Getaway

by OriginalCeenote

Summary

One woman. One man. One vacation in Mexico at Christmas time.

And a whole lot of explaining to do once they realize that they WORK together.

Notes

I couldn't believe I never posted this here. It's one of the only RoLo chaptered stories that I try to update anymore.

Also, this story, interestingly enough, is a spin-off from "Parent Pick-Up Zone," one of my Stucky stories here featuring Steve and Bucky as the main pairing. I wrote THIS story FIRST, but PPZ is technically the "prequel" to it. You don't have to read that story to know what is going on in this one, I promise.
“Cuanto cuesta?” His Spanish was rusty. He’d spent sophomore year sneaking smokes during that period, so he was at a loss. The vendor eyeballed him with a smile that revealed how ripe a sucker she thought he was. His wallet was burning a hole in his pocket.

“Esto, senor?”

“Si.”

“Diez. No menos.”

“Tengo cinco. Puedo dar cinco para esto.” He held up the black fringed shawl and fingered a tiny flaw in the fabric that actually gave it character. She rolled her lips, then moistened them with a sip of lemonade in a sweating, red plastic cup. The ice cubes jangled as she thunked it back down.

“Es muy bonita, senor! No puedo permitir que lo tienes, eh? Ocho?” She was getting warmer. He shook his head. He was enjoying himself.

They bartered back and forth in a jumble of clipped English and half-formed phrases in Spanish until she carefully folded the shawl in brittle wrapping paper and stuffed it into a shopping bag. He handed her a twenty. She gave him a sour look.

“Tienes cambio?”

“Excusame?”

“Cambio.” She picked up the small “take one, leave one” penny tray by her cash box.

Ah. Change. Logan dug back into his billfold and peered inside, finally fishing out a five and two singles. She was just as annoyed with his choice of currency, but he had to go convert more of his pin money to pesos before he met Scott. He gladly took back his ten and thanked her for the purchase. He decided to skip perusing the rest of the trinkets at the risk of annoying her after talking her down so low.

Logan left the stand and strolled through the crowded fresh air market. Various smells mingled and assailed his senses; he succumbed to the safest offering he saw and bought a huge cup of fruit salad marinated in lemon juice and chile. It wouldn’t even take the edge off his appetite, but he wanted something to wet his whistle before he met Summers.

He’d bet good money Slim was already red as a lobster. They’d brought along SPF 50, and his cheeks were already well done beneath the rims of his Oakleys by the time they reached their hotel from Mexico City. But what did he expect? Spending the other fifty weeks of the year in a city where winters usually ran twenty below made a man get ahead of himself. Logan wasn’t in the mood for another white Christmas in Boston, especially when he’d have ended up spending it alone. Fuck it.

His feet fell victim to the blaring music, his steps falling into time with the banda playing across the plaza. Logan didn’t dance. Ever. But he tried with no success not to walk to the beats. He caught his reflection in a car window as it cut him off at the intersection.

Logan was going native.
His hair was tousled and held auburn glints from the sun, setting off his rich, dark tan. His guayabera shirt held sweat rings and triangles from the humidity, and his lightweight linen pants were rolled up several inches above his ankles. Guarache sandals shod his feet; his heels were cracked and dry. Logan couldn’t resist the daily luxury of the white sand sifting between his toes at the beach.

His stance was relaxed and open, to an extent. Logan was still mindful of pickpockets, hooking his thumb into his pants pocket and walking with the shopping bag handles looped around his wrist, shielding his wallet. Some habits never died.

The air conditioning chilled him, making his perspiration drop by several degrees and goosebumps break out on his skin when he entered the restaurant. Green talavera tiles covered the floor and the walls of the lobby. He nodded to the cashier out front, who assured him that he could seat himself anywhere.

Slim beat him to the punch. No surprise, there. Scott was everyone’s yes man. Always on time, never broke a promise, and he hated to disappoint anyone. Ever.

He grinned at him as he entered the patio, glad it was only cooled by shade. Scott was sweating as much as he was and smelled faintly of Coppertone. He was darkly tanned but as Logan guessed, his cheeks were already slightly ruddy. He’d already overdone it. Now he was overdone.

“You have the spare key card already, right?”

“Yeah.” Logan beckoned to the waiter, who barely looked old enough to drive. “What’s up?”

“I’m gonna be out late tonight.” Logan twisted his lips.

“Is that right.”

“Don’t wait up.”

“Dog.”

“One helluva lucky dog, too.”

“Name?”

“Carol. That’s what she told me it was, anyway.”

“Just make sure ya don’t wake up without yer wallet and passport.” They were interrupted by their server again, but this time it was a short and slightly rotund woman in dark red lipstick and snug black top, wearing her dark hair full and blown out. She set down Logan and Scott’s drinks, handed them a basket of freshly fried tortilla chips, and ambled off. Scott raised an eyebrow at Logan’s sweating bottle of Corona.

“What’d you get?” Logan handed over the sack. Scott pawed through it, peering inside. “Nice. Who’s it for?”

“My boss’ secretary. She made a big fuss over how she ain’t goin’ anywhere for Christmas this year except for visitin’ her in-laws. So I picked up a tidbit.”

“Looks like a girlfriend gift.”

“Nah. No strings attached.” And no headaches involved.

“She’ll probably like it.”
“Already got all the little crap I was lookin’ for. Few shot glasses, few post cards. Tee shirt for my kid sister.”

“Nice.” Scott downed half of his orange Jarritos, smothering a burp. He’d grown addicted to the sodas since they flew into the airport.

They weren’t hungry enough for anything on the main menu and eventually shared an appetizer of chicken flautas cut into medallions and served with sour cream and fresh guacamole.

The next hour found them perusing the beach one more time and taking a final dip. Logan cleaved his way toward the deep waves and flipped over onto his back. He floated wherever the water took him. It was a rare indulgence.

They returned to the hotel worn out, sandy and smelling like the surf. They took turns with the shower and dug into their traveling kits for shaving cream and hair gel. Logan didn’t even know what his plans were yet, but their motel wasn’t remarkable enough to tempt him to stay inside. The Pay-per-View choices were slim.

He slipped into lightweight linen slacks and another guayabera shirt, beige this time, and shoved his feet into his broken-in brown loafers. Scott chuckled as he scrunched a handful of gel into his unruly waves. Logan scowled at him in the mirror, then made the same face at himself as he tried to smooth his cowlick.

It didn’t help. He sighed, then forked his fingers through it, letting his hair fall wherever it felt like. There. Good enough.

“Going through a lot of trouble for a guy with no plans.”

“I’ve got plans. All they involve is goin’ out.”

“I’ll inform the local authorities.”

“Don’t wait up,” Logan tossed back, repeating Scott’s earlier injunction. Scott sighed as the door slammed behind him.

Logan was a grown-up, and he didn’t need Scott holding his hand when he crossed the street.

But he worried anyway. He’d grown so hard.

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The cantina was packed to the rafters. The music throbbed and drifted into the street. From what Logan could tell, the crowd was all-ages, so he wouldn’t be out of place. Good enough.

The drink menu was full of trendy crap and sweet shots that didn’t appeal to him. He was craving something with a bite. There were some tempting tequilas lined up behind the bar. Logan still wasn’t hungry for a big meal; the heat was killing his appetite despite the fantastic choices on every corner.

It was about an hour til dusk, but it was already happy hour. The tourists were easy to distinguish from the locals by the sunburns and clothes that didn’t quite fit the season. Logan finally settled on his usual Jack Daniels, neat.

He moved to the patio again, this one lined with potted palms. He found one of the only solitary
tables left. Something in his face and the set of his shoulders kept him alone, and he was thankful for it. For the moment.

Then again…

“This seat taken?” A voice straight out of a dirty phone call line interrupted his next sip. The Jack Daniels hovered millimeters shy of his lips. He traced its source, taking the long way up.

His eyes jerked slightly, slowly, taking her in one piece at a time.

Red. Garish, stark red. She wore it unapologetically, standing out from the “I look slimmer in this” black and white cotton that were the staples of every other woman in the room.

You could hardly call it a dress. All he could see were shoulders, the deep swell of her breasts and a glimpse of her taut belly once he got past her legs, and even that took him a while. They were a mile long, toned, tapered, and made for wrapping around a man’s waist.

She smiled indolently. Decadently. Like she had a secret.

“It is now.”

“I came out here to hear myself think,” she admitted as she began to pull up the chair. He knew courtesy required that he rise to do it for her, but she gave him a better view of her chest in the skimpy halter of her dress as she bent forward and sat down.

For five seconds, he could be discourteous. Why the fuck not?

“Ya here on a vacation?” Of course she was. He hated, HATED small talk, but he wanted to keep here there, instead of watching her traipse back to the bar, or worse, to the dance floor.

“What do you think?” Her reply mimicked his thoughts, but she was still smiling.

“Where ya from?”

“Here and there. I’m working on a contract in New York after New Year’s. First of the year sucks for new business.”

“No shit,” he agreed, not thinking to curb his language. She didn’t appear to mind.

“What’s your line of business?”

“Sales. You?”

“More power to you.” Her smile was different now. Admiring, but also self-deprecating.

“Underwriter.”

“Nice.’ He noticed her drink glass that she’d set down on the table when she arrived. Nearly empty.

“Drink?”

“Only if we can get it at the bar.”

“Why? Got a great table right here.” And it was. The view of the beach was spectacular.

“So we don’t have to wait a dog’s age to get another drink.” Fair enough. This time he rose first, rounding the table and offering her his hand.
Her fingers felt cool and soft, but she released him quickly. She felt the brief press of his palm at her lower back, beckoning her to precede him to the bar. Thankfully there was a second one set up outside. They could watch the sunset.

Anticipation and arousal mingled in his gut. Her perfume was heady and sharp with notes of ginger and sandalwood. It teased him when a breeze whipped her hair, sweeping it off her shoulders and revealing the long line of her neck.

Her hair was a blazing, startling white, a stark contrast to her skin, which was a deep cinnamon. He enjoyed watching the sway of her hips as she walked. He wasn’t the only one. She stood out easily, nearly parting the crowd as they passed. His knuckles itched at the calls of “Ay, mami!” as she leaned against the counter and caught the barkeep’s attention.

She ordered their drinks, asking for another of what they were already having. His body was already drawn to hers; he flanked her side, close enough for her hair to tickle him and cling to his shirt in the breeze.

“What’s your name?”

“Ya can call me Logan.”

“You can call me Tory.”

“That yer real name?” He had to be sure. He needed something to offer the cops in case she ripped him off, he supposed.

“I answer to Tory,” she shrugged. Her smile rose a notch. She toyed with the ice cubes in her glass, swirling them with her finger.

“It’s nice.”

“Thanks.” She eyed him over the rim as she took a sip. “How long are you here?”

“Another two days.”

“Back to the real world,” she mourned. He chuckled at her mock pout.

“If it were my world, this would be the real world. It’s gonna be hard ta tear myself away and hop back on a plane.”

“I think I want to come visit your world for a while, then.” They spoke in low tones to better hear themselves over the din of music and laughter.

“I’ll make ya a reservation, darlin’.” She was studying him, drinking him in. He felt naked under her gaze. “What?”

“You can make a wish.”

“Come again?” She smiled decadently, feeling he made it too easy, practically walking right into it. Is that an offer? Or a promise? He arched his brow and his own smile deepened half a notch.

He got the joke.

“Your little pendant.” Her fingertips were cool as they graze his flesh. Every cell in his body awoke sharply, aware of her closeness and light touch.
She fiddled idly with the sturdy gold chain, making it rasp his skin as she fed it around his neck. She watched his throat with great concentration as she fixed him. “When it’s on backwards, you make a wish.”

“Really? Hm,” he shrugged. She peered down at the small St. Christopher medal pursed between her finger and thumb. “Yer a woman of insight,” he challenged. “Tell me what I should wish for.”

“That’s not how it works,” she said.

“Tell me.” His fingertips traced an indolent path down the length of her hand until he ringed her wrist in his grasp. She shivered. His skin radiated heat, even before she touched him.

“You have to keep your wish to yourself or it won’t come true.” Her tone mocked him. “Like a wishbone. Or birthday candles.” She gently unfolded his fingers and turned his wrist face-up. She reached for a salt shaker and bowed her lips to his pulse. Her pink tongue flicked out to taste the taut vein before she sprinkled a few grains on it, seasoning him.

He grew hard. The sight of her tongue and its soft lapping at his skin was enough.

*Was it his birthday?*

“Eyelashes,” she mused, signaling the barkeep for another by raising her empty shot glass. “You let someone else blow away a loose one, if you have one.” The barkeep thunked down a full glass; it reflected the sunlight and the garish colors of the lounge’s décor. Moisture oozed down its sides as she ran her fingers over the rim. “Some girls like spinning an apple off its stem. One turn for each letter of the alphabet.”

“Some girls.” Absently he reached for a tiny wedge of lime from a tray shaped like a palm tree. “Not you?”

“Not my kind of wish.” She held up the shot, saluting him.

Logan never broke their gaze as he tucked the lime wedge between his teeth.

This time she bobbed her head and lapped up the salt, flattening her tongue for a thorough taste. She felt his body stiffen and tossed back the shot, savoring the burn. She only let go of his wrist long enough to fist her hand in the collar of his beach shirt. She brought the sharp sting of tequila to him, exchanging it for the tart morsel between his lips.

Beads of pulp punctured and exploded across his tongue as her even white teeth grazed his lower lip, slightly sunburned from his swim. She teased him, wresting the prize from him and sucking on him like he was an appetizer.

She was milking him.

Her tongue nimbly swept the wedge of lime from the recess of his mouth. “Mmmm. Mmnh.”

“Mmmph,” he replied on a low rumble. She reluctantly let him go, allowing him enough oxygen to come back to his senses.

*So help me…* She was holding the lime between her fingers, diligently draining its juice. She tossed the used-up tidbit onto her cocktail napkin.

“Thirsty?”
“I was.” She dipped into her canvas hobo bag and pulled out a twenty. His hand stopped her sliding it across the bar as the waitress approached. Logan fished out a couple of crumpled tens from his pocket and settled their tabs.

“Are ya finished?”

“Here,” she said, nodding to their surroundings. “But there’s a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m hungry.”

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They made it to another open market and Logan purchased a plate of soft tacos for them to share. They ate with their fingers, licking them clean of the spicy green tomatillo sauce.

“Where do you live, Logan?”

“Boston.”

“You’re headed back to snow.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Bet mine’s colder than yours.”

“Not on yer life!”

“Manhattan,” she announced.

“Is it so cold ya can’t inhale the air without wearin’ a muffler around half yer face?”

“Worse. It’s so cold you can’t talk without your tongue sticking to the roof of your mouth.”

“Pansy,” he teased. She poked him in the ribs.

“Look who’s talking. You’re here in the sweltering heat, like me.”

“Can ya blame me? Look at this place.” They were already walking back down the street toward the beach.

“I don’t want to leave,” she admitted. “Ever.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“It’s nice.”

“Mmm-hm.”

“I mean all this, but having someone to share it with.”

“Ya didn’t travel with anyone?”

“Nope. Just me, and all the voices in my head along for the trip.”
They reached the shore. Their shoes dangled from their fingers as they strolled across the sand. Their shoulders bumped until he took her hand in his.

He was so easy to be with. She rationalized that this was why she’d abandoned common sense and any control of her impulses.

She’d needed to get away from her life. A diversion. A time-out. She needed time to just “be.”

Whether he knew it or not, Logan fit the bill.

“Logan.” He let her gently tug him to a halt. She tossed her shoes onto the sand and reached for his face, cupping his jaw. His lips met hers halfway just as he crushed her to him.

His hands were firm around her waist, gripping them as she kissed him senseless. They exchanged breath and heat and want. Her arms twined around his neck, and she moaned with need when his hands roamed and slid down to her hips, grinding her against him. He was already erect and straining toward her softness through his linen pants.

They were out in the open and wearing too many clothes. Logan planned to remedy both problems in one shot.

“C’mon.”

They only scrambled back into their shoes when they reached the beach parking lot. He stole one more long, hungry kiss before they headed back into the street.

“Where are you staying?”

“La Playa resort on Mercado Street.”

“Mine’s three streets down,” he argued.

“Drive,” she ordered as they piled into his rental car. He was checking his mirrors and pulling into traffic as she turned off his radio, too keyed up to want the distraction of music. Traffic stopped at the second intersection; he cursed under his breath. Tory giggled. Her hand stroking his knee, squeezing it, consoled him slightly but made him more impatient to reach their destination.

“Ya don’t wanna do that right now,” he grated out.

“Oh, but I do.” Her hand was sliding south, her pinky nearly flicking the bulge rising between his legs.

“Jesus.” Traffic stopped again. He took advantage of it and lunged across the console, fisting his hand in her hair and kissing her roughly, sucking her lower lip. Tory purred in approval; he tasted hot and his lips were firm and demanding.

A car honked impatiently behind them. He broke away and drove. Her hand covered his over the gearshift. He wanted her to stroke him instead.

They attempted to walk calmly through the front lobby. Again, several sets of eyes followed her, but this time his hand at her waist was slightly possessive. They entered the elevator and waited breathlessly for the doors to shut.

He fell upon her, pressing her back into the corner as their hands groped and kneaded and tugged.

“Damn it, this is nuts!”
“Don’t stop. Please, just don’t stop.”

“Not on yer life. Taste so damned good, darlin’. I wanna eat ya up.” The chime dinged, and they came up for air long enough to make their exit. They reached his door, and Logan fumbled for his key card. His hands were shaking. She pressed her breasts against his back and teased his neck with her lips.

