jack, and my car settled back onto the ground. When he stood up, he had a smudge of dark grease along one cheekbone. "That should get you home. But it's just a spare. You need to buy a new tire right away instead of driving around on this one for too long."

"I know that," I retorted, stung.

“Sorry.” His smile was knowing, almost disdainful. “I forgot I was talking to an expert.”

Okay, so he’s a smug son of a bitch, but he’s the son of a bitch who just saved your ass. I swallowed my irritation. “Listen—thanks. Seriously. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you. I owe you one.”

His smile faded. “Then do me a favor. Don’t try to be superwoman next time. Join Triple A, stay in the car and keep it locked, whatever you have to do to keep yourself safe.” He handed me back the wrench. “You should be more careful who you trust.”

His eyes searched mine again, and I hoped my face was in shadow—enough that he couldn’t see how flushed I was. Then he turned and walked back to his sedan.

As his door slammed, I went to the driver’s side of my Civic, legs trembling beneath me. I got back in and hit the locks. His car pulled back onto the highway, passed me, and kept on going. I sat still, watching the taillights shrink and pass out of sight as he drove away.

I needed to keep driving. But for a few moments I just sat there, one hand to my lips, and tried to stop shaking.

That’s not what I wanted. It’s not.

If only I could believe that.

Two

Monday mornings mean Dr. Ward or, as she insists I call her, Doreen.

I’ve tried therapy before, but Doreen is the first psychologist who’s made me feel like I might actually get somewhere. Everything about her and her office is comforting. Instead of a sternly neutral face and a crisp suit, she always wears a gentle expression and flowing, colorful knits. Instead of a cold, clinical office, she meets with clients in a room of her own bright, sunny house, filled with potted plants and the African sculpture she collects. Most importantly, instead of lecturing, she listens.

“I didn’t know whether I was safe.” I sit on the cream-colored sofa, my bare feet tucked under me. Doreen asks patients to leave our shoes at the door; supposedly it’s to preserve her rugs, but really I think it gets us to let our guard down. “I could’ve been in danger, for all I knew. I didn’t know that he wasn’t going to hurt me. And I still fantasized about him . . . forcing me.”

“He didn’t hurt you,” Doreen says calmly. “He helped you, and then he went on his way.”

And he had an attitude about it. But that isn’t the point. “We were still out there alone in the dark. The danger was *real*, and I wanted him anyway. It’s like—like I wanted to get hurt.”

Doreen raises an eyebrow. “Ever consider that you wanted him just because he was hot?”

I laugh despite myself.

She leans forward. “Let me tell you what I’m hearing here. You were in trouble. You were scared. A very attractive man helped you out. While he was doing that, you let yourself fantasize about him. That’s not abnormal. In fact, I’d say it’s the most normal thing in the world.”

“What I fantasize about isn’t normal.”

“Rape fantasies are among the most common sexual fantasies women have,” Doreen says, not for the first time. As ever, shame lashes me when she says the actual word. *Rape*. “Some men fantasize about being forced, too. That’s not the same as actually wanting to get raped. Not all fantasies are things we want in reality.”

“I should know.”

That’s my attempt at a joke. Doreen doesn’t crack a smile; she’s not so easily distracted. “One of the reasons you came to me was that you wanted to stop having this fantasy. I understand your reasons. But I don’t think the fantasy itself is your most significant problem. I think your main problem is the way you beat yourself up about it.” Doreen sighs. “That, and the reason you’re fixated on the fantasy in the first place.”

I can’t talk about my reasons—not again, not now. My mystery man looms too large in my mind. His shadow falls across everything I say and do today. “If I’m having that fantasy at times when I might really be in danger—about men who really could—who might—”

“We’ve talked about this. Sometimes you tie yourself up in knots about what could have happened, instead of just dealing with the facts. For a little while, let’s stick to the facts about last night.” Doreen’s tone is kind but firm. “This guy changed your tire, and then he went on his way. That’s all.”

Am I overthinking this? Maybe. With a sigh, I let it go—or try to.

• • •

After my hour with Doreen is up, I take my Civic to the shop, buy a new tire, and drive to the north side of town, up to a small town house with empty packing boxes stacked by the curb.