“Hurry.”

“Just gimme a sec…aw, God!” Her arms enfolded his waist and she stroked his taut abdomen, nipping at his ear. His knees practically buckled. He found the card and punched it into the slot, yanking it out. They fell inside, and he couldn’t wait. Not one second.

Logan kicked the door shut and extinguished the lights; the sunset provided a backdrop for the silhouette of their bodies as they came together. Their lips fused hungrily and they felt feverish as their fingers tore at each other’s clothes. He was impatient with the fastening of her dress; she reached up one-handed and he heard a snap. It pooled in a red puddle around her ankles, leaving her bare and lush except for a tiny, black pair of bikinis.

She was about to kick off her shoes. “Uh-uh. Leave ‘em on.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Hell, no. Leave ‘em on.” She was so sexy she made him hurt. She worked open three of his buttons before he yanked his shirt off over his head. Her hands played over the melody of solid muscles on his chest, raking her nails gently through the crisp layer of dark hair.

“I don’t care. Whatever you want. I want you.” Their hands fumbled and awkwardly for his buckle until she wrested his away and jerked it open, kissing him at his look of amused surprise. “Now. I don’t care how. Gimme!”

“Shit!” He nearly tripped over his pants, now down his knees. The air conditioning made his nipples pebble. Hers were already pouting and ripe, begging to be tasted. He embraced her, devouring her mouth. Her world felt tipped on its ear as he lifted her, arms locked around her waist, barreling them both against the wall.

“Logan—mmmph!” He hooked his hands behind her knees, hoisting her up and wrapping those long, tempting legs around his waist. She felt herself dip slightly as he jerked down his boxers. Logan’s mouth trailed hotly over her face as she clung to him for support, pressing her cheek against his pulse.

“Just tell me yer ready, darlin’. Please.” His cock slapped her thigh as it bobbed free. She ground herself against it instinctively; her pearl throbbed as it rubbed against him, testing his hardness.

“Now,” she hissed.

He didn’t bother taking off her underpants. Logan tugged aside the crotch, dipped his fingers inside and plunged her. She was wet, and enticingly hot. Her walls squeezed his fingers and promised ecstasy if he could only get inside…

He rubbed the head of his cock against her dewy flesh, slicking himself with it before he pressed himself inside.

“Jesus,” he prayed again. His second thrust sheathed him completely within her depths. Her eyes went wide, uncomprehending that he could make her feel that way, so full and stretched and
exposed.

He needed to fuck. His brain screamed at him to move, to possess her however he could. He needed to hear her cry his name and drain him. He wanted to smell her scent on his flesh when he woke up. But he didn’t want to wake up from this. It was the best dream he’d ever had.

“Ride me,” she rasped in his ear. She bit his neck. His hips bucked in response, and he obeyed her command.

They watched each other’s faces straining with need and desire as he rutted inside her. The wall was unyielding at her back but she didn’t care. Her heels bounced against his ass as he thrust in and out of her sweetness. She clutched handfuls of his gloriously thick, soft hair and possessed his mouth.

Before she could protest, he turned them, still engaged at the hip, and carried her to the bed. They tumbled down and were buffeted apart only long enough for her to back her way up the mattress, giving him room. She welcomed him back, and he entered her once more, this time harder and more easily with the new position.

The headboard banged against the wall as he slammed into her, creating friction and heat in her loins. Heat spread over her, making her breasts jiggle and tingle all the way down to the tips. He paused only long enough for his mouth latch onto one, groaning around her flesh. She tasted so good, like sun-warmed fruit. His tongue swiveled around it, enflaming her.

“Oh, God, Logan, please! Oh, God,” she prayed. They continued like that as the sky turned watercolor shades of orange and pink outside.

He needed to see her.

Logan reared back and grasped her legs, prying them farther apart. He pulled her ankles up so that her legs formed a wide ‘V’ while he kneeled upright, giving him a perfect vantage point to look his fill.

Her fingers dug into his thighs. He was banging into her harder, faster, deeper; the sight of her face straining with pleasure, chanting curses and his garbled name sped him toward completion.

“Tory!” he huffed. “Aw, God, Tory! So fuckin’ good, ya feel too good, yer gonna…make me-“ His words were cut off as he fell over the edge. His hips spasmed and she felt the swell and cramp of his dick as he erupted inside her.

Those final, fast jerks sent her hurtling after him. She gasped and sobbed his name over and over as her climax shook her.

He released her legs. They felt slightly cramped as she let them splay open, and he collapsed against her, spent. Her arms drifted around him, embracing him as though they’d done this before.

“Sorry,” he mumbled into her throat.

“Why?”

“That was faster than I wanted. I couldn’t wait.”

“You don’t hear me complaining?”

“I wanted ta touch ya and take my time with ya.”
“You can do that now.” He leaned up on his elbows and watched her. Tory’s smile was content and replete when she caressed his jaw.

“Might take ya up on that.” Her toes ran down the length of calf, once she kicked off her shoes.

And he did. They spent the rest of the night cuddling and touching between bouts of making love and dropping off to sleep.

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He tasted a remnant of whisky and salsa on his tongue when he woke up. He was slightly stiff from sleeping in odd positions, and he groaned at the brisk click of the door.

“Wakey, wakey, sport,” Scott crowed cheerfully. He made a face at the tangled covers and scattered clothes. “Wow. Rough night?”

“Mmmmph.”

“Rough night,” Scott declared.

Tory.

Logan bolted awake. “Shit! Shit, shit, shit!” He jerked himself up and bunched the covers over his lower half, searching the room. “Where is she?” Logan hoped she was decent.

“Who?”

“I had company.” He didn’t hear the shower running or smell shampoo.

“‘Had’ company is right. Looks like she skeddadled.” Logan squinted at the floor.

Only his clothes and shoes. No purse or high heels. He rubbed his face, then grimaced at his throbbing temples. That would teach him to mix.

“Shit.”
“Damn. That good?”

She had to be out of her mind. Or the real Ororo had been kidnapped by pod people. There was no other explanation for the night before.

She hadn’t even kissed him goodbye.

The enormity of what she’d done sank in as soon as she woke up. She stifled her own moan of exhaustion when she felt something solid moving beneath her cheek.

_Logan._

He was solid and warm, and his arm currently pinned her against his side. Hot breath steamed her temple, stirring the tendrils of her hair. He smelled faintly of whiskey.

Panic gripped her, speeding her pulse. She had to go. Now.

She gradually eased her way out from his embrace – reluctantly, since he felt so good, like cuddling a teddy bear – and crept out of the bed. He was out like a light, his sonorous breathing nearly a snore.

She watched him flip onto his back, flinging his arm over his head. The movement made him look so vulnerable, so peaceful, that she nearly changed her mind.

He wasn’t conventionally handsome, but he was memorable. His body was beautifully sculpted and sturdy. He was hairy and very male, and she was transfixed by the deep rise and fall of his chest. His abdomen was a washboard of muscle, marred only by what looked like an appendix scar. His skin was tanned; she could tell he was probably olive-toned rather than fair without that much time in the sun.

His brows drew together before he rolled to his side. His hand seemed to be searching the sheets. That launched her back into action. She fumbled into her dress and caught her shoes and purse in her hand. She could have sworn she heard him murmur her name in his sleep as she gently eased the door open and fled.

She had no idea what she would have said to him. Thanks? I’ll call you? Look me up the next time you’re in Queens?

Her way was the best way. When he woke up, he’d be grateful to her for making it easier on them both. Sure. Sure he would.

She’d loved _Fear of Flying_ when she read it in college. To quote Isadora, Logan was her “zipless fuck.” No commitments. No back story or excuses. No reasoning why it had happened or assuming it would lead to anything else.

Her vacation was the beginning of her promise to herself that she’d never again lose herself.
She popped a piece of Wrigley’s into her mouth and started reading her Nora Roberts book before the plane reached full altitude. Her head throbbed. She dug into her bag for some Motrin. And that was that.

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Hair of the dog, Logan assured himself, would get him through this. Man, he hated flying.

“Your funeral,” Scott shrugged as he watched Logan gulp down the Bloody Mary. He leaned back and closed his eyes miserably. He felt like shit.

“Don’t lecture me, Summers.”

“They won’t let you on the connecting flight if you drink too many of those.”

“One’s all I need.” Truth be told? Logan needed anesthesia. This was the closest he was gonna get til they reached the terminal at Logan Airport. Yeah, he mused; hearing people tell him “So Logan, are you flying out of Logan? Are they gonna fly you first class, since they named the airport after you?” didn’t get old…

He pored through his Elmore Leonard novel that he’d picked up at the airport gift shop, but the words blurred in front of his eyes ten chapters in. Once they were cruising over the Atlantic coast, Scott booted up his laptop. Logan abandoned him for a nap. He woke up with a crick in his neck once the plane skidded against the runway.

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“Girl…mmmh. I don’t know what to do with you when you get yourself into this shit.”

“Just don’t take blackmail pictures or record it to put my nekkid behind on YouTube,” Ororo suggested. Monica’s lips twisted and she narrowed her eyes.

“He was a complete stranger. He could have been a psychopath. He coulda given ya AIDS or STD’s or fleas, for Heaven’s sake…”

“Lice. Not fleas.”

“Don’t sass me, baby girl.” Monica was getting worked up and talking out of her neck, hands on her hips. “Might as well tell me the rest.”

“Rest of what?”

“Listen to you. Did he have skills? How was it?”

“Good Lord.” Ororo fanned herself.

“Damn. That good?”

“Oh. Monica. I can’t even begin to…” Her phone jangled from the kitchen. She sprinted to pick it up but decided on the lazy man’s way, hitting the speaker button.

“Tory!” It was her boss, Selene. Ororo sighed. Back to reality. Heifer couldn’t just wait til she got
back to the office in twenty-four hours. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

“What’s going on?” Nice of her control freak manager to ask her how she was or how she liked her trip. No “So glad your plane didn’t go up in flames on the way home” from Selene Gallio.

“So I was just calling to let you know that there was a change in that AMT meeting with OptforWellth.”

“What did they change?”

“Everything. Different facilitator, different time, different day. Jean’s sending out the revised announcement to the routing list.”

“So when is it?”

“Tomorrow at eight AM.”

Ororo stifled an “aw, hell, no!” and made a face at Monica, who leaned back into her couch rolling her eyes. Ororo made gagging motions with her hands, pretending to stick one down her throat.

She’d no sooner unlocked her door, checked her mail and begun unpacking before the woman expected her to be into work with bells on, jumping through hoops.

“I need the demographics for the Shake ‘n’ Take account. They changed their effective date.”

“They signed already for 1/1.”

“They want to add a flexible spending account effective April first.”

“Shit…” Selene tsked; Ororo could almost see her on the other end of the line, shaking her head at her choice of words. Hey, Ororo figured, technically she was still at home. She could say whatever she darn well pleased. Selene wasn’t going to turn a random phone call into a meeting.

“We’ll just have to buckle down this week. And every week until we get the workload down to size.”

“No doubt.”

“See you at the meeting,” Selene trilled. “Oh, and go ahead and save the rate sheet as an attachment in the database so we can get to it.” Ororo sighed.

“I’ll update the numbers –“

“No. Oh, no. We’re not amending their rates for the renewal. It was a condition of their agreement not to charge them more for adding the spending account.”

“Good enough for me.” Less work in the long run, she hoped.

“Hope you had a nice vacation,” Selene pronounced. That didn’t bode well. She hung up without any further ado. Ororo clicked the handset off and proceeded to bang it against her forehead. Monica laughed.

“A’ight. I wanna hear more about this man. What does he do?”

“He said sales.”
“Mm-hm. Likely story. He could be a checker at Target for all you know.”

“He was well dressed. Had on a nice watch.”

“An ex could’ve given it to him.”

“Said he lives in Boston.”

“Eh. Still too far away to bother with anything long distance.”

“I don’t want anything long distance. I didn’t leave him my information. I beat feet.”

“Damn, girl.”

“I’m not gonna have a ‘pen pal’ who’s supposedly the love of my life after one date.”

“Speaking of which…”

“He already gave me back my key. Saved me having the locks changed.” Monica bit back an “I told you so” and began removing items from Ororo’s carryall, dropping them into a small laundry basket. What else were friends like Monica Rambeau for, if not to help her unload her baggage?

“Anyway, what’d you bring me? Kick down,” she reminded her. Ororo’s face lit up.

“Ooooh. Yeah. Hold up, hold up…” She nudged Monica aside and rummaged through a tiny pocket inside the bag and pulled out a tiny paper one. She uncrumpled it and handed her a small box inside. Monica flipped open and cackled.

“Girl, I love this!” It was a ceramic tile fired and glazed with dancing skeletons and inscribed with “Dia de Los Muertos.” She clucked her tongue and held it up for a better look. “I’m gonna add this to my house number plaque out front.”

“When do you close escrow?”

“Next week.”

“Better warm up that gas grill.”

“Luke’s already got a propane tank and some of those extra long barbecue tongs. He’s more than ready.”

“I can’t wait. I can’t wait to see everything when you two get moved in.”

“You and me both. Seriously. My neighbors are driving me nuts. Nuts, I tell you. They were out front acting ghetto in the parking lot at nine in the morning on Sunday.”

“Mmph. What now?” Ororo rolled her eyes.

“Ya don’t wanna know.”

“Lay it on me.”

“She screamed at him that he farted.” After a pause, Ororo’s shoulders shook and she face-palmed. “You heard me.”

“Say it ain’t so.”
“The whole building heard those two fools. Back and forth about no he didn’t, and she was a psycho, and he was a pig, and why didn’t she just light a match…”

“That’s just wrong.”

They chatted over a snack in Ororo’s kitchen; naturally, Monica came bearing gifts in the form of Subway sandwiches. Ororo didn’t cook. Not even under penalty of death.

Her mother would be turning over in her grave at the contents of her refrigerator. N’Dare Munroe was a born homemaker from the jump. Griller of cheese sandwiches, folder of hospital bed corners, hostess of Mary Kay parties. Ororo shunned her legacy, majored in business at BU, denounced commitment and never looked back.

Ororo fished out some bottled water and poured it into two red plastic cups from her last house party. Monica glanced over her shoulder at the mostly bare shelves inside the fridge and tsked. She saw expired yogurt, a bag of dried-up broccoli and a bottle of ketchup that had been in the door since the first Bush administration. Of the first Bush.

“That’s pitiful.”

“Hey, whaddya want. I was out of town.”

“Not for a whole year.”

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do with you.”

“Love me and my dirty drawers.”

“Uh, no. Not those…” Monica tossed a bit of provolone cheese into her mouth and swigged some of the water.

A while later Ororo’s washing machine was rumbling away in the background when Monica stood to go.

“Listen up. Call me. Stevie’s having one of her Pampered Chef parties.”

“Girl, please.”

“Just go to see Stevie. Waste money on something cute like one of those little oil spritzers. Or a can opener. You open cans. Sometimes. Kinda.”

“Hmmph.”

“Humor me. She’d love to see you.”

“I’ll think about it.” She’d probably go. She didn’t have anything else to do, and, obviously, it was Stevie. She loved Stevie, Avon catalogs, Partylite candles, scrapbooks and all.

It reminded her so much of Mama.
Messages

Chapter Summary

He almost didn’t know why he cared. She made it loud and clear by her hasty exit that they were done. Hoping for anything else was a pipe dream Logan wouldn’t entertain.

Logan juggled his carryon bag with his camera case as he boarded the escalator, hating the “off-balance” feel from being in a plane for so many hours. His legs were cramped and his foot had that prickly feeling from falling asleep.

“Papa Gino’s?” Scott inquired.

“Yup.”

They managed to stop at one on their way to the subway tunnel for the Red Line. Logan wolfed down a thick slice of sausage and olive pizza, folding it in half to catch the drippings before they could land on his favorite coat. The freezing air bit into them as soon as they stepped outside.

Good morning, Boston.

The odors of the subway assaulted his nose; that much he hadn’t missed, but it was so much more convenient than taking a car. Logan and Scott boarded their train and sped past stop after stop, plunged into darkness each time they hit an unlit segment of the tunnels. Scott wasn’t particularly chatty after keeping his friend a captive audience on the plane, so at least Logan could be alone with his thoughts.

She said she was from New York. Manhattan. She was an underwriter.

He almost didn’t know why he cared. She made it loud and clear by her hasty exit that they were done. Hoping for anything else was a pipe dream Logan wouldn’t entertain. She left him with another nice memory of his vacation. End of story.

He didn’t even know if Tory was her real name. She at least looked like a Tory, he mused.

They emerged from the tunnel and parted ways at the bus stop; Scott was headed back to his overpriced apartment in Cambridge. It was only four o’clock, and the sky above them was already changing from pearl gray to oppressive black. Logan was already settling back into the doldrums, but he was still relieved to be home.

“Give me a call to let me know you got home all right.”

“Whaddya think? We came all this way without a hitch, and someone’s gonna snatch me off the street before I make it another mile home?”

“Humor me,” Scott nagged before clapping him on the back. He waved back as he disappeared onto the bus. Logan waited in the glassed-in shelter for the next one headed south, watching a drizzle of rain hit the panes.

The bus’ smell wasn’t much of an improvement from the subway. The various street lights and neon
signs looming in the dark as they rode past hypnotized him, making him drowsy. He nearly missed his stop but jerked the window cord just in time. The driver looked annoyed as he peered back into his large rearview mirror. Logan stumbled off the bus through the rear exit and dodged the rain as he ran down those last several blocks toward his home.

His first stop was his mailbox. It was stuffed full of bills and junk mail, and there was a small yellow slip stating “Sorry We Missed You” from the post office. He wasn’t expecting a package.

Logan stomped his feet on the welcome mat outside his door to beat off the dirty slush from his boots. As soon as he unlocked his door, the smell of his unaired apartment wrapped around him but confirmed that he was home.

Minutes later, the heat was turned on and his cold toes were beginning to thaw, stuffed into clean wool socks. He opened every letter, whether it looked like junk or not, and laid them into separate stacks. His kitchen was meticulously clean, at odds with his upbringing. His mother kept a shamefully messy house. Despite an exhaustive trip home, Logan’s insomnia claimed him, giving him his second wind.

His voice mails were next.

Beep. “You didn’t call me. I’ll assume you were abducted by aliens or that you fell asleep. I’m putting out an APB if you’re not at the meeting.” Friggin’ Summers…

Beep. “Logan, it’s Sara. Call me. Let me know if you got the box.”

Logan’s stomach twisted as soon as he heard her voice. He eyed the yellow slip on the table and picked it up. From the date, they tried to reach him yesterday. Sara must have forgotten his itinerary and when he’d be back. He took the slip and tacked it up on his bulletin board by the refrigerator.

He felt numb. That hadn’t changed.

Beep. “It’s John. Thought I’d call and talk. You left me a message. Catch you later.” Logan sighed and sank into his chair, brooding. He scrubbed his face with his palms. Why?

The rest of the calls were hang-ups, no doubt telemarketers who missed him at home; his caller ID blinked “Unknown Caller” as he toggled through the numbers, deleting them one by one. That left his email.

He didn’t even bother flicking on his bedroom light as he booted up his desktop, bringing his cocoa with him. His Dilbert screensaver blinked on and his PC made weird cranking noises; he either needed more memory or a new friggin’ computer. Either option made his wallet ache.

His Google inbox wasn’t that full. There were about a half a dozen “FW:” emails from Scott’s brother Alex. He scanned the subject lines and deleted them without opening them. His Classmates subscription was almost up; Logan contemplated canceling it, since he hadn’t found anyone he knew from school after having it for over a year. His cable bill was due. His phone bill was due.

John sent him some attachments, big ones from the size indicated in the message index. His PC made more grinding noises as it tried to download the files.

Thought you might like a copy of these. I can send more of the ones that I have, once I scan ‘em.

John

His screen flashed, then expanded, revealing a large image a few centimeters at a time.
His breath caught as his mother’s eyes came into view. Then her smile. It was his smile, or so he’d been told. And it was rare.

He leaned back in his chair and released a long, shaky breath, bowing his face and rubbing the bridge of his nose.
Meetings

Chapter Summary

“You leave first. Be discreet.”

“Yer better at making speedy exits than I am.”

She looked nonplussed. “Men like you invented them.”

“Can we have a quick head count?”

“Why don’t I just start?”

“That’s fine.”

“This is Selene Gallio, calling in from our branch here in Manhattan.”

Ororo took that as her cue and spoke into the air, as always feeling silly sitting next to the large conferencing phone. It looked like something out of Star Trek Voyager, and the volume button almost never worked properly.

“Good afternoon, this is Tory, Tory Munroe, here with Selene.”

“Your title, give them your title,” Selene hissed under her breath. Ororo smothered a sigh.

“I’m underwriting this account,” she offered. She was met by a tinny chorus of hello’s on the other end.

“Is it Tory, or Ororo?” a male voice inquired that didn’t sound familiar to her ears.

“I answer to Tory,” she elaborated. Selene nodded in agreement and smiled, even though the other meeting participants couldn’t see it.

“Glad to have you aboard, Tory! This is Scott, Scott Summers. I’m handling the ancillaries on this account.”

“Great!”

“We didn’t expect them to purchase dental and life on their renewal.”

“We’re still trying to pitch them our vision package.”

“Good luck on that,” Betsy chimed in. She was calling in from the regulatory department on short notice after sifting through strings of emailed dialogue regarding mandated requirements. Ororo thanked God that New York wasn’t a “white space” state for their carrier. Shake’n’Take liked OptforWellth’s preferred plans with very few tweaks.

“Has legal already approved the new shell?”

“They have for the policy. Still waiting on the booklet,” Betsy admitted with a sigh.
“When will we have the client on the line?” Selene whispered. Ororo thoughtfully put their phone on mute.

“They said they’re calling in late. I’m waiting on an email from their admin.” Ororo’s stomach was already in knots, and she abandoned her half-finished coffee.

“Wish they’d get on with it, then,” Selene grumbled. “If they’re paying us enough money, I guess they expect us to wait all day.”

Ororo smothered a laugh; Selene came up with about three different errands she needed Ororo to do at the last minute, including bringing along a jump drive with all of the meeting attachments in case anyone was on their laptop and didn’t have access to the database, coffee (which she could barely drink, thanks to her nerves), and placing the lunch reservations for fifteen people. Pot calling the kettle black? Definitely.

And black was her signature color. Selene wore it like she meant it, all except for her French-manicured nails and mean slash of red lipstick. She was a striking woman, classically beautiful, but she had hard eyes that chilled a man to the bone. Her long ripple of black hair was held back from her face with a tortoiseshell barrette, emphasizing the slant of her eyes and sharp cheekbones.

Selene trusted few people, a trait that had taken her far and cost her few failures. Ororo was her right hand; Ororo made a point of staying one step ahead of her expectations to avoid being her scapegoat.

Ororo had certainly dealt with worse account managers than Selene Gallio. Few, granted. But worse.

Ororo was one hell of an underwriter, but she’d never have answered that was what she wanted to be when she grew up. She merely lived by the numbers. Literally.

Her mother knew at least ten recipes that involved hot dogs. They’d been a staple in the Munroe household as long as she could remember, because they were cheap. David and N’Dare were dirt poor for several years before her father’s ship finally came in as a broadcast journalist.

Until then, school was miserable.

Ororo Victoria Munroe was the only ten-year-old on the planet who hated recess. She lingered beneath a tall oak right inside the fence, doodling on scraps of paper she’d stuffed into her pockets on the way to lunch. Stevie and Monica were in a different lunch group; she wouldn’t see hide nor hair of them until they walked home from school.

In the meantime, she had to deal with the Cuckoos.

They called themselves the Queens, but Ororo came up with her own moniker after her teacher showed them a nature film about the birds who hijacked nests they didn’t build themselves.

Emma, Esme, Sophie, Mindee, Phoebe and Celeste all acted, looked, dressed and sounded so much alike that they were interchangeable. Emma Frost was their appointed sovereign and mouthpiece. None of them attacked their chosen target first, opting instead to scope out their prey for the weakest member of the pack.

Emma determined which day of the week they wore pink socks and ribboned barrettes. She went first at every game of hopscotch and stopped the tetherball mid-spin whenever she deemed a do-over. She named any girl on the playground who couldn’t do a back handspring a queer, and heaven help any of them who tried to defend themselves.

They took one look at Ororo’s clothes her mother bought her from the clearance rack of Sears and
had a field day.

So Ororo became obsessed with having enough money. Not lots of money, enough money. She hoarded pocket change and looked for pennies between the couch cushions. Stray nickels were harvested from the cupholders in her father’s battered Dodge station wagon. She dumped all of the loot into a change jar her mother kept in the cupboard with the salad bowls, enjoying the clink that sounded less hollow each time she made a deposit.

She mentally added sales tax for every dollar she spent at the five and dime. She was the one who split up the bill each time she, Stevie and Monica went to Friendly’s for a single scoop. Ororo believed strongly in layaway to buy her own school clothes from what she earned at her summer job every year. She counted out her cash down to the last penny and carried those boxes home under arm proudly, receipt tucked into her pocket.

By ninth grade, the Cuckoos grew bored with Ororo and moved on to Anna Marie Darkholme and her eczema that was so bad, no one wanted to touch her. Anna was relatively wealthy but still managed to be an underdog; rumors flew around the school about her mother, who was inexplicably single. No one knew whether she was widowed or divorced, since no one had ever seen a Mr. Darkholme at school functions or at the Stop and Shop. She was intrigued by Ororo, who was pretty in her own unique way, smart, funny, and wouldn’t hurt a fly. Literally. Ororo was the kind of girl who would catch a spider in a napkin and gently toss it back outside where it belonged.

Anna always offered to pay their way; Ororo always refused. They went to the mall once or twice a month, where Ororo would count out her pocket change and get herself an Orange Julius and Anna would buy a chili dog. They’d people watch and duck whenever a cute boy caught them staring and dared to stare back. They were thick as thieves.

In short, Ororo never wanted to depend on anyone to give her what she felt responsible to acquire for herself.

The Cuckoos did their level best to steal away any prospective friends who made any overtures of good will, but as high school progressed, people made up their own minds. They knew a fake when they saw one, and Emma’s glossy good looks were no match for her vicious tongue.

For Ororo, the best revenge was living well. The Cuckoos ended up as trophy wives to cheating husbands the last time she’d seen any of them at her high school reunion. Ororo silently laughed her way to the bank.

Her reverie was broken by an abrupt greeting on the other end of the call.

“‘We were afraid we’d missed you,’” Scott told someone in the background.

“‘Got caught up in traffic, bus got stuck in road construction.’” The new arrival had a gruff voice that was unabashedly male and unapologetic. And why should he be? He got stuck in traffic, she mused.

Something about his voice sounded…yummy.

“‘Ororo, Selene, I’ve got our broker here right now, looking a little the worse for wear…introduce yourself to the nice ladies,’” he chuckled.

“‘Hey. I’m James, James Howlett. Might’ve seen my name in a few email strings.’”

“‘They all run together after a while,’” Ororo admitted. “‘But it was nice of you to join us today.’”

“‘You too. Welcome aboard.’” Ororo and Selene were both pleased.
They discussed the transactions while Ororo had them open the attachments onscreen to review rates.

“So where’s the set of rates for the renewal? For the COBRA members?” she heard James ask, inadvertently interrupting Selene.

“They’re in the second sheet,” Ororo told him. She heard him rifling pages in the background, wondering why.

“That’s not what’s in the hard copy. I have the copy that the client got from me at time of sale. It’s the set they signed on.”

“What day did you get the signatures?” Selene barked. Ororo scowled and started swirling her remaining coffee in its to-go cup.

“On the first, exactly thirty days prior to their effective date. It was a clean sale.”

“I’m not arguing that it was,” Selene told him gently, but Ororo caught the brief flare of her nostrils and wanted to tell the guy on the other end, “Look, Chuckles, RUN!”

“We did this sale by the book. The rates were supposed to be locked in for twelve months for the products sold, health plans and ancillary.”

“Yes, but they have COBRA,” Ororo interjected. The guy was working her last nerve. “COBRA and Retirees.”

“I realize that.” His voice took on a certain “I know you are, but what am I?” edge that made her teeth grind. “What I’m looking for is a breakdown of their rates that the client can see up front, easily indicated, showing the premiums their COBRA and retired lives can expect to pay.”

“Like in yellow highlighter pen?” Ororo muttered under her breath. Selene scowled and put the phone on mute while Ororo fiddled with the laptop.

She took over the web conference, mousing over the attachments and pulling down file menus as she spoke.

“Look. Here are the COBRA numbers. Here are the retirees. This will be spelled out on the group policy and labeled pretty clearly when we send this to Contracts. Was that what you had in mind?”

“Pretty much.” She was about to sigh in relief until he said “Make sure we do this on the other plans, too.”

“Wait…”

“Dental, vision and life. All of the rates need the same breakdown for those demographics and corresponding language in the booklets.”

“Fine,” Selene announced, restoring their end of the connection. Ororo fumed. Fine, then.

The rest of the meeting ran into similar stops and starts. Scott ended up being Ororo’s favorite, placating Selene whenever his colleague played devil’s advocate.

“So you’ll send out new attachments to reflect the rate corrections?” Ororo was interrupted from her stewing.

“I save them on the shared drive.”
“Emailing them leaves a paper trail with a date when you changed them.”

“People hate email clogging up their inboxes.”

“I have hundreds of messages in mine,” Selene added with a roll of her eyes. She tapped one long, French-manicured nail against her Blackberry. The noise was driving Ororo nuts, but what was one more thing?

“Some of us work remotely more often than in-house,” James informed them curtly. “You can imagine the life of a broker.”

“I can imagine,” Ororo admitted dryly.

On the other end of the line, Logan clenched his fist in his lap and pounded back a double latte, wiping the corners of his mouth with his fingers. What was up with this chick? Geez…

…and what was it about her voice?

If she wasn’t busy working him over, it would have been a nice voice. Deep, throaty and smooth, a low alto, the kind of voice made for laughing until you were breathless. Her inflections were familiar, definitely an east coast girl, but not necessarily by birth?

The day hadn’t started any better than this meeting, even before he got out the door. Logan’s stomach was growling, but aggravation distracted him from the fact that he’d burned his bagel beyond recognition before having to dart out the door. He’d splashed through a puddle of filthy slush, leaving his ankle freezing cold and sopped; a quick stop to wipe down his shoes showed him that he’d left the Residence Inn wearing mismatched socks. For fuck’s sake…

Why?

Logan mustered as much patience as he could, taking his cue from Summers’ wary look across the table. “It’d be nice to have a paper trail to add to the client’s hard file, just to cover our collective backside? Just a thought.”

Ororo sighed. The client’s hard file was already three inches thick. Thank goodness the benefit booklets were electronic, thanks to OptforWellth’s “paperless” delivery of the plan documents. It saved postage, it saved a tree, and typos or plan omissions could be fixed in the .pdf files with the click of a mouse. Hooray for technology.

“Not a problem. I’ll get that to you as soon as I’m back at my desk.” Ororo wasn’t going to fiddle with it in the middle of the meeting, even if she was on her laptop. She hated the sound of other people “multi-tasking” in the background; it was hard enough to keep her own fingers away from her cell when it started vibrating in her pocket, promising more voice mail to answer between emails.

“So this should be pretty straightforward, then?” Selene encouraged. “We sold preferred products? No need for legal input at this point?”

“The client gets thirty days to review. No comments from them means we go to press,” Scott assured her. Ororo thought he sounded like a Boy Scout. Bless his heart.

“All right,” Selene chirped, perky as the Good Witch of the North. “Sounds great. I promise that shop talk’s a no-no once we get to the brewery. Everybody put their calls on forward.”

“You might as well ask us to chew off our right hands,” Scott chuckled. There was a wave of quiet laughter in the background behind them. Ororo shook her head. She decided she could actually eat.
Selene drove them to the restaurant; no surprise there. Ororo was grateful, despite the line of cars backed around the block with noon traffic. Selene’s car, a slick, black Porsche, rode smooth as butter, and her stereo filled the interior with bland classical music that soothed both women’s nerves.

They bundled into the front lobby, and Ororo breathlessly gave the hostess their name.

“Party of fifteen, reserved for Gallio?” Ororo informed her. The hostess smiled.

“A few of your party have already showed up. This way.”

Ororo and Selene were similarly dressed in business black, but Ororo wore a snug periwinkle blue sweater beneath her blazer instead of the gleaming white silk blouse Selene favored. She wore her hair in a simple French braid that reached halfway down her back; soft tendrils framed her face and made her look more approachable than her boss.

Two rectangular tables were already set end to end. A handful of people in beige and gray work gear were divesting themselves of heavy coats and finding seats. Ororo’s smile was already safely in place as Selene hurried forward and began making introductions.

“It’s good to put faces behind names! I’m Selene Gallio, your account manager!” Ororo sighed under her breath at the look of awe they wore when they met the attractive yet intimidating woman and shook her hand. Even during warm weather, Selene’s hands were cold as ice.

They eyed Ororo carefully, measuring her before making their hellos. Ororo’s “nice to meet you, glad you made it” speech was automatic and easily repeated each time one of them pumped her hand off.

She’d already figured the tall guy with the well-cut brown hair and perfect teeth was Scott Summers. He was as nice as he sounded on the phone.

“Great restaurant you picked out, Ororo. Even the bathrooms are nice!” he boasted. Ororo laughed.

“We aim to please.” The table started to fill up. “Who are we missing?”

“Donald, our implementation rep.”

“Donald who?”

“Pierce.”

“Ah.”

“He’ll be running the demographics so we can send out the welcome letter to the members next week.”

“Then he’s my hero.”


“Is he a member of the account management team for this client?”

“No. He’s the broker.”

“We spoke to the broker at the meeting about the rates,” Ororo argued. “He introduced himself as James.”
“He does the same thing you do, sometimes he goes by his middle name with people he talks to on the phone, but he uses his first name on his emails. And he’s over there at the bar. I told him we were going to take drink orders once everyone got there, but he wanted a soda.” Scott pointed toward the long bar. The only person Ororo saw there had his back turned to them.

What a back it was. He was shorter than she was, built like a linebacker, and filled out his dark brown suit like a Hugo Boss model. She saw him raise one beefy hand as he beckoned to the server and heard his low voice ordering a Dr. Pepper.

His dark hair was thick and slightly ruffled by the wind outside, but he had a decent barber. Ororo enjoyed drinking in little details about him, like the no-nonsense silver watch he wore and the shape of his ears.

“A soda sounds too cold right now, I want something to warm me up.”

“Coffee?” Scott offered. “I could order it for you if you’re not ready to sit down?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Had my fill during the meeting.” Scott grinned.

“My blood type’s espresso. How about tea?”