“Anybody home?” I call as I walk up the path to the front steps. “Because I feel the need to unpack something today.”

Carmen appears at the screen door, a red bandana around her black hair and a broad smile on her face. She wears a T-shirt dress and rubber gloves; obviously I’m not the only one who wants to help out. “Are you a glutton for punishment?”

“No more than you are. Besides,” I say, gesturing to my cutoff shorts and heather gray T-shirt, “I’m dressed to work.”

“Then get in here and work, girl.”

As I walk in, I see Carmen’s younger brother Arturo with a hammer in one hand. “Vivienne! I can’t believe we didn’t scare you off for good on moving day.”

I give him a hug. “Not yet, anyway.”

Carmen and I were randomly assigned as roommates freshman year, because I didn’t have any friends attending UT Austin, and because her best friend from high school changed her college choice at the last minute. We were wary of each other at the start, because two people more different would be hard to find. I’m from New Orleans, from what my mother likes to call “old money” even though not much of the money is left anymore. Carmen is from a small town not far from San Antonio, the daughter of immigrants who worked their way out of poverty. I’m slightly taller than average, slender, and, as Carmen has told me many

times, the whitest white girl in the world. She's short, curvy, and proud of her Mexican heritage. My hair is honey-brown with just enough wave to defy any style I attempt, and my eyes are an uncertain shade of hazel, like they can't decide whether to be brown or green or gold. Carmen's hair is a deep, shining, perfectly straight blue-black that I covet nearly as much as her dark brown eyes. I love literature and history, and I littered our dorm room with paperbacks. She loves mathematics, the harder and more abstract the better, and loathes clutter. We hardly dared talk to each other for the first few weeks—but somehow by Christmas break we'd become best friends.

When her younger sibling, Arturo, followed her to UT Austin two years later, I adopted him too. We took him to parties, made sure he studied for finals, even got him a fake ID. By now he's the little brother I've never had.

So I understood how protective Carmen felt when Arturo got involved with his first serious girlfriend. I just can't share her dismay about how it's turning out.

"Hey, Vivienne." Shay waddles down the stairs, her hands on the small of her back. Her Australian accent makes my name sound like *Viv-yin*. "Want a Coke?"

"Maybe in a minute, once I'm hot and sweaty," I say. "Then I'll be craving one."

Shay laughs. "Just get them out of the fridge! I swear, the cans are taunting me."

Shay's doctor told her caffeine was a bad idea during her pregnancy.

Yeah, Arturo and Shay are young to become parents—only twenty-two years old, still undergraduates. But it's as though they *glow* every time they look at each other. I don't think they got engaged because she got pregnant; I assumed a wedding was inevitable from the first time I saw them together. Sometimes you just know. Whenever I see Arturo and Shay together, I smile.

Carmen, on the other hand, scowls.

After we work in the kitchen for a while, unpacking dishes, I glance sideways at Carmen. She's staring out the window above the sink into the narrow backyard, where Shay and Arturo are giggling as they set up the charcoal grill. I say, "If you're not careful, your face will freeze like that."

She rolls her eyes at my dumb joke. "I'm just worried. That's all. A baby . . . I mean, Arturo used to forget to feed our *dog*."

I laugh. "He's not a little kid anymore! And he's got Shay to help him."

"Vivienne, get real. They're young. They don't have a dime. Even with their part-time jobs, they can only barely afford to rent a place big enough for a nursery." Carmen gestures around us.

The town house is modest, and I know Arturo and Shay already have to scrimp. That will only get tougher when the baby arrives in three months. Still—"Listen, if money solved every problem, my family would be the happiest in the world."

"I'm not being materialistic. I'm being realistic. Marrying young, before he gets his degree—it scares me."

"A lot of guys might drop out under that kind of pressure," I admit. "But Arturo's not 'most guys.' He'd never let anything stop him from taking care of Shay and the baby."

Carmen presses her full lips together. “I like Shay—I’m trying to love her, as a sister—but I resent what she’s done to Arturo’s life.”

“She didn’t make the baby on her own, you know. Remember, it takes two to tango.”