“Herbal, if they have it,” she nodded, pleased. He gave her arm a light squeeze and returned to the table as Ororo drifted to the bar.

The clamor of patrons and the clinking of glasses and silverware made it difficult to hear her own voice as she greeted him. “Hi. Scott told me you handled the sale.”

“Pardon?” he muttered as he set down the glass and turned to face his visitor.

He turned. She swallowed. Time stood still.

His eyes dilated and she caught the slight flare of his nostrils as his eyes roamed her face, then the rest of her. Disbelief and shock lingered between them as Ororo licked her lips. His eyes jerked toward her mouth with that gesture. Her stomach flipped.

“Better come sit down, it’s like playing musical chairs! C’mon, Logan, some of us want to eat!” Scott turned to Ororo. “Ororo, I went ahead and ordered your tea.”

“Thanks,” she murmured weakly, sparing him the briefest of glances before he left.

Her body’s response was immediate. She wanted, no, craved a chance to touch him, or to lean in and breathe in his scent. Did he still wear the same cologne?

He radiated heat and masculinity that made her cheeks flush.

“Tory?” he whispered.

“Oh, God.” She didn’t recognize her own voice.

Her hand rose to shake his hand. It was instinctive. It would have been bad form if she hadn’t after all the greetings she’d offered a few minutes ago.

He looked confused.

“It’s…nice to meet you, James. I-I’m…”
He didn’t let her finish. He took her hand with his left, curling her fingers around it and tugging her stiffly after him. She nearly stumbled as they made their way out of the main lounge.

What the heck just happened? her sense of reason screamed.

Heck if I know.

Behind them, Selene peered around the lounge, frowning. “Where did Tory go?”

“Tory?” Scott asked.

“Tory. Tory Munroe, our underwriter.”

“Oh, right! I’ve been calling her by Ororo. I figured that was her name?”

“Her middle name is Victoria. I’m horrible with names, so I get to call her Tory.” Selene announced this like it was a special privilege.

“I love her autosignature in her messages! No one else uses purple font. It’s cute.” Selene sniffed. She didn’t find it impressive. Scott pondered what she’d said.

Why was the name Tory familiar to him?

For that matter, where did she go? Where the heck was Logan?? His soda was sweating forgotten on the bar.

He wasn’t here. She wasn’t here. That wasn’t her hand, smooth and cool, gripped in his. “What are you doing, where are we going, what…”?

“Wait,” he hissed. They hurried down the short corridor toward the rest rooms. Ororo heard hand dryers coming from the men’s.

Is he out of his mind? He knocked on the door to the women’s and jerked open the handle. Before she could point out the obvious, he’d pulled her inside after him. She felt flutters of excitement and her pulse speed up when he punched the tiny lock in the knob.

He looked determined as he faced her. “C’mere.”

“Wait…”

Her world turned itself inside-out when he pulled her against his broad, hard chest and crushed her mouth beneath his.

Good night… She tasted his soda and a remnant of coffee on his lips as she leaned into the kiss, following the smooth, slow slant of his mouth and the velvety stroke of his tongue. Logan swallowed the low, desperate sounds she made as they shared breath and heat. In the back of his mind he remembered her throaty laughter and the sunset, her wicked red dress puddle on the floor and high-heeled sandals bouncing against his back.

His body confirmed that yes, this was Tory. Despite the tweedy blazer whose button gave way easily enough beneath his searching fingers, she felt like her. She smelled like her, and she definitely tasted like her.

They stumbled back into she collided with the hand dryer. They inadvertently punched the ‘on’ button, but its low, steamy roar didn’t distract them from need.
“Logan,” she whimpered as his lips trailed hotly over her face, tasting her.

“God, Tory, oh God,” he rasped into her ear as he suckled it. Her hands were greedy, kneading and caressing his back through the blazer and curling into his hair, so thick and satisfying to clutch.

His fingertips feathered over her abdomen, tracing her ribs once he freed her sweater from the waistband of her black skirt. She stole greedy kisses from him and toyed with the collar of his shirt. He groaned when she found his neck and lapped at his pulse.

Something cool and rough got in her way.

She stared with hazy blue eyes at the gold chain. The clasp was visible beside the St. Christopher medal.

“You can still make a wish,” she murmured. He looked confused for a moment, then shook his head.

“Maybe I don’t need to, darlin’,” he told her, and she felt a rush of want run through her body at his knowing stroke of her breast through the satin of her bra.

This is crazy. She didn’t want to stop. She didn’t want him to stop.

Similar questions were running through his own mind.

Why did she leave the hotel so abruptly? It was a one-nighter, he’d gotten the memo, but still…?

Ororo. Scott had introduced her as Ororo. Then who the hell was Tory?

She was bereft and surprised as he lowered the hem of her sweater and gently released her.

“Logan?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, mastering his thoughts and catching his breath. He eyed her over his shoulder while he straightened his collar. His hair was a lost cause, but he didn’t care. “Yer Tory.”

“Yeah.”

“But yer Ororo.” Her look said “get on with it, already.”

“Sure. Ororo Munroe.”

“Ya work fer OptforWellth. As an underwriter.”

“As the underwriter for the Shake ‘n’ Take account.”

It dawned on him slowly, like a late morning hangover.

Weeks. He’d spent weeks talking to her back and forth in his email strings about business. Never a phone call until today. He’d had her location and last name for weeks. Known how she worked and communicated.

What made it worse was that she was the control freak, stick-up-her-ass underwriter who’d rained on his parade throughout the client’s implementation from the moment they signed on the dotted line.

“We’re gonna be late fer lunch,” he told her curtly.

“What?”
“Fix yer hair. And yer top.”

“Wait…what just happened here?”

“A coincidence. One in a million.” He stood gripping the door handle. “Or two in a million, I guess.” His look was appraising as he gave her a once-over again, taking in her sedate outfit and hair.

He wanted to mess her up, take down that braid and peel off her clothes. The Tory from the beach was wild and uninhibited; “Ororo” was too buttoned-up, too controlled and glossy for his taste.

It was a mind-fuck. Their encounter here was a tease.

Her own emotions began drifting over her lovely features. She straightened up and cleared her throat, buttoning her blazer and smoothing her hair.

“A suggestion.”

“Name it, Ms. Munroe.” She gritted her teeth.

“Miss. I go by ‘miss.’”

“Nice of ya ta inform me.”

Grrrr... “You leave first. Be discreet.”

“Yer better at making speedy exits than I am.”

She looked nonplussed. “Men like you invented them.”

He felt the moment her guard went up. “Tory” died; he already grieved her.

He left. His posture was broad and took up space, and he walked with long, swift strides. Her own pace was more controlled and sedate.

Like Ororo herself.
Logan unzipped it and pulled out a one-ounce bottle of Claiborne. He opened the stopper, and its strong floral brought back a flood of memories in one breath.

Numbers. Stare at them long enough, and they made your eyes ache. Ororo was developing spreadsheet psychosis.

She sat back in her chair and kneaded her neck. Removing her reading glasses relieved the soreness across the bridge of her nose.

Her phone picked that moment to whine at her; she punched the hands-free button and muttered, “Underwriting, this is Tory?”

“Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed today.”

“Both sides are the wrong side. I didn’t wanna get up, period.”

“Grouch,” Stevie accused. Her sigh was heavy. Ororo heard the sounds of children in the background. It sounded like she was calling her from her Mommy and Me playgroup. The buzz of Ororo’s headache intensified, but she urged a smile into her voice. “Won’t get much sympathy from me.”

“Since when have I ever come knocking on your door for that?”

“Might be nice if you came knocking on my door more often. Wanted to see if you were still coming to my shindig.”

“Pampered Chef?”

“Yup. Whole point is to come enjoy the food and the other women who show up. Monica already confirmed. I’m waiting for Misty to RSVP, too.” Ororo perked up. She took a gulp of her coffee to wet her palate, savoring it even though it was only warmer than room temperature. Lunch was a half an hour away.

“Who else?”

“Monet was a no. She had some alumni thing to go to that Saturday. She said she started sending out wedding invitations, though, and that you should have gotten yours in the mail by now.”

“I’ll have to go back through my bill pile and make sure I didn’t chuck it in there.”

“Invitation’s cute. Girly.”

“Of course it is,” Ororo said. She shook her head. Never in a million years. Not this sista.

“She invited me to go dress shopping for the bridesmaid outfits. Ask her if you can go, too.”

“I hate those shops. Too stuffy. I get so bored…”
“Speak now or forever hold your peace if she picks out something godawful, Ororo. Put in your two cents.”

Ororo already knew this song and dance. The Bride had the Ring. Literally and Tolkien-ically speaking. Evil in the form of overpriced accessories and dyable shoes was afoot.

“And you didn’t hear it from me,” Stevie added slyly, lowering her voice, “but she might end up having the dress let out a little on that last fitting.”

“Hold up…”

“Yup.”

“Good night,” Ororo muttered. “Say it isn’t so.”

“She told me she nearly had a heart attack.”

“So we get to plan her a baby shower right after the bridal shower.”

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait. Never mind the wedding, the baby’s the fun part.” Then Stevie scaled it back a notch. “But we’ll get back to that. I’m getting ahead of myself.” The women shared a silent moment, digesting their own thoughts.

Ororo finally said, “I’m excited. That’ll be one beautiful baby.”

“You’ve got that right. Everett’s gotta be grinning like a fool.” Ororo chuckled.

“Let’s see how she hides that booty now in that white dress once she starts to show. Bless her heart. All the preparations, blood, sweat and tears she’s putting into this, and it’s gonna end up being a shotgun wedding.”

“That don’t mean a thang,” Stevie twanged. Ororo could visualize the neck roll she no doubt gave her on the other end of the phone. “Twice as much to be happy about. It doesn’t matter how you start your family, as long as it’s blessed with two people who love each other.”

“Still,” Ororo prodded.

“Still,” Stevie agreed,” that chile’s a mess. Got morning sickness already.”

“I don’t miss that.” Ororo’s voice sounded faraway. Stevie bit back a hint of pity. Ororo didn’t want it; she wouldn’t throw it out there.

“Baby, you okay?”

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

“We’ll talk. Come to my party anyway, but seriously, girl, you and me. We’ll do something else soon. I’ll leave the kids with my momma and we’ll do coffee. I promise.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I always worry about you.”

“Uh-uh. You’ve already got my godchildren to give you gray hairs. Don’t waste ‘em on yours truly.”
“I love you, girl.”

“I love you, too.” Ororo fiddled with the phone cord.

Ororo was interrupted from saying anything else by a shriek so shrill it could cut glass in the background. “Jesus,” Stevie grunted before crying out “You’d better GIDDOWN from there! Uh-uh, don’t make me come over there and snatch ya baldheaded!” Despite Stevie’s addiction to parenting books and suburban-style family activities, she took an old school approach to dealing with her kids when they acted up. A timeout was one thing, but she didn’t waste time counting to three or even asking the question “what are you doing?” when she could just sneak up and catch them in the act. She was Ororo’s hero.

“Are the heathens running amok?”

“They’re running the asylum.”

“I’m sitting here in my nice, warm, quiet office. Everything’s all nice and neat…”

“Aw, hush up, girl.”

Then Ororo heard a din of children’s music over the phone, changing the noise in the background to low cheers and claps of approval.

Even after she gave up professional dancing, Stevie still ran a very successful dance school in the studio she’d had built behind her spacious home. It kept her fit and content, the kids loved her, and it gave her a connection to her own neighborhood that she couldn’t live without.

Ororo pushed aside the melancholy veil that threatened to smother her. “It’s good to hear your voice, Stevie. M’gonna go.”

“Bet you’re busy.”

“I know you are.”

“Come to my party, please. Please.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be there. Let the girls know, okay?”

“Definitely.”

“And hug my sweeties for me.”

“I will. They can’t wait for the real thing. They’ve been asking about Auntie Tory all week.”

“Are they excited to be flower girls?”

“Yep.”

“All right. Sounds good. I’ll let you go.”

“Come hungry.”

“I always do.”

“Bye, girl.” Ororo cradled the handset and leaned back with a sigh. She tapped her pencil against her blotter and scanned her office for a distraction. It was too hard to focus on her work now.
Her work had other ideas.

*Boop. Boop. Boop…* Her phone was at it again. “Underwriting, how can I help you?”

“I need you to come to the meeting, ASAP. Log on.” Selene sounded clipped.

“What meeting?”

“Check your email. I just sent it out ten minutes ago. I was waiting for you to accept it.” Ororo was already diving into her email and found the most recent red flag.

**URGENT: AMT Follow-Up Meeting at 11:30AM; Please Respond.**

“Why are we holding it?”

“More changes. Shake ‘n’ Take just added another eligibility group and a flex plan.”

“Shit.”

“Wrong attitude, Tory. We’ve gotta roll with this. This is excellent. I’m sending you the sales figures now, you’ll get the attachment in a second.”

“What figures?” Ororo yelped. Sure enough, the tiny Outlook envelope flickered across her screen before her horrified eyes. “I didn’t okay any figures!!”

“We quoted them the same rates for this as we did for the core plan.”

“And this is the first I’ve been told about it.” Her voice sounded hollow to her own ears.

“Don’t worry. Log on. We’ll be filled in soon enough. And Tory, don’t sound panicked. Go in with a smile, they’ll hear it in your voice.” Selene waited for her response.

“Right. That’s fine. Thank you.” She fought the urge to bang the handset on her desk to make her manager’s ears ring. Once she was off that call, she dialed into the teleconference, turned on the speaker, and set it to mute.

She waited for the first three of four voices to announce themselves, naming each one in her head. She recognized Scott easily enough, right off the bat. The deeper, older voice was slightly nasal but also familiar; she guessed it was Donald Pierce.

Selene was next. “Okay, good morning!”

“It’s practically lunch,” Scott countered. He sounded sunny, as usual. Ororo sighed. She’d need more coffee or something stiffer to deal with this…

“Have we got everybody?” Selene asked, ignoring him. Ororo shook her head.

“Donald here,” the older voice confirmed. Ororo nodded, saluting the voice with her mug.

“Hello? This is Nate?” Ororo was unfamiliar with this one. Less nasal, slightly British accent, but equally deep. For some reason, his voice gave her chills. “I’m working on the census for this account. I manage Eligibility.”

*Ahhhh…the ringmaster of this little circus. Nice.*

“I didn’t see your name on the email,” Selene explained.
“Essex. Nathaniel.”

“Oh. Got it.”

“I deal in lives, what can I say? I’m managing another three hundred for the renewal.” He sounded smug. “The more, the merrier.” Ororo rolled her eyes.

“Where’s Tory?” Selene said, sounding irritated. So much for hearing a smile in her voice…

“Here,” Ororo piped up. “Listen, could you give me a quick moment?” She placed her own phone on mute and hurried from her desk before anyone could protest.

“Tory? Tory? Are you there?”

No. She wasn’t there. She was anywhere but here…

Ororo hurried to the small kitchenette in the next suite and cursed at the last fifth of a pot of coffee. It smelled burnt; nevertheless, she emptied the carafe into her cup and grabbed a red stirrer, two whiteners and two sugars. Beggars couldn’t be choosers.

The first sip back at her desk made her wish she hadn’t. “Bleah!”

“Tory?” Selene called again. “Are you there?”

“Here.” She wanted to scrape the taste off her tongue but settled for dumping in the condiments. It blanketed some of the bitterness. Lunch felt like it was eons away.

“Great! Let’s get settled. Hi, Tory!” Chipper Scott. Bless his heart.

“Hi. Good to see you.” What was she saying? It was a conference call.

“I know this is abrupt, but we added the new plan out on the database. Attachments can be found there. Let me know if you didn’t get them on the meeting announcement along with the agenda.”

“Jeanne-Marie sent them. She has them,” Selene told him. Selene’s personal assistant was the most overworked woman in the building. At her desk, she was under Selene’s thumb. In the break room by the water cooler, though, her dominant personality came out in fine form. Jeanne-Marie delivered rants and one-liners like she was playing the weekend show at Caesar’s.

“Which product did we sell again?”

“An Option Plus. In and out of network, high deductible with one hundred percent wellness.”

“Their employees are going to hate that plan,” Ororo muttered under her breath. She took the mute button off her phone and spoke aloud. “Sounds cost effective.”

“They didn’t want a gatekeeper plan. It’s nice to have flexibility.”

“Same eligibility date on the policy?”

“Yes. Retroactive effective to January 1st for new hires. No preexisting condition exclusion, and they can add late for qualifying events.”

“Nice and clean,” Ororo remarked. Good. At least that part was uncomplicated.

“Clean as a whistle.” Scott’s voice was suddenly cut off by another click on the line. “Hello?”
“I’m here,” rasped a voice Ororo didn’t want to hear. Hot prickles washed over her as she remembered her recent indiscretion.

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit.*

His emails had become the bane of her existence. Too many of them had important action dates, so she couldn’t delete them…yet. Ororo fantasized about printing them and lighting the whole heap up in a bonfire so she could toast marshmallows.

She took small, ugly satisfaction in the fact that he showed up later to the conference than she did. *Take THAT.*

“Better late than never,” Nate remarked. Ororo wanted to clap.

“My laptop died. I’m at a guest desk right now.”

“Where are you, James?” Selene wanted to know.

“Cambridge. But I’m due out your way pretty soon for that training seminar.”

“Wonderful!” His announcement hit Ororo like icy water. She choked on her coffee, sputtering.

“Um…who’s that coughing up a lung?”

“Ack,” Ororo gasped, whacking her chest with her fist as she caught her breath.