“Oh, oh, gross. ‘Tango’ in that sentence means ‘have sex,’ and I know you didn’t suggest my baby brother actually had sex.” Carmen’s smiling now, which counts as a positive sign. “They got pregnant via . . . osmosis.”

“Definitely osmosis.”

From outside we hear Shay’s laughter, and we look outside to see Arturo dancing her around the backyard. Arturo is the male version of Carmen: compact, dark, attractive in a way that has as much to do with charisma as appearance. As for Shay, her bare feet are almost hidden by the high green grass as she spins around; her pixie cut is dyed to a shade of red that’s almost maroon. She isn’t easy to cast in the role of Evil Temptress. Instead she’s straight-up Alternative Chick from her horn-rimmed hipster glasses to the roses tattooed around one ankle.

Carmen says, “I’m trying harder with Shay these days.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

That wins me a glare. “I *am*. I even asked her to invite a few friends along to my party Friday night. You’re still coming, right?

“Are you nuts? Of course I’m coming to my best friend’s party.”

“Well.” Carmen’s expression turns guilty. “I should tell you I invited Geordie too.”

I take a deep breath. “That’s fine.”

She gives me a look.

“I swear.” Geordie and I promised we’d stay friends. After a whole summer away from each other, we ought to be able to hang out again. The party could be awkward as hell, especially if he drinks too much—but I can handle it.

“You agreed faster than I thought you would.” Carmen grabs the box cutter to get us started on our next round of unpacking. “Have you been missing him? Thinking about getting back together?”

“No.”

That isn’t entirely true. I miss Geordie, not as a lover but as a person. Plus I miss sex. I really, truly, definitely miss sex. Maybe the lovemaking with Geordie wasn’t the best, but at least it was *something*. Since the beginning of the summer I haven’t even had that.

Our lack of chemistry in the bedroom isn’t the reason Geordie and I split up, but it didn’t help. Even though the sex was okay, he hadn’t given me what I really want. What I need.

Once again I think of my rescuer—the tall, dark, dangerous man who’d had me at his mercy and walked away—

I shiver.

But Carmen doesn't notice, and I start talking with her about school, the weather, whatever. I try to sweep away my dangerous thoughts along with the dust on the floor.

• • •

The rest of the week goes like any other for a doctoral student at the UT Austin School of Art. Tuesday, meeting with my advisor and then going to the undergrad art history class where I'm a "teaching assistant," that is, the person who actually grades all the papers. Wednesday and Thursday, long hours at the School of Information downtown, where I'm doing some research on document preservation. Friday, some actual studio time with my prints—and I get a couple of really good prints of my favorite etching I've done so far this year, one of a man's hands cradling a dove.

Why does this image speak so strongly to me? I'm not exactly sure, and in some ways I'd rather not know. Art is mysterious, sometimes; unconscious inspiration is often the most powerful. I need nothing more than the image itself: a man's strong, large hands—rough, as if from years of labor or combat—cupped around the form of a dove, its bright eyes shining with both fear and life. The interpretation can come later, or not.

Once I'm done with my prints, I drive home to my little house, a tiny white one-bedroom place, small even among the modest, ramshackle homes just off First Street. Carmen says my place gives her claustrophobia, and Geordie always calls it "the dollhouse." But I like my snug little hideaway. Built-in bookshelves line the bedroom walls, and a freestanding brick fireplace divides the kitchen and the living room. My dream home, basically.

Anyone who walked inside would know a few things about me right away. One, I'm a bibliophile—someone who collects everything from Jane Austen to John le Carré. Two, I'm a sensualist. Only someone in love with texture and color would buy a velvet couch on a grad-school budget, or drape richly woven throws over every other stick of furniture.

Three, I very much love a little girl named Libby, whose coloring-book pages decorate my refrigerator. One original drawing of hers I even framed and put on the wall. In each corner is the scrawled dedication: *To Aunt Vivi*.

No one could look around this room and guess that I don't see Libby very often, much less why. That remains unknown, which is exactly how I want to keep it.

What to wear tonight? I don't want to look too sexy, in case that makes Geordie think I want him back. But I don't want to look frumpy either. Finally I decide nothing matters more than the heat. In Texas in August, temperatures are scorching even after dark, and bare skin is your best friend. I slide into a denim miniskirt and a black camisole, trusting my silver strappy sandals and dangly earrings to dress it up a bit. Then I swing by the convenience store to pick up a six-pack of beer and head to Carmen's.

Her brick red bungalow is within walking distance of some of the great restaurants, clubs, and bars on Congress Street. I have to park my car more than a block away, because this party is one of Carmen's rare blowouts; as I walk up, I see about ten people laughing and talking on her back patio. No doubt a pitcher of sangria is already making the rounds.

Arturo shows me in, hugging me with one arm as he holds his beer with the other. Another two or three dozen people fill Carmen's tiny house, all of them talking and laughing at once, without quite drowning out the thumping of the music from her stereo. The lights are turned down, and a few candles flicker from atop

the speakers and the coffee table. Through the glass door that leads to the back patio, I can glimpse a few of the solar torches lighting the yard as softly as fireflies. “About time you got here!” Arturo calls over the din. “We’ll have to catch you up. Do you know everyone?”

“I don’t think I know anyone.” This is a little bit of an exaggeration—I recognize a couple of faces—but both Carmen and Arturo attract new friends with constant, magnetic appeal. Me . . . it takes me a lot longer to trust people. To let them in. I have my reasons, and I don’t think it’s a bad way to live, but it’s lonelier sometimes.

Also, it makes parties awkward.

Shay comes up to me then, hugging me from behind; the swell of her belly presses against my back. “Introductions time! This is Nicole Mills—hi!—she works with Arturo. Then I’m sure you know Anna Dunham, from Carmen’s department? And Jonny is one of Carmen’s neighbors.” I try to at least wave to everyone as they’re introduced, but Shay is already guiding me toward the kitchen.

Carmen’s tiny galley kitchen is cramped even for one person. In the middle of a party, with everyone trying to get to the fridge or the plastic cups, it’s a tight squeeze. Laughing, I try to shimmy between two figures in the darkened kitchen, get pushed right up on some guy—and then go completely still.

Shay continues, oblivious. “And this is Jonah Marks. He’s a professor in earth sciences. You know that’s where I’m doing my work study this semester, right?”

The last time I saw him it was late at night, and headlights shone from behind him like a halo. Doesn’t matter. I’d know him anywhere. Only one man ever made me go instantly hot and flushed and weak—or wore such a cool, appraising smile while he did it.

He’s smiling at me like that right now.

Tall, Dark, and Dangerous is named Jonah. He’s here with my friends, here in my life. And all my fantasies about the stranger on the road feel even scarier now that he’s not a stranger anymore.

Three

Our chests are pressed together by the crush of people, and I know he can feel my breasts through my skimpy camisole and the thin cotton of his T-shirt. He cocks his head slightly, and I know he recognizes me too. But he says nothing.

Shay blithely continues, “Jonah, this is Vivienne Charles. She’s a good friend of ours, Carmen’s old roommate.”

I just nod. No words come to me. Once again that mixture of fear and desire surges through my veins, the same kind of fire I imagine injected heroin must feel like—an agony so sweet you’d do anything for it.

“We’ve met,” Jonah says, never looking away from me.

“Oh, yeah? That’s UT Austin for you.” Shay grins, still oblivious to the energy between Jonah and me. “Practically the largest university in the country, but somehow we all cross paths.”

“We met just the other night,” I finally manage to say. “On my way back from New Orleans, I had a flat tire.

Jonah changed it for me. Thanks again, by the way.”

He inclines his head, acknowledging my words as little as possible.

“Hey, hey. Our hero,” Shay says. “You never mentioned helping someone on the roadside, Jonah.”

“It was no big deal.” With that, Jonah finally breaks eye contact, turns, and walks away. I let out a breath I hadn’t known I was holding.

If Shay notices my reaction, she misinterprets it. “Don’t let Jonah get to you. He comes across as rude sometimes, but that’s just his way. I mean, he’s good to work for—doesn’t treat me like his personal servant, the way some of the professors do. But never once have I heard him laugh.” Shay’s expression turns thoughtful. “Huh. I’m not sure he even can.”