“Tory?” Selene said cautiously. Her tone was plain: Don’t embarrass me.

“Sorry…hoo. Wow. My coffee had bones in it,” she joked, using her mother’s favorite phrase.

“Next time, might wanna go to Starbucks, eh?” She heard the smirk in his voice and wanted to smack him. “Or just get your caffeine in an IV so you won’t have to worry about feeding yourself.”

“Works for you,” Scott tossed back. Shared snickers in the background among the other participants rubbed Ororo the wrong way. But it made her continue to like Scott.

“Won’t that be something. Training. I’d forgotten about that,” Selene mused. Ororo could hear her silently planning to take Jeanne-Marie to task for not drawing her attention to it sooner. Ororo was kicking herself as it was; the announcements for the training coming up in two weeks were laddered neatly in her in-box, but she hadn’t opened any of them to notice the name “Howlett, James” in the “Cc” field. Shit.

“Can’t wait,” Logan offered politely, even though Ororo knew he wasn’t any more enthused than she was. Project management training sucked. Thank goodness it wasn’t any more often than once a year. Selene was a Six Sigma black belt.

The rest of the meeting was relatively painless until they got ready to wrap up.

“So Tory, are you gonna send out an updated rate sheet?”

“Already done,” Ororo informed him. She’d spent the rest of the call on mute and typed her fingers off, fixing the newest copy of the spreadsheet and hitting send. “There you go.”

“Got it! Way to multitask, Munroe!” Scott cheered. Ororo snickered.

“Who did you send it to?” Logan prodded.
“Everyone here, and the admin at Shake n’ Take as a heads-up.”

“Whoa, whoa,” he said. “Back up a sec. There are a few other folks who need it. Don’t jump the gun. Here. I’m sending you the distribution of who you need to copy on this.”

“Who else? Their admin is the one we’ve been dealing with for any hard copies! She’s also handling the distribution to the employees when we go to print.”

“Their CEO, COO, VP and legal department.”

“Legal?” she squeaked. “This is a simple addition to what we already sold! Same language, almost identical plan, just more of the same demographics!”

“They want Legal looking at it before they sign off.”

“That’s not what you told us before.”

“The customer’s always right. And the customer wants their legal team to have thirty days to review the drafts, with an extension if they have a lot of changes…”

“Are they expecting to have a lot of changes?” Selene interjected. Ororo felt a migraine brewing in her temples and jerked open her desk drawer. Two chalky extra strength Tylenol found their way down her throat, chased by more of the foul old coffee.

“This is a sensitive group,” Logan supplied. “So we’re giving them the velvet glove treatment until we go to print. So you’re gonna send out those rates to the names I sent, Tory?” Ororo almost forgot he was talking to her.

He used her nickname. The setting and situation felt wrong. He’d groaned her it in her ear so many times in the silence of his hotel room…

No. Stay focused, Munroe.

“I’ll get on that,” Ororo replied in her can-do voice. She pasted the names from his email into a new message and re-attached the sheet with new narrative. She hated resending anything, since it added to confusion.

It was only after she hit send on her corrected draft that she noticed his message to her was still open.

Try to get everybody in the distribution the first time around if you can. No sense in confusing anyone with too many drafts. Next time, ask who else needs to be copied in, eh?

Ohhhh, she wanted to kill him. Slowly.

*

Two days later, Logan bit into his BLT, leaning over his plate to catch the toast crumbs and stray tomato seeds. His apartment smelled like Clorox, his laundry was done and put away, and the voice mails on his machine read zero.

The boxes in his front hall mocked him. He still needed to go to Goodwill.
He was just settling down to read the funnies in the *Boston Globe* when his phone trilled from the kitchen. He chucked the sandwich aside and brushed crumbs from the corners of his mouth. He managed an ungarbled “H’lo?” once he managed to swallow the bacon and dry bread.

“Hey, Jim. It’s John.”

“Hey.” Logan leaned back against the fridge. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Did you get my messages?”

“Last one I opened was the one with the pictures.”

“I sent a few more since.”

“Guess I haven’t been online much.” That was a lie. John’s heavy sigh was proof that he didn’t believe it, either.

“Dad said he hasn’t talked to you lately, either.”

“Dad hasn’t called me. There you have it.”

“Jimmy, he’s lonely. Give him a call sometime, for cryin’ out loud! He’s getting old.”

Logan fiddled with a magnet on his fridge idly. Shame pricked at him. “Ain’t had a lot ta talk about lately. Same old, same old. I ain’t got a lot ta tell him.”

“You’ve been back from your trip.”

“Sent him that tee shirt.”

“He said it was a little too big. Dad’s lost weight.” Guilt pangs gnawed at Logan.

“Maybe I can trade it to him fer mine. Ain’t even worn it yet.”

“Good. Go see him and give it to him.” John’s voice was matter-of-fact.

“I’m in the middle of a lot of shit right now.”

“Make time.”

“When’s the last time ya saw Pop yerself?”

“Last week.” Strike one.

Change the subject. “How’re the kids?”

“Vic and Laura are fine. They keep asking when Uncle Jimmy’s coming to visit.” Strike two.

“Sold any cars this month?”

“Just two at the dealership.”

“At the dealership? Why? What other cars would ya have had ta sell?”

“I got ten thousand for the Brougham.”

The phone hit the linoleum with a thunk. Logan reeled and broke out in a cold sweat.
His brother’s voice nagged him from the floor while he got his bearings. Logan sank down onto his haunches inch by inch, letting the news sink in. *Motherfucker.*

He picked up the handset unsteadily. “Ya can’t be fuckin’ serious, bub. What the fuck.”

“I got ten thousand. Why can’t I be serious?”

“Ya can’t…ya can’t just…”

“I can and I did. I sold it, Jimmy. Dad said it was fine.”

“Well, it’s not fine. It’s not fucking fine. Dad was wrong.”

“Dad said he didn’t have any room in his driveway when anyone comes to see him. Give him a fucking break, Jimmy.”

“That’s no excuse. That’s not yer reason or Dad’s reason for getting rid of that car. Do ya have any idea what ya’ve done? Do ya?”

“Yeah. I did it for Dad. I did it because he asked. Because I’m his son and I care about him. I did it because it was hard for him to see that car outside on those rare days when he gets out of the house.”

“Yer such a good son,” Logan snarled. His skull felt like it would split in half. His blood throbbed in his veins and he could hear his pulse.

“That’s not why I did it.” John was at the end of his patience. The Howlett family temper was rearing its ugly head. “You selfish sonofabitch. Where do you get off? Huh?”

“If Dad needed money, I could have sent him money!”

“It wasn’t about the money! Get it through your skull. It was about Mom. It’s always gonna be about Mom.” There was a charged pause between them. Logan’s breath felt thick, he was scarcely able to force any out of his lungs.

John heard the change in his breathing. “Jimmy?”

“That all ya had ta call about?”

“I just wanted to tell you—”

“Ya told me. Fine. Bye.” He punched the End button and flicked the phone away, letting it skid across the floor. The linoleum felt cold against his ass as he leaned back against his refrigerator and let his thoughts swim through his head.

Another piece of her was gone.

“Ya had no right,” Logan whispered. “Ya had…no…right.”

All he needed was a minute. The silence of his kitchen seemed to hum and close in on him. Logan rubbed his face and combed his fingers through his hair. Once he centered himself, he was in his hallway in five brisk steps.

The boxes loomed by the door, still unpacked and untouched.

An X-Acto blade found its way into his hand. He slashed the broad strip of cracked, brown packing tape with a loud, satisfying rip, repeating the process with the other three.
Minutes later, he was spread out on the floor, surrounded by possessions and memories he didn’t want.

He set Sara’s short note aside, written in her girlish script. *Thought you might want to go through some of these things again. I just wasn’t sure. I didn’t want you to miss anything.* – Sara.

*PS. Leave space in your calendar to do something this summer. We’re thinking about heading to Provincetown when the kids are off for break.*

The more he sifted through the crates, the more his anger at John waned.

Sure. Why would his dad want the car?

How wouldn’t it have stabbed him in the fucking heart every time he looked at it?

How wouldn’t he have felt raw and empty and ripped apart?

Numbly Logan popped open the small velvet box. Jean’s solitaire and band winked up at him. He clapped it shut again and shivered, thrusting it back in the crate as though it burned him.

There were some clothes and a few other little trinkets. Sara included a mini photo album of pictures he didn’t recognize as any he had taken of her; he was surprised that Sara didn’t keep it.

Books. Craft items, including three skeins of untouched yarn and six crochet hooks. Women’s magazines. A pair of chenille bedroom slippers. A travel case for Jean’s cosmetics. Logan unzipped it and pulled out a one-ounce bottle of Claiborne. He opened the stopper, and its strong floral brought back a flood of memories in one breath.

He was drowning…

He shoved it back into the case, threw it back into the crate. The silence around him buzzed and hummed again, tormenting him. Logan hurled himself down the hall to the bathroom.

He wretched, doubled over and leaning his head against the cold porcelain. His voice was clogged and harsh.

It was too damned soon. Too much, too soon. Why didn’t God and fate and the rest of the fucking universe understand that?

He flushed and flicked on the shower, not caring that it was his second of the day. He didn’t care that the spray that escaped the curtain wet his clothes when he left them on the floor.

Steaming water poured over him, running in long runnels from his hair while he leaned against the tile.

“He, God?” he said. The water didn’t answer him, and it didn’t carry his troubles down the drain. He pounded the wall, hearing it echo.
Warranty

Chapter Summary

The empty space next to her was replaced by a brush of a sleeve against hers that made her pulse jump.

“I never wanted to get married as a kid.”
“Ya didn’t, huh?”
“Nope. No marriage for me. I wanted to work for a living straight out of the gate.”
“Ya can be married and still work, sugah. Almost can’t not work, these days, no matter who ya marry.”
“I know, I know. Falling in love I didn’t mind, but not being a soccer mom. Or a domestic goddess, a la Roseanne.”
“It ain’t gotta be like that. Shoot, ya don’t hafta find Ward Cleaver and start vacuuming yer house in a twinset and pearls.”
“*snort*”
“Well, ya don’t.”
“Thank the good Lord and all of his angels. Ward Cleaver…eek.”
“Ah always kinda had high hopes. Ah just wanted ta find that one perfect man who thought Ah was his everythang.”
“You’re dreaming awfully big.”
“Baloney. Smack yer own mouth, shoog.” Anna slid her glasses to the end of her nose and cut her eyes at her best friend over the rims. It was her patented “don’t mess with me” look. Ororo was the rare friend she allowed to defy that look. Mock it, even.
“I’m not saying there isn’t a man out there who thinks you’re his ‘everythang’, woman. I’m just saying…whaddya even wanna do with him once you find him?”
“Whaddya think?”
“Anna…marriage sucks.”
“Ya don’t have enough material to write that book yet, shoog.”
“I’ve got enough for a manuscript that reads like Gone with the Wind.” She kept her attention on the road. Ororo loathed rush hour traffic on the freeway. The rental car that she and Anna Marie split the tab for had GPS, but they were edged off the ramp two exits too soon. In the meantime, they were picking at cooling McDonalds leftovers and scanning through Sirius channels for some decent adult R&B.
“Ah just get envious when Ah see people really lookin’ like they’re in love. I ain’t talkin’ about makin’ out in public, Ah mean those couples who just seem well put together. None of that insecure shit.”

“My mom and dad managed okay.”

“Your folks were nice. Ah liked hangin’ out at yer place.”

“You liked Mom’s Russian tea cakes and marshmallow cocoa.”

“That, too. But Ah mean it, when Ah get married, Ah want what yer folks had.”

“Gas?”

“Ew…no. Yer nasty, sugah!”

“I’m serious! What is it about getting older that gives people gas? Mom kept the Beano in the spice cabinet.” Ororo merged into traffic just as the stream of cars crawled to a near-halt. “It’s just… marriage should come with a disclaimer or warning.”

“Yeah. Maybe it should.”

“Customer satisfaction not guaranteed. Consumer takes responsibility for the use of this product.”

“And there should be a penalty for ripping off the little tag.”

“Too bad there isn’t a fifty-year warranty that includes loss protection.”

Anna Marie warmed to the topic. “Loss of sanity? Loss of libido? Loss of memory for conveniently forgetting a weekend trip to your parents?”

“Sure. Plus damage insurance that covers neglect and abandonment.” Ororo punched the menu choice for the station she wanted. The station description onscreen promised R&B but gave them Kelly Clarkson. Good enough. Anna sang along with gusto while Ororo brooded behind the wheel.

They began to play a game Ororo came up with as a kid, reading the road signs.

“Framingham. Two a’s.”

“Two m’s. What else have ya got?”

“Give me another few miles.” It wasn’t Slug Bug, but it passed the time between pit stops.

Monet St. Croix was one of their acquaintances that insinuated her way into their lives before either of them could object. There was nothing she loved more than a captive audience for boyfriends, clothes and social climbing.

She was always “just so.” Hair just high enough, lipstick just dark enough, skirt just short enough without going overboard. She liked men with money, leading to the obvious nickname “Money” by past conquests. She didn’t have the patience to put up with a relationship that didn’t progress past several weeks of decent sex. Once the conversation ran out, so did her patience. Dates that ended with “I’ll call you” were met with indifference, or even “Actually, I’m gonna be pretty busy for a while…”

Yet she found the man she’d call back. Hell, he was the one she’d wake up to every morning for the next ten to fifty years, if she bought the extended warranty.
And Everett was a sweetie. Anna Marie pretended to wipe away drool after Monet introduced him to her girlfriends. They made a pretty couple, both maple syrup colored and dark-eyed, athletically built and tall. They’d make pretty babies, and the bride would make just as big a fuss over her baby shower as she would over her bachelorette.

They took the exit they wanted and merged badly into traffic that wanted to be rush hour. All the streets looked the same, but Ororo took the left turn at the strip mall intersection and then turned right into a picturesque subdivision.

“Not bad. Girl musta paid through the nose for a yard this big.”

“She lives on a corner. Her yard is one of the biggest.”

“Cow.”

“There it is.” Anna Marie let her glasses slide down to the end of her nose, and her mouth hung open in shock.

“Hello, McMansion.”

Of course it was perfect. Even the snow piled thickly over her lawn was well-groomed, no muddy slush or dog pee in sight. She’d already taken down her Christmas lights, but there was a tiny sign over the door wishing guests a Happy New Year. Ororo parked the rental car, fiddling with the sticky safety brake. There were two other cars parked out front.

“Brrrrr. Too damned cold fer this southern gal.”

“Wuss.”

“Kiss mah fat one, sugah.” They hurried up the front walk, well-shoveled and salted, and Anna punched the doorbell. “C’mon and let us in,” she said, stomping her feet and rubbing her hands.

They heard a commotion behind the door and a break in conversation inside. Monet’s voice proclaimed “yay, they’re here!” before the door was jerked open.

“C’mon in before you let out the heat!” Anna Marie chuckled.

“How was your trip?” Ali corrected from over her shoulder. Monet already had Ororo wrapped in a brisk hug, air-kissing her cheek. The hallway felt toasty-warm, thawing the chill from her flesh.

“Uneventful.”

“Good. Let’s see if we can bat a thousand.”

“Traffic already kinda sucks.”

“We’re going to car pool as best as we can. More than likely, we’re going to pack ourselves like sardines into my car.” Monet never even tried to sell her Suburban, despite the gas crunch. It was simply too comfortable, and of course, it was the only car that her huge house didn’t dwarf from the street.

“Beats mah old ride,” Anna mused. “That was like watching a whole mess of clowns showing up under the big top.” Ororo laughed. She was right. Even though Anna’s tiny Beetle was in great shape, it was comical seeing how many of their friends they could pile into it on their way to the clubs on Thursday nights. Ali was the shortest, and frequently ended up giving any lucky soul sitting
in the back seat a lap dance.

“First things first: Where is your bathroom?”

“Down yonder,” Ali told them. “Down the hall to the left. Just follow the smell of potpourri.”

Ororo clucked approvingly as she looked around the living room, taking in the furnishings. “That’s new,” she said, nodding to an art print.

“Everett’s mom gave me that. I paid to have it framed myself.”

“She has good taste.”

“I know. I’m jealous of her place.”

“You shouldn’t be. Look at how nice this is!”

“Thanks. We do all right.”

“Just wait til ya have some rugrats. You’ll hafta move that stuff up sky-high,” Stevie warned her. Monet had a varied assortment of knick-knacks on side tables, window sills and shelves. Monet grinned and rolled her eyes. Her hand reflexively covered her stomach.

“Whoa, hold on, girlfriend, lemme get a look at that!” Ororo tsked and shook her head. The theatrics had begun.

They all clucked like hens, taking a turn patting her tummy, which was barely rounded, definitely not enough to raise suspicion at first glance. But she was radiant.

“How’s Everett doing with all this?”

“He’s got cold feet about going to the altar, but he’s all over himself about this baby.”

“So give him some socks,” Ali snapped. “Or tell him you have a half a dozen girlfriends training shotguns on his butt if he takes too long saying ‘I do.’”

“For some guys that isn’t a threat. Sure wasn’t for my last ex,” Jubilee complained sourly.

“No shit,” Paige agreed, holding up her hand for a high five. Jubilee met her there with a sharp smack. “See Dick run. Run, Dick, run.”

“Gads,” Ali sighed.

Four more trips to the bathroom later, they all bundled themselves into thick coats, then into Monet’s black SUV.

The clerk at the bridal shop was already smiling expectantly as they filed inside.