“Why did you ask him here tonight? If he’s so—cold.”

“I asked a bunch of people from our department. Would’ve been mean to leave him out.”

That’s just like Shay. She’d invite someone she barely likes to a party before she’d hurt anyone’s feelings.

Jonah’s out of sight, and—for Shay, at least—out of mind. She resumes pushing me through the kitchen crowd. “Come on. Time to get you some sangria!”

It’s not like me, going quiet that way. I’ve spent most of my adult life trying to teach myself to be more assertive, and . . . let’s say I’m getting there. But seeing Tall, Dark, and Dangerous again—finding out that his name is Jonah Marks—he threw me off. Embarrassed me.

Correction, I tell myself. He didn’t embarrass you. Your fantasies about him make you ashamed. Not the same thing.

Sometime later on, I’ll find Jonah among the other partygoers. I’ll say something simple and stupid. Basic party chatter. *Great song, huh?* That kind of thing. Then I’ll thank him again, and it won’t be weird anymore. After that I can walk away from this man for good.

Right now, though, I need to catch my breath.

Shay gets me sangria and grabs herself a ginger ale, and starts going on about how she wants to paint the nursery green, but Arturo prefers yellow. I’m excited about the baby and everything, but there’s only so much nursery talk I can take. So I basically zone out, saying “Yeah” and “Of course” whenever she pauses for a moment.

Almost against my will, I steal glances across the room at Jonah Marks.

He’s even more attractive than I remembered. Not *beautiful*, or *gorgeous*—any of the adjectives that would apply to a Ralph Lauren model or a boy-band star. Jonah’s features are too rugged for that. Too stark. He looks like the work of a sculptor who didn’t believe in polishing rough edges, who wanted you to see exactly where the chisel had struck. In some ways, he’s aggressively masculine: the dark red henley he’s wearing is tight enough to reveal the powerful muscles of his arms. But in others, Jonah looks strangely vulnerable. His waist is narrow, and his neck is longer than most men’s. His whole body looks as though someone took the macho ideal of a masculine form and brought it almost to the breaking point. Strong—and yet strained, beneath the surface.

This is a man who could be broken, I think. But he'd be more likely to break you first.

Jonah moves deeper into the crowd, until I can't see him any longer. At first I wonder if I could extricate myself from Shay's nursery-decoration talk to find him; then I wonder why I feel like I need to do that this second.

Maybe I shouldn't seek Jonah out at all, if he shakes me up like this. Besides, what would I say? *It was incredibly nice of you to help me out the other night. Remember how I treated you like you were probably a serial killer?* Yeah, guys love that.

Then distraction arrives, in the form of Geordie Hilton, aka my ex-boyfriend.

"Vivienne!" Geordie's smile is absolutely genuine. In his eyes there's only the slightest flicker of doubt. He's glad to see me, but he's not sure I'll feel the same.

To my surprise, I do. "Hey, you. Come here."

We hug each other, the one-armed friendly hug that clearly says *We're not fucking anymore*. I'm aware of Shay studying us, and other people too; the first meeting of the exes is always an attention-getter. Right now they're looking at us half in relief (no fight), half in disappointment (no fight?). Shay sidles away, giving us as much space as this crowded party allows.

He says, "Did you have a good summer? You never post to Facebook, you know." Geordie is the kind of hyper-extrovert who considers avoiding social media nearly criminal.

"I had a quiet summer, which is exactly what I needed. You?"

"*Brilliant.*" Geordie lived in Inverness until he was sixteen, and occasionally his accent and slang give him away. "The internship went great. Seriously, beyond my wildest expectations. We won amnesty for *four* immigrants in danger of exportation to home countries where they'd have been killed, either for political protests or sexual orientation. Four in three months! The wheels of justice rarely spin so fast."

Most young attorneys who return to law school for an LLM do it to make even more money; Geordie's getting his LLM so he can better help people. I don't regret breaking up with him, but it's good to be reminded of what I liked about the guy in the first place.

Plenty of the eyes watching us are female. More than one woman at this party hopes to make sure I'm out of the picture with Geordie, so she'll have a shot at climbing into the frame. He's handsome—okay, *adorable*—with floppy brown hair, puppy-dog eyes, and a smile that can be warm, or sly, or both at once. With his white oxford shirt unbuttoned at the neck, sleeves rolled up, his frame looks less skinny, more wiry. He's the ideal hero of a romantic comedy.

But my life isn't a rom-com, and it never will be. That ship sailed long before Geordie came along.

Besides, standing within arm's length of Geordie does less for me than just glancing across the room at Jonah Marks.

Again I look toward the corner where I saw Jonah last, but he's not there. Did he leave the party already?

If he did, I ought to feel relieved. I don't.

Time to focus on Geordie again. "Good for you," I tell him, meaning it.

We chitchat about his time in Miami for a while, then go our own ways within the party. I manage to dodge Arturo's old roommate, Mack, who always stares at my tits; he's one of those jocks with a thick neck and square head, like a canned ham in a Longhorns T-shirt. For a while I get to talk with Kip, the department secretary in my section of the art department, but then he receives some urgent text that sucks him into the cell phone dead zone. Mostly, even though I ought to be mingling and meeting new people, I hang out with Carmen. We're best friends for a reason, and besides, she has a new crush to describe in detail.

As for my crush—if you can use such an innocent word for what Jonah Marks does to me—I refuse to let myself look for him again. Nor does he seek me out. Either Jonah's on the patio or he blew out of here early, because I don't see him once.

What I do see is Geordie going back for a third glass of sangria.

And a fourth.

And a fifth. That's assuming I didn't miss any refills, and I might have.

It's on the fifth sangria that Geordie stumbles into the coffee table. A few people's drinks slosh onto the carpet, which makes Carmen swear under her breath; one of the candles rocks but doesn't fall over to start a fire. Barely.

People laugh, but there's an edge to it. Geordie's drunker than anyone else at this party, by far.

"Hey," I say to him as gently as I can. "Let's get you some air."

Even as she dabs paper towels against her carpet, Carmen defends Geordie. "It's all right! The rug's dark. It won't even show."

"No, Viv's right. She's right." Geordie must be smashed; otherwise he'd never risk my wrath by calling me Viv. "We should all listen to—to Viv—a little more often."

I get up and sling one of his arms around my shoulders. If he or anybody else misinterprets this, it's on them.

"Why don't I listen to you more?" Geordie stumbles against me, but I manage to keep us upright. "You're always so smart."

"That's me. The genius. Come on."

With my free hand I slide the glass door open and guide him onto the brick patio. Only a few people linger out there now, and I pay attention to none of them. Instead I get Geordie to the ice chest, where—amid several bottles of beer—I find a Dasani for him.

"Drink this, okay? You need to drink nothing but water the rest of the night. You should eat something too."

Geordie clasps the bottle of water, but he doesn't take a sip. Instead he gives me this sad smile. "I should've tried harder with you. I should've made it work."

Is he going to cry? Damn, Geordie's a sloppy drunk.

He just keeps talking. "I'm sorry I couldn't be the partner you wanted me to be."

"It's okay. Really. Please drink some water." I prop him against the patio table. Around us, a few people are

snickering at Geordie; I'm still loyal enough to feel angry on his behalf.

"I mean, it's for the best. I know that. I do. But it hurts sometimes, doesn't it?" Geordie's slurring now. "We should've had more fun while we could."

"Less fun," I say. "More water."

Finally Geordie takes a sip, but it doesn't shut him up for long. "I just couldn't do that for you. Any of it. And, oh my God, I feel so bad about the rape thing—"

He did not say that. He did not start talking about this in public, at a party, with strangers standing around listening.

Except he did.

My face goes cold with shock, then hot with shame, as Geordie continues. "I mean, kink yay, right? Everybody should love kinks. And you get to have yours! You do. But it's not my kink. At all. Playing rapist freaks me out. But I shouldn't have been such a dumb cunt about it."

"We're not discussing this here," I manage to say. "Please stop."

It hits Geordie then, where we are and what he's done. The impact gets through all the booze. He sucks in a breath. "Oh, fuck."