“Reservation for St. Croix?”

“Fitting?”

“Not yet. I’m still choosing the dress. I have it narrowed down to these.” Monet handed her a small folio. There were six pages inside showing the gowns she was considering, along with swatches of fabric for possible bridesmaids gowns.
“Get ready to play dress up, girl,” Anna told her.

“I hate changing room mirrors.”

“Let us be yer mirrors.”

She made her way into the changing suite while the others got comfortable, shucking coats and gloves in the warm shop. The clerk offered them coffee and mints.

“I know this will never be me,” Ali sighed, “but I love these stores. I wouldn’t mind working in one. Look at all this stuff.” She fingered a green taffeta sheath hanging on a nearby rack.

“I know. It’s just like hanging out in your grandmother’s attic, trying on old clothes in her trunks.”

“Not my grandma.” Jubilee looked doubtful. “Her attic was a mess. Nothing but dime store romances with Fabio on the cover, her needlepoint junk, and some old baby clothes. She had a little sailor suit for my dad. I’m just grateful I didn’t have to wear it as a kid.”

“Bet it was cute,” Paige prodded.

They heard a rustling of raw silk approaching them, followed by Monet’s voice. It sounded unconfident, completely unlike her.

“Okay…what do you think? Be honest.”

“Oh.”

“My.”

“God.”

“Hubba HUBBA.”

The only person in the room whose mouth wasn’t hanging open was the clerk’s. “Okay, then. Size eight in that for you, sweetie?”

“Wrap it up,” Monet agreed. They didn’t need to see the others; it didn’t hurt that she felt too bloated to want to try on another gown.

“Poor Everett,” Paige muttered. “Boy’ll never know what hit him.” The clerk fetched a sample veil to try on with it and a pair of gloves to complete the image.

Ororo moved away from her friends and lost herself in her own thoughts. She thumbed through the thick catalogs on the counter without really looking at the clothes and jewels inside.

She just wasn’t there anymore. It just wasn’t her anymore. Her happy glow was beginning to fade.

Suddenly she wanted out. Even the freezing chill outdoors was a welcome change from the discussion of hotel reservations and place settings.

But this is what she came here for. These were her sisters from different misters. It was just so hard. Ororo’s own experience walking this road soured her. She wouldn’t let her mood infect the excitement wrapped around everyone in that room.

Jubilee sidled up to her, leaning her cheek against Ororo’s sleeve like a needy puppy. The tiny girl was a study in contrasts next to her tall friend, only standing five-one in her bare feet. Her pretty
complexion was creamy and fair and she had her glossy black hair razor-cut in a spiky little boy cut that made the most of her delicate features.

“Whatcha doin’?” she implored.

“Nothing. Looking at the pretty things.”

“Oooohh. Pretty thiiinnngs…” Jubilee purred, flipping a page of the book Ororo was reading. “Why so down?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. I believe you.” Jubilee gave her a one-armed hug that said otherwise. “Talk later?”

“Later.”

“Okay.”

The bridesmaids gowns were another matter altogether. The clerk had her job cut out for her as she brought out the samples. Some were rejected before she even took them off the rack.

“Please tell me those aren’t sequins.”

“Anything but fuchsia.”

“Geez…the shoulder pads are straight out of an eighties movie.”

Each woman took their turn on the hot seat, narrowing their selections down to three.

“This maid of honor dress matches mine,” Monet reasoned. “All we need is a color.”

“The plum!” Ali insisted, waving the dress on its hanger.

“I second that,” Paige added.

“Me, three,” Ororo said, resigned. She didn’t want to express a preference for the teal. It wasn’t her day, and Monet was looking relieved.

“I looked cute in the gold,” Jubilee complained.

“You looked adorable, chica, but we need one color that I can plan a color theme around. Plum it is.”

“No scary bolero jackets,” Jubilee cut in. “No one will wear them again.”

“They make me look like Frankenstein,” Ororo said. She shuddered.

They met Monica for lunch later and chatted and cackled about old times over the pasta special at Olive Garden. Ororo once again felt comfortable and happy.

Until Monica opened her mouth.

“So whatever happened with that guy?”

“Huh?”

“The one you met on your vacation. He ever catch up to you?”
“Oooooooo,” Jubilee hooted, agog. “What’s up with that? This is the first I heard about any man on any vacation!”

“I never gave him my number,” Ororo offered to put them off. But she was blushing ten shades of red.

“So why ya actin’ guilty, shoog? Spill!” All eyes were on her now; even Monet sat there with her arms folded across her chest. She looked smug.

“I want to hear all about this. What’s his name?”

“It doesn’t matter-“

“Like heck it doesn’t.”

“Oh…whatever. His name’s Logan.” Then she recanted. “James, actually.”

“Wait, which is it?”

“James. But he likes Logan.”

“Mmmmmm. I like both. But Logan…that sounds mysterious. Like someone you sneak away from a party with to go make out in the car.” Jubilee stirred her soda with a dreamy expression.

“Damn, girl…last time I invite you to a party!” Paige teased. The other patrons stared at the gaggle of women laughing and cheering.

“Just when I thought it couldn’t get worse…” Ororo muttered under her breath.

“Did you give him your digits?” Ali asked.

“No. Just…no. Nothing else happened.”

“But something DID happen, right?”

“Maybe…”


“Didn’t what?”

“You DID!”

“It was a mistake. Granted, a fun mistake-“ Jubilee cut her off.

“Mistake, nothing. Bring it on. That’s the end of a dry spell.”

“No. Still pretty dry.”

“So no digits?”

“Uh-uh. Not even.”

“He didn’t offer to stay in touch?”

“I didn’t give him the chance.”
“Hold up. Dine and dash?” Stevie was aghast.

“It sounds nasty when you put it that way,” Ororo tsked.

“Nothing wrong with nasty,” Ali pointed out. There was a momentary hush as their server brought their dishes of mousse and tiramisu.

“So that’s it?” Jubilee said before taking a bite of her dessert.

“That’s it.”

Ororo was bursting.

It was insane. The burden of her encounter – her reunion – with him in the bathroom was trying to claw its way out. Monica watched her knowingly, stabbing her fork into the tiramisu.

“Nothing to tell,” she finally lied. “Vacation’s over.”

*

Training Day.

Too bad it didn’t involve Denzel in a black leather jacket smoking cigars and smacking people around, Ororo grumbled to herself. Management training sucked.

The big guy in the Stacy Adams shoes sounded slick as a used car salesman. Ororo didn’t recognize him, but Selene’s smile was unnecessarily bright when she found herself and Ororo a seat in the back of the conference room. She felt like she was trapped in ninth grade geometry again and like her boss was gonna ask her for gum and pass notes.

Ororo got up and fetched each of them an information packet and work folder. While she was drilling two pencils in the automatic sharpener Selene’s admin thoughtfully remembered, she watched the room begin to fill. No one else looked any more enthusiastic than she did, except for Scott. She was pleased to see him arrive so early. He caught her eye and hurried over with a broad grin.

“Now it’s a party!”

“Good morning.”

“Good morning to you,” he said, saluting her.

_Dang. Just like a walking Colgate ad._ But she liked him. It was nice to have someone on the account who knew how to laugh.

“Glad you’re here with bells on.”

“Too late in the season. Last month I would’ve worn a pair of antlers my ex gave me last Christmas, though.”

“Those aren’t business casual,” she pointed out.

“Did they bring any hand puppets?” he muttered, leaning in conspiratorially as they both watched their trainer assemble his laptop. Instead of the standard “Hello, My Name is…” tag stuck to him, he
wore an employee badge from OptforWellth’s sister branch, WellthyLiving, that announced him as Sebastian S.

“They’d have to figure out which cost center to charge the hand puppets to.”

“Not if they hire them as contractors.”

“We don’t outsource much.”

“Hey, that’s an expense report you don’t have to submit from your own desk.”

“Thank the good Lord.”

Scott joined his own department toward the front of the room. Ororo contemplated following him, but remained close to Selene for appearances’ sake. She almost regretted it; they were shortly joined by Cassandra, a director of sales from their Florida branch; Madelyne, an account manager with a tendency to sell nothing but flex plans before consulting the regulatory team; and Tessa, Cassandra’s assistant. The next three hours promised to be tedious.

Sebastian’s voice boomed, waking everyone in the room.

“I’m going to get this moving along. You’ve all received your information packets for this seminar; if you’re sitting here, your HR managers enrolled you for Project Management Measurement Goals.” He gave them a serpentine smile. “Not basketweaving.” Nervous chuckles answered him. Ororo groaned and sipped her coffee. Scott caught her eye and winked.

“So, let’s make a few introductions.” Ororo almost thought he was going to have them play show-and-tell, making them stand up and name themselves and their roles.

“This,” he said, gesturing, “is a laptop. This is your best friend.”

Okay, so she was wrong.

“It’s a helpful tool. Why? Because it stores information. What else?” They all stared at him a moment. “Anyone?”

Tessa nervously raised her hand. “Um…it has a …calendar?”

“Yes!” he emphasized. “That’s what I like to hear! Anyone else? Who here knows how to use Outlook?” Everyone assembled stared at each other and began to raise their hands. “All right. PowerPoint?” More hands stayed in the air. “Microsoft Project?”

Fewer hands. “Okay. Not too many.” He logged on at the prompt and they watched him wave the cursor around the screen, clearly enjoying himself. “Programs like that are useful because they provide a schedule. A set of deliverables to meet in a certain timeframe, if you will…”

And so it went. Boredom gnawed at Ororo. It wasn’t the fault of the presenter, even though Sebastian Shaw’s voice began to drone at times. He had an extensive career background in business training and recruiting prior to founding his own corporation, Shaw Industries. It cost OptforWellth a lot of money to get him to step down from the mountain, board a plane, and play with his laptop for their benefit.

“Take a look at the needs of the customer. Do you have the time to meet their deliverable? Do you have the data gathered and analyzed in a timely manner to set an action plan? Have you kept those deliverables consistent with each client?”
Ororo’s toes began to cramp inside her good brown pumps. The conference room was comfortably warm when they first arrived, but it was starting to feel stuffy.

“So what are our goals? Okay, let me toss a few of them up here…” He began writing furiously on his large whiteboard with a bright red marker in large, slashing script. “First, we measure performance. Then, we analyze opportunity, namely a chance to build ourselves up with the customer and show them, hey…what ELSE can we do? What ELSE can we sell them? It’s important to use your past successes to put the hook in ‘em. Then, show them how you’ll improve performance, and eventually, control performance…”

Ororo’s stomach began growling. She was ready to gnaw off her own foot. Selene was beside her, furiously taking notes on her Blackberry. She nudged Ororo impatiently. “Write this down! It’s useful.”

Ororo was about to argue the point with her but missed the opportunity. The door behind them creaked slightly as someone swung it open and rushed inside. The faint rush of fresh air woke Ororo up, and the familiar, masculine voice sent a shiver down her spine.

“Is, uh, this is the conference for the Project Management class?” She turned furtively to watch him.

He wasn’t rumpled. She was impressed. His suit was crisply pressed and his hair was neat. His shoes weren’t damp with mud or slush, telling her he’d probably commuted in winter boots and changed when he came inside, like she had.

He was too orderly. She longed to yank his tie askew, muss his hair, anything to do away with the “safe” look he wore.

His eyes were the dead giveaway. They were full of rich, decadent trouble. And his mouth. He smiled slightly, but it wasn’t an “aw, shucks” look of contrition. He wasn’t sorry he interrupted; he just wanted to know if he had the correct room.

“Project Management Measurement Goals.” Sebastian’s smile was full of curdled butter. “On that sign. Behind you.”

“All these rooms look alike. Ya seen one group of folks with name tags, ya’ve seen ‘em all.” Ororo smothered a laugh right in the middle of her gulp of coffee; she felt the caffeine back its way up into her sinus. She wasn’t the only one; several uncomfortable titters greeted his announcement. Nonplussed, James Howlett scanned the room, slowly descending the arena-style steps and looking for an empty seat.

Right on the aisle.

Right next to Ororo.

She had already turned back to her notes, or what passed as notes. She’d scrawled a few bits and pieces of info from the PowerPoint slides on her pad. She felt firm footsteps echo and stop beside her and someone setting down a briefcase with a light thud.

Cologne. Crisp, cool and heady, mingled with the scent of wool and leather.

The empty space next to her was replaced by a brush of a sleeve against hers that made her pulse jump.
Warm. Solid. He seemed to take up all the space around them. “Hope you ladies don’t mind,” he rumbled in that voice, low and guarded. Sebastian had already lost interest in him and was back to his presentation, highlighting action words on the slides with each click of his pointer.

“Not at all,” Selene promised with a tight little smile, before she, too, ignored him. Madelyne and Tessa merely looked annoyed.

*What about me? What if I mind??* Ororo’s stomach was doing little flip-flops.

It was killing him.

He should have just heeded Scott’s suggestion to continue on to the seminar without his laptop, but he didn’t want to sit there shuffling paper handouts in that cramped little room. So he ran late – again – and ended up being held up at the visitor’s desk to get a temporary badge and sign in. So there Scooter was, hanging out down front with a couple of other guys from Accounting, cool as a clam, while Logan was faced with a quandary.

Stand around scanning the room for any other seat next to a stranger, or hunker down next to the best one night stand he’d ever had, who, oh, by the way, hated him.

She was patently ignoring him at first glance. Her eyes darted over him briefly as he sat down, then flicked back to the front of the room. She hadn’t diverted herself from the presentation since he’d sat down.

The thought occurred to him that she was a good actress. The slides and the speaker were boring him to tears.

She was ignoring him, all right. *Bitch.*

Restlessness set in. Without realizing it, she began tapping her pencil lightly against the edge of her desk.

Logan sighed. “Quit it.”

“Pfft…” She barely even looked over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were haughty.

Her makeup was too stern, eye shadow that women’s magazines called “natural” and blush that she didn’t even need. And her hair…it was an injustice.

A French roll. She pinned up that mass of gorgeous thick hair in a style meant to neuter rather than flatter. He couldn’t even benefit from seeing the line of her throat in the turtleneck sweater she wore. She had on reading glasses that he didn’t even know she needed up until then.

In her navy blue pants suit, she was almost sterile. Brittle. He hated it.

She resented him. She didn’t care if she was annoying him at that point. Finesse the client without her go-ahead on the rates, would he? She paused, then tapped some more. The sound kept her awake…

He’d had it. His finger and thumb deftly flicked the pencil from her grip.

*Oops…* Okay, so it got away from him.

She stared directly into his face. Too bad it was to glare at him. She looked like a pissed-off librarian.

“Sorry.”
“Bullshit,” she hissed under her breath.

“Sssshhh…” Selene made impatient waving gestures for them to zip lip. Ororo felt like a child sent to the naughty corner.

*But he started it…*

She fumed silently, occasionally stealing snatches of looks at him from the corner of her eye.

On the one hand, he had nerve.

On the other hand…she could feign the excuse that now she didn’t have to take stupid notes about the stupid training presentation.

Then again…

“Pick it up,” she hissed under her breath.

“Make me.”

“You threw it down there. *You* go get it.”

“Uh-uh.”

She jerked her head around to face him, and her glasses slipped past her nose slightly. Her eyes were blue ice. He took childish joy in seeing her riled up.

“Do you always just rob people of their writing tools during important meetings?”

“One, Sunshine, it ain’t a meeting. Two, I didn’t rob ya. Three, I flicked the pencil. I didn’t throw it. And yer tappin’ was driving me nuts.” They were murmuring at a low buzz.

“Ssshhh!”

“Er, is there a problem up there? Can I continue down here? There were a few more areas I wanted to cover before we break for lunch?” Sebastian’s thick, dark brow arched their way. Selene’s head swiveled around, snakelike, and she pinned them with a cold stare.

“Do you mind?” she whispered. She was embarrassed, her posture shouting “My associates won’t embarrass me in front of Mr. High and Mighty Corporate Trainer.”

“Are we fine?” Shaw asked.

Ororo nodded and smiled, cheeks burning, and she slid her glasses back up. Logan ducked his head and hid his smile.

Ororo smelled mint moments later and heard the slow tear of paper. Logan unrolled two spearmint Life Savers and popped them into his mouth. Like Selene, he opted to use his Blackberry to take some notes, or so Ororo assumed. He could have even been checking Reuters for the Knicks’ game score, for all she knew.

“What’s one of the biggest mistakes companies make that costs them returning business from a customer?”

“A delay in delivery of the product?” someone called from up front.
“Errors in the finished product?” Ororo countered.

“The finished product or service didn’t live up to the sales proposal executed on the contract,” a smug voice announced beside her. To her annoyance, Sebastian smiled. “It could be a specific service, when and how it was delivered, or that the value of the services didn’t live up to the price they paid. We’ve got to give the customer what they paid for.”

“Spoken like a broker.”

“Guilty.”

“Give the man a gold star.”

*Even if he was late.*

The Q&A portion of the seminar continued in earnest.

Ororo was lulled slightly by the buzz of conversation. All of it began to run together after a while.

Her mind drifted to sunny beaches and sand pushing through her bare toes. *Drat him.*

He felt the change in her. Her face, in profile, softened and relaxed, and she looked more appealing to him. He liked seeing her look pensive instead of pissed off. Not that he *liked* her, or anything. Not really. Sitting next to him they were roughly the same height, even though she towered over him when they stood up.

The traitorous thought nagged him that he wanted her horizontal again. And again. And *again*…

His hand drifted over the edge of his desk. His knuckles barely grazed her elbow with the peace offering.