I don't want to look at the faces of the people standing around who just heard that, but I can't help it. A few of them look shocked. Others look amused. That creeper Mack leers at me in a way that makes my skin crawl.

Worst of all is the one face that remains impassive—Jonah Marks, only a few feet away, who must have heard every word.

Four

Once, when I was thirteen, the bloody string of my tampon somehow hung out from the edge of my swimsuit. Jackson Overstreet—who I thought was so cute, with his blond hair and blue eyes, the boy I hoped would be the first guy ever to kiss me—he saw the string, pointed it out to everyone at my friend Liz's pool party, and laughed the loudest of all. Given how many people were shrieking in laughter at once, that was a hard competition to win. Jackson won it hands down. Since then I've believed that moment would probably be the single greatest public humiliation I'd ever feel.

Turns out it wasn't even close.

I stand at the edge of Carmen's yard by the tall wooden fence. The noise and light of the party are as far away as possible, which isn't nearly far enough. What I want most is to leave. But to leave, I'd have to walk through the crowd, and I'm not ready to do that yet.

Footsteps in the grass behind me make me cringe. When Arturo comes up beside me, though, his smile is kind. "You all right?"

This is Arturo; I can't lie to him. "If 'mortally embarrassed' counts as all right."

“Don’t be like that. Everybody gets a little crazy in the sack once in a while, you know? I could tell you a few stories, if Shay wouldn’t kill me afterward.”

I give him a crooked smile. Probably everyone else who heard Geordie thinks what Arturo thinks: that he was talking about a bad night of role-playing, a one-time thing. They have no idea how deep this goes for me. To them it’s a tremor, not an earthquake.

Arturo adds, “Geordie’s a dick. Carmen shouldn’t have invited him.”

“He was drunk. That’s all.” I push my bangs back from my forehead. The night is sultry—hot and humid. “I’ll take it up with him later. You guys stay out of it.”

Arturo holds up his hands, a gesture of surrender, but I can tell he’s not ready to let Geordie off the hook yet. My adopted younger brother is more protective than any real older brother could ever be. He’s slow to anger, but once he finally gets mad—watch out.

Hopefully someone’s driven Geordie home by now.

“You sure you’re okay?” he says.

I nod. “Just give me a few more minutes, all right? By tomorrow maybe I’ll be able to laugh about it.” Fat chance.

“Sure thing.” Arturo’s hand touches my shoulder, a comforting pat, before he heads back to the gathering.

Nobody else knows the truth. If I’d been able to laugh off what Geordie said, chances are most people wouldn’t have thought much more about it. I’m making it a bigger deal than it has to be by staying away from everyone else, so I should knock it off. Probably Mack’s smarmy grin is the worst of the aftermath, and that’s already over.

Geordie, you dickweed. I might keep Arturo from giving him hell, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to. *You couldn’t have spent one single party drinking ginger ale?*

Footsteps on the grass again, but I don’t turn around. “I’m coming back in, really—”

My voice trails off as I see who’s come to my side.

Jonah Marks doesn’t look directly at me; he stares in the same direction I do, right past the fence, but there’s no missing the intensity of his focus. He is as vividly aware of me right now as I am of him.

“Sorry your ex embarrassed you,” he says.

“He, um, he just had too much to drink.” I hug myself a little tighter. “Guess we’ve all been there.”

“I’ve never humiliated one of my lovers at a party. Have you?”

Wow, thanks for describing it as humiliation. “I just meant, I’m not angry with Geordie. You don’t have to be either.”

Jonah doesn’t seem to think my take on this matters. “He should never have revealed something so private.”

I remind myself: a tremor, not an earthquake. “That was just one thing Geordie and I talked about, one time.

Don't read too much into it."

My best bluff. I even manage a smile. Most people would believe it. Jonah doesn't.

"If it were no big deal, you wouldn't be standing out here now," he says. "I knew the truth as soon as I saw your face. You want that fantasy. You want it more than you've ever wanted anything else." He looks directly at me for the first time. "You hate it, don't you? The fantasy. I do too. But it doesn't change anything."

I feel naked in front of him. Exposed, and vulnerable. I can't think about what he's saying; all I want is to get away. But Jonah's presence—the sheer heat of him—holds me in place, trapping me. "You—I don't want to talk about this with you."