“Mint?” Her head whipped around in surprise.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Sure?”

“I’m fine,” she repeated. Her stomach picked that moment to argue with her. It growled audibly.

Lunch wasn’t for another half hour.

“Going once. Going twice.” Her hand reached out tentatively, paused, then darted out and plucked the mint from the wrapper. “That’ll be five bucks,” he deadpanned.

“You wish.” She popped it into her mouth and crunched it savagely between her teeth.

His nostrils flared. *You can still make a wish.*

“Nah. *You* wish.” She paused in chewing and stared back at him fully, his intent sinking in. The air between them was charged with unsettling energy. She felt itchy, tightness crawling over her nape. His eyes dilated and he licked dry lips.

A loud, strange “blip” sounded from the front of the hall. The screen blacked out.

“What on earth? Hunh. That didn’t sound good. Can we call tech support?” Scott was already on his cell, speed-dialing the number and pausing by Sebastian’s podium to fiddle with the laptop.
Ororo took that moment to stretch her legs, welcoming the reprieve. “Excuse me.” She stepped around him into the aisle, her legs buffeting his knees. The contact made her tingle.

He wanted to protest until she bent down and retrieve the pencil in question, offering a perfect view of the supple, generous curves of her ass in her dark slacks. His stomach clenched and he felt a tightening between his legs. Geez.

She was turning him on, even dressed as a scary librarian.

“All right, folks, let’s go ahead and break for lunch early. I’ve called the catering desk, and they’re already setting everything up.”


“No shit,” Tessa agreed easily.

“I have to grab my protein shake from my car. I’m counting carbs,” Cassandra Nova bragged. She already looked like she could do a hula hoop through a Froot Loop, in Ororo’s humble opinion. Cassandra was one of those micro-managing, uptight women that made horrible managers. She could have used a donut to kill that bug up her butt.

Ororo didn’t need any more prompting. Not caring about the lack of propriety, she asked Selene, “Hand me my purse?” Selene complied.

“What’s your rush?”

“I want to make sure they don’t run out of fruit salad. Beat the rush.” She leaned over Logan and met her halfway.

He caught another whiff of her light perfume. Vanilla. Her breasts were almost close enough to –

Damn it. She was off and running.

She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that her pulse raced with every step.
Logan hated working off-site.

Everyone wanted to know “how he was managing” because he looked too much like a visitor, despite his company badge. It wasn’t the fault of how he was dressed; the New York office was full of sharp dressing movers and shakers, no less so than their sister branch in Boston, so he looked the part.

It was just aggravating. It always took him a couple of hours just to get his bearings. He hated walking around looking confused when hunting for the copy room, bathroom, conference rooms, or the cafeteria. This time, he kept a Xerox copy of the building’s map in his briefcase, which was slightly helpful. Not much, of course, since close-up, every hallway and corner looked the same once he got out of the elevator.

The only thing worse was the guest cubicle they found him. Logan tried to work for a while with his headphones on while he checked his emails. Fifty messages made a stack of red flags. Sure. All of them were *that* urgent. Geez…

But the noise surrounding him was too distracting. Thankfully the training was almost complete, and he only had one more meeting left before he could head back to his hotel.

The denizens of the third floor periodically “checked up on him”. Women made frequent stops to scope out the newcomer in his sharp suit. Even after five days, the novelty hadn’t worn off.

Logan had a strong, virile presence that drew them like honey bees. But he was about to shout “YES, I’m settling in just FINE, fer fuck’s sake!” if one more person asked him. The feminine attention wasn’t the problem itself; Logan just wanted to be back home, in his own office or on his own couch. He hated the office’s poor excuse for coffee; more often than not, every time he went to get a cup, it was either empty or burnt because no one felt like making a new pot. He didn’t sleep well on the too-soft bed at the hotel, either, and their Wi-Fi access sucked.

He checked the scores for the Celtics game under the guise of “getting caught up.” He was so absorbed that he nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of a female voice over his shoulder.

“How?!” He jerked himself around in his seat and stared up at his guest. She had the temerity to smile at him.

He vaguely remembered her from the meeting, the striking redhead sitting in his row at the first training snoozefest…session. Mary, something. Maybe.

“It’s so bare in here,” she remarked.

“Eh?”
“Your cube. I know, you’re visiting, but it’s kinda drab. No pictures of family, or anything.” She was definitely fishing, he decided.

“Uh-uh. No family to share.”

“Hmmm.” She invaded his space and turned, leaning back against the edge of his desk and crossing her long, slender legs. She wore brutally high pumps that looked a little like black suede. Logan wasn’t into shoes, no surprise, but he was a leg man. “What’s it like in New York?”

“Cold. Ain’t much different from this.”

“I find that hard to believe. I’ve always wanted to travel to Long Island.”

“It’s nothing like the city.” Apples and pomegranates, he mused. So not the same.

He guessed she’d probably love the garment district. She opted for a black wool dress with a wrap waist that emphasized her curves; Logan guessed they’d stand eye to eye when she was in stockingfeet, perhaps shorter than medium height.

“How long are you in town?”

He indulged her game of twenty questions. “Checking out tomorrow morning. I’ve got an early flight back, just soon enough to go back to work.”

“No rest for the weary?” Her green eyes and an impish smile inserted the word “wicked” in weary’s place. She sounded hopeful.

“Not in this lifetime.”

“Has anyone fed you?”

“Packed a snack.”

“I meant lunch.”

She was blunt. It was refreshing.

“I’ll mull it over.” It wasn’t a yes or a no. “If I’m hungry, I might eat.”

“That’s usually how it works. We’re not robots in this office. Not yet, anyway. We require sustenance and potty breaks every now and again.” He smirked. Okay, he liked her. Maybe a little.

“Can I check on you later, if you want to go to lunch?”

“Feel free.”

“What’s your ID on Outlook?”

Okay. That irritated him a little. It never made any sense to Logan to email someone who was sitting only a few yards away or no farther than a couple of rows of cubicles. Throwing a paper airplane over one of the walls and talking in a loud whisper was more effective and took up less bandwidth, in his opinion.

“Look me up under Howlett. I’m the only one on the directory.”

“What do you like to be called?”
“James,” he decided. In the back of his mind, he chided himself for his misstep with “Tory.” No nicknames and no aliases meant no bullshit. His eyes drifted down to her badge, hanging from a beaded lanyard meant to look like a necklace.

Madelyne, with a ‘Y’. It figured…

She caught his look and she rose from her perch, arms folded beneath her breasts. Her smile was warm. “Then I know where to find you.” She drifted off in a cloud of some floral perfume that tickled his nose. He enjoyed the view.

He worked with no further distractions for the next two hours. Like clockwork, his stomach grumbled. He contemplated an email, but decided to let her tag him first.

The tiny white envelope prompt flashed across his screen. He grinned. You have a new Outlook message.

His smile faded. Sender: Munroe, Ororo.

Subject: Rate proposal for the X Effect Account.

“Great,” he snarled. He took a gulp of the tepid coffee and read its contents.

James,

I’m reviewing the package you’ve pitched to the client. The rates you’re suggesting don’t add up for the services we’re providing, nor do they reflect the number of lives we want to insure, based on what I received from Eligibility.

Please review the package again and the eligibility tapes and get back to me. I think you’ll find I’m right about this. You may need to call the customer back.

Like hell.

Her autosignature was still in its playful purple print. It annoyed him.

He opened the attachments. She’d included the benefit summary and the Access file; the username showed up as Essex, Nathan when he opened it. Figured. Even Scott, who got along with everyone at all the sites they collaborated with, couldn’t stand that guy. The file’s timestamp said it was two days old.

Shit.

He recalled that the point of service plan he sold covered network services at eighty percent with a sweet pharmacy plan and dental option. X Effect was a slick company and generous employer, but they were also a tough, sensitive client with a legal team who would ream OptforWellth, and Logan, up the ass if they screwed up this sale.

Logan scanned through the eligibility numbers and hissed “Fuck!” His fingers fumbled over the keys as he printed the message and the attachments. He had a bone to pick with “Ororo.”

He was up and running, the perfect picture of a man you didn’t want to piss off. “Tessa,” he said, catching sight of the dark-haired admin he recognized from the meeting, “could you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Ororo’s office. She’s on this floor, right?”
“Sure. Underwriting’s down the hall, to the left, right past the copy room.”

“Appreciate it.” He wove his way through the maze of cubicles, glad to leave its buzz behind him. The corridor was drafty and brought him a welcome breath of fresh air. He briefly wet his lips at the fountain and nearly stumbled into two women as they rounded the corner.

“Oh!”

“Sorry, didn’t see you,” he offered. He was batting a thousand. It was the account manager, Selene Gallio. A barracuda with a saccharine tongue.

“You seem like you’re in a rush.”

“I wanted to talk to your right hand woman,” he informed her.

“Oh…you mean Tory!” she said, giving herself a silly little slap to the forehead. “Of course you mean Tory! Well, she’s in her office. She has her little sign on the door saying she’s out to lunch, so you might want to just knock. I’m lucky to have carte blanche to walk in whenever I please. What good’s being an account manager if it doesn’t open doors?”

Geez…

“She’s such a busy girl,” Selene continued. “Is it urgent?”

“I just need to talk to her.” She eyed the attachments in his hand, but he held them protectively against his gut and began to skirt around her.

“It’s nice meeting you, er…” Cassandra eyed him expectantly.

“James.”

“Ah. Of course.” She’d forget it as soon as they made it down the hall. No matter.

“Have a good one,” he threw over his shoulder as he sped toward his goal.

“Goodness,” Selene mused as the door at the end of the corridor banged shut behind him.

“Seemed rather distracted. And a bit rude,” Cassandra said.

“Nice suit, though.” Cassandra nodded in agreement.

Ororo was waiting in suspense for a return message. Her tuna salad bagel sat on its white wrapper, half-finished. Anticipation always made her stomach twist.

He gave her more than he bargained for.

Knock, knock, knock…

“C’mon in. It’s open.”

The door swung open. Logan stood before her with a death grip on the knob, the attachments clutched in his free hand.

Oh, goodie…
“Ya mind explainin’ what the hell this is about?”

“Good morning.”

“It’s practically noon.” He tossed the papers onto her desk; the draft from the motion rattled the hard copies she already had spread across her blotter.

“Make yourself at home,” she tossed back.

“I’m fine where I am.”

“Suit yourself.” She leaned back in her seat to stare up at him. She knew that was his motive. Big whoop. Be a grouch.

“That ain’t the eligibility that the group sent over when we made the sale.”

“That’s the most recent file. Call Nate if you don’t agree with me.”

“I don’t believe you. That ain’t the same as disagreeing with you.”

“Get…OVER yourself. Do you want the email?”

“Fine.” She scanned through her messages, pissed off.

“Ya might wanna sort ‘em by sender, since ya don’t look like ya clean out yer inbox that often.” His Boston twang was back, she noticed. It seemed to come out more when he wasn’t in meetings or on the phone.

Or when he was hopping mad.

“I can go through my email pretty well by myself. Like I said earlier, make yourself comfortable. Please.” She nodded sharply at the chair in front of her desk.

Hostility radiated from him. He obeyed. She hit the “Sender” bar and her messages reordered themselves neatly. She saw messages older than six months and made a note to archive them, anyway. What is he, the tech support police?

She wanted to crow when she found it. “I’m sending it to that printer,” she said sweetly. She was lucky enough not to have to share it with anyone but Selene.

He took the sheaf of papers and thumbed through them. He snorted. “Who’s Anna?”

“What?” She stood and leaned over her desk.

“Anna. She wants to know what time you’re leaving for the shower.”

“Give me that!” She circled her desk and snatched the sheet out of his hand, not caring how… snatchy it looked. She was embarrassed at his amused look. “It says confidential on the bottom, or didn’t you notice?”

“Then don’t leave it on the printer shelf,” he suggested.

“This is what you wanted.” She sifted neatly through the papers and handed him the one from Nate. “They added another eligibility group for retirees under 65.”

“Added?”
“Yup.”

“Why the hell wasn’t I copied in on this?”

“Beats me.”

“This should’ve come through me first.”

“So contact the account manager. That didn’t come from Selene’s desk.”

He fumed. Being left out of the loop was bad enough. Watching his least favorite member of the account management team gloat about it pissed him off.

“It’s gonna look sloppy to the client that the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing.”

“So start being the left hand. Check with the client beforehand if they need to add any more eligibility groups.” She returned to her desk. “Be more proactive.”

“Proactive.” The word felt razor-sharp on his tongue. She didn’t flinch.

“It helps in the environment we work in to watch your communications with the customer.”

“So I’ve gotta go back to them with different premiums than what was agreed.”

“Bingo.” Not her problem.

That bitch.

“Yer pretty happy about this, aren’tcha?”

“Me? Of course not!”

“Pfft.”

“Why would I be happy? Logan, I had to go back over their numbers, their claims experience, and their personal data to see if they had preexisting conditions among that group. I had to do my homework. It’s not just a matter of punching a few numbers into a calculator.”

“I thought ya were drawing sticks in the sand.”

No. You. DIDN’T.

“What is WITH you? You just barge into my office, acting indignant-“

“Are ya calling me indignant?”

“No. I said you acted indignant, and I don’t appreciate it.” She stood this time to her full height.

She took off her reading glasses and thunked them down on her blotter. Anger blazed from her blue eyes, undiluted and all for him.

“If you want, James, I can happily send the client an email, or better yet, route it through Client Services first, explaining that the earlier rates didn’t reflect the addition of the eligibility group. They should have realized this by now, themselves. No one says you have to look uninformed.”

“Fine,” he muttered. His anger dwindled down to its last spark.
“Blame me, if you want. I’ll once again be the evil underwriter. Next time just send me an email back. Save yourself the trouble and the walk.”

“It ain’t any trouble. My legs aren’t broken, Ororo.” His eyes narrowed. “Or is it Tory?”

“Whichever one is easier to remember.”

“I think ya know what I think about that.”

“No. I don’t.” Her steps were brisk as she came back around to the front of her desk again. She approached the door and swung it open, giving him his cue to leave. “And I don’t need to know.”

She still looked the part of the “evil underwriter.” Her suit was still severe, but the saving grace was that she chose a skirt this time. He saw her long black boots sitting in the corner of the room behind her coat rack. Her feet were shod in a pair of two-inch heels, slightly more practical, and besides, she didn’t need the boost to her height.

But they surprised him. Red patent leather with black buttons over the toes. They cut the severity of so much black, since she’d draped herself in it like a funeral shroud again. The shoes matched a silver necklace with red seed pearls at her throat.

If he didn’t know better, he’d think she’d dressed that way for him, just to put him off, but he dismissed it. It niggled at him that she’d probably transform back into the carefree beach siren with her ripple of hair loose and flowing, begging to be touched once he was gone…

Right now, Hands Off was written all over her.

Her legs. Long, lithe and muscular, like a casual jogger’s. They were even better than Madelyne’s. His gut clenched at the memory of those legs.

Ororo’s heart thudded. He was so close.

He smelled good. He looked good, even though that tiny divot was still between his eyebrows. He was still annoyed with her, which suited her fine.

Logan’s body seemed to radiate heat. Her own felt almost compelled to lean in closer, even though she was in the process of giving him the bum’s rush.

Wasn’t she?

She wanted him to back down first, to break eye contact and give her his retreating back.

He had no such plans.

“I don’t even know what to call you, half the time. James.” She said it in such a bland tone. He wanted to shake her. That didn’t help him with his determination to keep his hands off of her.

“Just as well ya don’t hafta call me. Ain’t it?”

“There’s always email,” she scoffed. She held the door open wider.

“Great. Like I need more. Save some server space, darlin’.”
“Fine by me.” Then, “And don’t call me darling.”

“Ya didn’t mind before.”

“That was before.” She felt foolish still holding onto the door, fearful that someone would round the corner and catch them bickering like siblings. Scratch that; like the school bully and the wallflower.

“Then which is it? Tory, or Ororo?”

“Just don’t call me late for dinner. James.”

That was it. She’d flicked the switch.

“That ain’t what ya called me before.”

“How would I have? I didn’t know you. I still don’t.”

“That didn’t matter, did it?” His eyes flicked over her, making her self-conscious and her cheeks grow hot. Her fingers tightened on the knob. She began to back away and tug the door partly closed, hoping he would take the hint and vacate the space.

He neatly slapped the door back against the stop, not hard enough to slam. Her lips thinned.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“No. I ain’t.” He advanced in slow increments. She backed up, swallowing against the knot in her chest. “Ya mighta found that out if ya’d stuck around long enough, Tory.”

Her name. In his voice. That rumbly, almost gravelly voice that narrated her wet dreams. Oh, man…

“Ya like it when I say yer name.”

“Please,” she snarked, but why did her voice sound…more desperate than snide?

Her knees felt weak. Her urge to flee warred with her need to stay close to that scent, to his heat, and her desire to drown in his dark eyes.

She licked her lips. Those luscious, ripe lips.

She nearly fell back against the chair he’d abandoned. He caught her by her shoulders, clamping them in his beefy grip.

He was touching her. The voice of reason in the back of his mind bellowed at him, *Abort! Eject! Get the hell outta there, soldier! RETREAT! Fall back!*

But electricity and heat sizzled between them, channeling through her pulse and stomach, back up through his chest.

“Damn it, Tory.”

She made a helpless sound, a whimper, if she had to describe it, and she trembled – trembled! – when he slid his grip from her shoulders to the small of her back, almost circling her narrow waist in one smooth movement. One second she was staring at him like he was insane.