"I think you do."

The presumption of the guy. "Excuse me?"

He takes a sip from his wineglass, utterly unhurried, completely and maddeningly calm. Then he says, "I want to tell you this now—tonight, while you're safe, and with your friends, and you know I'm not threatening you. What your ex said—if that's the fantasy you want, I can give it to you."

Did he just say that? He did.

It's like every sound turns into white noise. Like my brain won't process words any longer. The shock is physical. "You—you didn't mean—"

"Rape as fantasy. You'd like to play one role. I'd like to play another." Jonah's tone remains diffident, but his eyes tell another story. He stares at me so intently that I can't help picturing him in the role he wants to play. "On your terms, and within your limits. But I think we could . . . satisfy each other."

I can't even answer him.

Apparently I look as shocked as I feel, because Jonah says, "You're safe. You're with friends. Even if you were alone, you'd be safe with me."

There are a thousand objections I could make, from long outraged diatribes to a slap on the face he's surely earned. I go with, "I don't even know you."

"That's going to make it better for you," Jonah says. "With a boyfriend, you can pretend—but it's a joke, really. A game. Not the fantasy you really want. Me? I'm nearly a stranger. I can do more than fuck you. I can scare you a little. Just a little. Enough to make it what you really want."

I need to shut this down. "This is crazy. You know that, right? And it's never, ever happening."

"It's your fantasy, and mine. Chances like this don't come along often—two people twisted in the exact same way." Jonah smiles; it's a fierce expression, rather than a friendly one. "If we don't make something out of this, I think you'll regret it. I know I will."

I want to tell Jonah that he's wrong. I want to tell him to fuck off. I want to make it clear that I'm not the twisted woman he described—but I can't. This man has already seen right through me. "I can't believe we're even having this conversation."

“We can have a lot more than that. Think about it.”

I can't help imagining it. Every fevered, violent fantasy I had about Jonah that night on the side of the road comes back to me, more vivid than most of my real memories. I wanted him to take me. Control me. Drag me down and force me.

The whole time, he was fantasizing about doing that to me. Maybe more than I even dared dream. Out there in the dark, when I was at his mercy, that was what was going through his mind.

Probably I should feel insulted, or scared. Instead I am powerfully, almost painfully turned on.

Turned on is not the same as suicidal. I say, “There's no way in hell I'm giving you permission to rape me.”

“That's not what I asked for. I asked to play a role in your fantasy, just like I'm asking you to play a role in mine. Nothing happens you don't want to happen.” His gray eyes are unfathomable. “We can work out a few details in advance, for your protection.”

“Is this something you do with women?” I demand. Though I only mean it in terms of fantasy, I realize almost instantly that Jonah could have done this for real. I might be talking to a rapist. I could be a potential victim dangling in front of him like low fruit on a heavy branch.

“A couple of ex-girlfriends tried to act scenes out with me, but it was never quite right. They didn't want to play rough.” His smile is as sharp and bright as a straight razor. “I think you do.”

That ought to scare the shit out of me, except—he's right. I do want to play rough. I want the dirtiest, filthiest brutality, and I want it badly. Wanted it for so long. We still haven't exchanged more than a handful of words, but I already realize that Jonah's exactly the kind of man who'd give me what I need without any hesitation. Without mercy.

I don't want to want that. My fantasy is something I'm trying to escape from, not sink down into. If I try this and hate it, that would be beyond horrible. It might be as traumatic as a real rape, and I would have walked right into it.

That's not what scares me, though. What scares me is that I'll try it and love it. Maybe I really am that fucked up.

I'd rather not find out. “Listen. I realize this is—an offer. Not a threat. But we're having an extremely unnerving conversation, and I wish we weren't.”

Something subtle changes about Jonah's expression. I remember the way I was thinking about him earlier tonight—that this was a man who could be broken. Some of that vulnerability is visible now, if you look hard. “I would never force a woman against her will. Never. If someone held a gun to my head, I'd tell him to shoot. That's not a line I'd ever cross.”

“But you fantasize about raping women.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You fantasize about being raped. You know the line between dream and reality. So do I.”

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