The next, she was *tasting* him.
They came together like magnets from opposite poles, charged with need and lust. It defied reason. Logan remembered himself and freed one of his hands long enough to swat the door shut.

Yes.

Her body sang its approval of the way he kissed her, greedy and hot. He devoured her lips. She opened for him with no entreaty on his part. After all, it wasn’t about what he wanted, was it? It was her office, and her lunch hour that he’d hijacked. She just had to take more of him, more of his hearty, satisfyingly male flavors and textures, mints mingled with coffee and his firm lips. Her fingers were clutching his crisp white shirt, hopelessly wrinkling it, but he didn’t care.

She hated him restrained as much as he had. Her hands were creeping inside his blazer, molding the contours of his pecs. *God, he has nice pecs…* She wanted to peel him out of that suit and lick salt and lemon from every inch of his body.

She felt the stroke of his fingers at her nape, tracing the shape of her neck. And something else; her hair seemed to be shifting…falling. He freed it of the pins, loosening her snug chignon that she had to admit, now, had given her a headache all morning. She had such heavy hair…

He clutched handfuls of it once it was all loose, sexy and soft. She moaned as his lips traced the curve of her ear.

The indignities of the past week melted away with her touch. Bad coach flights, lumpy hotel mattresses and piss-poor coffee evaporated into the ether. The cure for all of his ills was sliding the toe of one slick red shoe up the back of his calf. He was practically on top of her, fer cryin’ out loud. They tumbled back against her desk. It was temptingly horizontal.

They couldn’t.

The *wouldn’t*.

They *could*.

The metal inbox racks on her desk tumbled off the side with a low clank. Her commuter cup, thankfully, was still sealed, but it, too, rolled off onto the floor as he scooted her back. Her hands were fisted in his hair and tie. She pried apart the Windsor knot she despised, craving his pulse and the taut cords of his neck. His breath hitched when she claimed it with her mouth.

“Logan,” she whimpered. Her control was slipping away. She didn’t miss it.

“Tory. Aw, man, Tory.” He groaned in satisfaction at the feel of her pressed beneath his body.

Fate intervened where common sense failed.

“I think I left my folder in Tory’s office, Cass. I’ll grab it and we can head to that café you wanted.”

Ororo’s blue eyes flew open and she inadvertently bit his lip as she broke the kiss.

“Ow! Shit,” he hissed. He was dazed and confused as she began to wriggle out from under him.

“GogoGO! OFF!” she grunted as he heaved himself up. She was up in a flash, straightening her clothes.

“What?”

“Go. Please. Just…go.”
“Ya’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Uh-uh. No.” Then, more plaintively, “Please.”

He straightened his blazer and gave her a hard look. “This ain’t over.”

“Yes. It is.” He shook his head.

He left her office in swift strides with his tie carefully tucked in his blazer pocket. He could redo it when he had a moment’s privacy in the men’s. Ororo was a different story. She’d just managed to fasten the rest of her buttons, but her hair…

She caught sight of it in her reflection as she peeked at her monitor. It was a shambles, tousled as though someone had been running their hands through it.

Bedroom hair, complete with less lipstick than what she’d worn to work.

“I’ll just be a second…Tory, hi! Sorry, I just need my folder.” Selene was grabbing the folder, only planning to breeze in, then breeze out. She froze as she caught sight of her underwriter. “Goodness. What happened to you?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Ah…I had a mishap. Bad hair day.”

“So, did, um, James get a hold of you? He was looking for you.”

“I-yes, h-he did. He found me. We spoke.”

“Is everything…fine?”

“Yes. Sure. Fine. Fine.”

“Okay.” She caught sight of Ororo’s unfinished sandwich. “Looks like you’re working hard, you’re eating at your desk!”

“I like to keep my day moving.”

“Take some time for yourself some time,” Selene urged insincerely. An hour from then would find her hounding Ororo for file updates on the shared drive and numbers from her Rolodex.

Ororo stifled a laugh.

“Bye!” she trilled as she left.

Ororo’s sigh echoed off the walls. She rounded her desk and picked up her fallen possessions, thankful that Selene hadn’t noticed.

*

Coach class sucked.

Logan was grateful that his flight was brief and that he didn’t need a rental car. Thank heaven for the Red Line.

He was done.
His lunch went as planned with Madelyne, who had no problem with him calling her Maddie. She was easy to be with, funny and seemed to have no expectations. There was no “lightning bolt” of chemistry between them, but he felt an attraction to her that was comfortable and familiar. He couldn’t place why. But it just made sense. Logan craved things that made sense.

She traded business cards with him and punched his cell number into her iPhone while they waited for the check.

“Drop me a line once in a while. Stay in touch. Maybe we could do something the next time you’re in town.”

“Likewise.”

It went fine.

So what was wrong with him?

Why was he chafing at the light peck she snuck from him before she exited the cab they shared back to the office? Why did it feel like a sacrilege?

Only an hour before, he’d righted himself and the raging erection cursing him went away. He’d scrubbed his face, removing a vestige of red lipstick from the corner of his mouth. Damn. He still had a restless look in his eye. She’d done that to him. He managed a neat knot with his tie and fixed his hair, dampening it to reactivate the hair gel he used that morning.

Ororo drew him in, then kicked him out. It was twice the insult of just leaving him hanging, alone in his hotel room with her scent still in his sheets.

What happened was crazy. He didn’t have time for crazy. Life was too short, and Logan was tired.

He knew he should have headed back to his office; it was certainly early enough. Logan decided he needed the comforts of his own apartment more than his office needed him.

He basked in the lived-in smell and silence as he set down his mail and coat. He no sooner shucked his blazer and tie than the phone rang.

“H’lo?”

“Hey. It’s John.”

“What’s up?”

“Wanted to give you a call. Have you talked to Dad?”

“Nope. Why, what’s going on?”

“I’m going to give you his room number.” John’s voice was all business. “That way you can call him when he gets out.”

“Gets out of what?”

“Surgery.”

Logan’s heart dropped into his shoes.

“What?”
“Dad’s having a triple bypass. He’s in the hospital.”
Visiting Hours

Chapter Summary

He stopped himself and immediately placed that thought on the shelf, all the way in the back of his mind. He wasn’t ready to take it down yet.

Logan was almost grateful that his father’s room was on the fourth floor; he had the chance to catch his breath on the elevator up. He hated hospitals.

They brought back too many recent, bad memories. The gift shop’s offerings were as shitty as he remembered. He brought up a paper bag full of goodies and comfort items and a separate sack that contained lunch. He wondered how much of it his dad could eat.

His brother was already there; he heard John’s voice as he interrogated a nurse inside. Logan lingered just inside the door. John’s wife hovered over their father like a mother hen, filling his cup from a pitcher of ice water.

“When did you give Dad his last pill?”

“No, I asked when did you last give him a pill.”

“I passed meds today at 10AM. His chart, however, says he got his last pain dose at four.”

“Are you certain? Dad, when do you remember your last dose?”

“Been about two hours,” he snapped hoarsely. “Quit getting so lathered up and siddown. M’fine. Tired,” he muttered. He took the cup from John’s wife Rose and drained it, handing her the remaining ice chips. She set it on his bed table and adjusted his blankets. He waved her away impatiently. “You sit down, too.”

“Sorry, Dad,” she told him.

“Visit. Don’t fuss.”

“I’m the mother of your grandchildren. It’s my job to fuss.”

“Hmmph,” he grumbled. He spied Logan in the doorway. “Where have you been, Twinkle Toes?”

“Didn’t wanna come empty-handed, Pop.”

Jonathan was still full of spit and vinegar. Logan was silently grateful.

Beyond that, the old man looked like hell. His skin was still wan and his face was drawn and tired. They had him on oxygen and Rose had brought him a long-sleeved pajama shirt that he wore like a jacket to keep the draft off of him in bed. A wicked-looking IV was taped to his forearm. His homely blue hospital gown was further accessorized by small red and white 3M leads below his throat and on his chest. An orange ID bracelet made him itch; he tugged and scratched at his wrist impatiently
while he addressed his sons.

“What, ya thought I just called ya to run my errands? It’s been weeks. Never hear from ya anymore.” Aggravation flared inside Logan, along with a hefty dose of guilt. His dark eyes, so much like his sons’, raked over him and landed on the bags. “What’d ya bring me?”

“Survival rations,” he said, setting the stuff on the bed table and removing a few at a time. He handed Rose the small box of See’s peanut brittle to open. His pop took the sudoku book and flipped through it with little interest.

“Your mom was good at these. I never got how to do ‘em.”

“Give it a try,” Logan suggested. He leaned over the bed rail and kissed his temple. His father patted his cheek roughly, the half-smack he’d grown used to over the course of forty-five years. It made him optimistic; clearly he was feeling better.

“How was Mexico, Logan?” Rose asked.

“Hot. Nice,” he explained. “The beaches were unbelievable.”

“We just got back from Martha’s Vineyard this summer,” she boasted.

“It ain’t the same.” Not even close, in Logan’s mind. The weather off the Cape changed every five minutes, according to the locals. Mexico was warm and bright, straight out of a postcard.

The memory of Ororo still plagued him, sharper now since his visit to her office. Logan still cursed his lack of control.

But her buttoned-up look drove him nuts, her body was begging to be let loose. Her hair made his hands itch to undo it. He was still kicking himself.

He couldn’t get the taste of her from his mouth. And worse, he didn’t want to.

“Well, you look good,” Rose assured him. “More relaxed.” Logan wanted to argue with him, but he let it go. Work was a bear. He had three client meetings in three different cities next week. He spent more time in his suits than he liked, and he was barely home long enough to warm the pillows on his bed.

There was an email from Madelyne in his personal inbox, but he hadn’t opened it yet. She left a little smiley face, “:-)” in the subject line. Cute and harmless, he guessed. It fit her. At least his attraction to her didn’t involve any conflict or games.

Rose looked good, Logan noticed. Her dark red hair was cut in a short pageboy and she looked riper, more womanly due to her four-month pregnancy. Once upon a time, John and Logan’s mother, Elizabeth, joked that she couldn’t wait to have a house full of redheaded grandchildren from both of her sons. Jean had been a redhead, too.

“When are ya gonna hurry up and gimme another grandson?” Jonathan nagged, waggling his finger at Rose. She sighed, shaking her head.

“The other two were late. I hope this one is more cooperative.”

“Hardheaded, just like these two. Gotta be another boy.”

“Amen,” she chuckled.
Rose had left Vic and Laura with their other grandmother due to visiting hour policy. Logan’s father was still in the stepdown unit after being in intensive care for three days. Despite the fact that he was feeling more chipper, Jonathan was still too frail.

“What’samatter, Jimmy? Ya look a little down.”

“Just worn out, Pop.”

“Slow down. Life’s short. In the grand scheme of shit, Jimmy, none of this runnin’ around’ll make a difference when ya hit the end of the road. Money’s important, but not if ya don’t have a life to enjoy it with. Or the folks ya love.”

“I know, Pop.”

“’I know Pop’, ” his father mimicked. “Blah, blah, blah…in one ear, out the other. Don’t mind me, I just love hearin’ myself talk.”

“Dad’s feeling better,” John mumbled to Rose. She giggled.

His father helped himself to a couple of bites of peanut brittle.

“Mom was addicted to this stuff,” Jonathan mused. Logan hated the wave of melancholy that threatened to wash over him.

“Pop…John said ya sold the car.”

“I did what I had to do.”

“What, you needed money? Pop…”

“Uh-uh,” he said, holding up his hand. “Don’t, Jimmy. It’s not just about money.”

“Then what, Pop?” Logan’s voice took on an impatient edge. He was hanging on by the fringes of his temper and threatening to slip.

“I know ya loved that car. But ya had no place to keep it. Jimmy…I ain’t getting any younger. I can’t take it with me.” Logan’s fists tightened, and he instantly defused. He was still somewhat pissed, but now that emotion had a different target. “I’m considering a smaller place.”

Logan might as well have been doused with ice water. “Wait…what?”

“Dad and I were out and about a few weeks back, looking at condos,” John confessed.

“Shit,” Logan hissed.

“Watch yer tongue, bub.”

“Sorry,” he told Rose. She gave him a “yeah, yeah, heard it before” nod. “I didn’t know.”

“I haven’t said much about it. I’ve just been thinking about it.”

“That’s how ya feel, huh?”

“This ain’t somethin’ I just woke up and decided to do while I was brushin’ my teeth. The house is paid off, that’s a plus. But repairs are the problem. I need a new furnace. That’s gonna set me back seven grand.”

“That’s what the contractor quoted me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa…hold up. Contractor? Pop, ya’ve got me an’ John. How much is the unit itself?”

“Five,” he shrugged.

“We can install it. Never mind that shit of paying someone that much if ya don’t have to.”

“You’ve got a busy schedule.”

“Yeah, but it’s mine. I’ll make time. I’m your pigeon.”

“So you’ll rush home to save Pop a few dimes,” John said.

“Are you on board ta help, bub?’

“Obviously. I’m just gonna sit on my ass?” John accused, eyes sparking.

“Geez, where did you two get those potty mouths?” Rose insisted.

“Hell if I know,” Jonathan tsked, taking a gulp of his apple juice.

Logan stayed another hour. They managed to find a Pats game despite the hospital’s pitiful excuse for cable. During the post-game wrap-up, Logan stretched and rose from the uncomfortable guest chair. The room was too small for the amount of furniture and equipment in it, but at least his dad didn’t have a roommate yet. He bookmarked the thought that it wouldn’t hurt to talk to the charge nurse to see about a private room. If Logan could help it, his father would have the best. If his father’s insurance wouldn’t pay the difference between private and standard beds, Logan was good for it.

His father’s dark eyes were rheumy and tired. “Ya goin’ already?”

“Yeah. Traffic sucked on the way over here.”

“You could stay at the house with us,” John offered. “The kids want to see you. We told them you were coming.” Logan wavered a moment.


“We’ll move the kids to the living room. They love to watch TV as soon as they get up, anyway. It’ll be like camping out for them.”

“I might camp out with ‘em. Tell ‘em I’ll bring a movie home on my way, too.”

“What else to you have to do?”

“This and that.” Logan sighed and turned to his father. He clapped him on the shoulder. “Get yer act together and get out of here, Pop.”

“He tells me to get my act together,” he grunted, shaking his head. Logan engulfed his in a hug, hating how wasted his normally beefy frame felt. He closed his eyes against the pricking sensation behind them and held his father for several long seconds. “Listen ta this guy, will ya?” But his voice was fond. “You’re my boy, and I love ya, even if ya are hardheaded.”
“Thanks, Pop.” He kissed the top of his salt-and-pepper head and made his way out, not before his brother clapped him on the back.

“I’ll make coffee when we get back. Don’t plan on turning in too early.”

“Fine. See ya.” They shared a look of understanding as he made his way out.

Logan drank in the familiar surroundings, recognizing the same watercolor art print of daisies hanging in the hallway that had a drip mark where the yellow paint bled near the bottom border. It always intrigued and annoyed him whenever he sat in the waiting area, staring at it when his mother was sick. The potted ferns near the nurses’ station needed watering; Logan was never into plants. That was one area that he and Jean agreed on, since they dropped leaves and soil onto her clean countertops whenever anyone gave them some as gifts.

He ran errands on his way home, despite his father’s words that it wasn’t his job. He stopped at Target and picked up some cleaning supplies, a snow scraper and a bag of salt for his pop’s driveway. His next stop was Hollywood Video for a couple of DVDs and snacks for Vic and Laura. He knew they didn’t need any more sugar, but he knew they’d wrangle the chance to stay up later anyway, since it was a weekend. He left the store with an enormous box of Whoppers, Twizzlers and a couple of packs of microwave popcorn. It was good for a few more “fun uncle” points, he figured. They had him wrapped around their fingers.

The rain started as he made his way onto the exit ramp, making the freshly plowed snow slushy and thick. Logan was glad John had already outfitted their Jonathan’s old Ford Escort with snow tires.

Sure enough, the phone rang as soon as he keyed his way inside.

“Howlett Residence?”

“Johnny?” The voice on the other end sounded surprised. “You’re back already?”

“This is Logan,” he explained.

“Oh, goodness, you sound exactly like your brother, and you both sound so much like your father! I’m bringing the kids back in a few minutes, since I caught you at home. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine, darlin’, go ahead and drop ‘em off. I brought back treats and Meet the Robinsons.”

“Oh, boy!” she agreed. “I know they’re up for that. I already fed them a late dinner; I packed their pajamas just in case they would have to stay overnight, it’s all packed up and ready to go.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“Be there soon.” Rose’s mother was all right. Ironically, she bore a superficial resemblance to Logan’s mother, petite with dark hair and blue eyes. She was pleasant enough. John lucked out in the marriage department.

Logan seldom spoke to John and Elaine, Jean’s parents. He still kept in touch with her sister Sara, and he enjoyed visiting once in a while with Gailyn and Joey. But sometimes, it was so hard, left him so raw. Seeing Gailyn, in particular, left him vulnerable, since she reminded him so much of Jean. She made him wonder what it would have been like if he and Jean-

He stopped himself and immediately placed that thought on the shelf, all the way in the back of his mind. He wasn’t ready to take it down yet.
While Logan waited for his niece and nephew to arrive, he cleaned up. He noticed that Rose had already taken care of the dishes they’d used for lunch and taken out the trash. He followed up that effort by shoveling the front walk again and salting it like he’d planned. The temperature outside read ten degrees. Logan checked the pipes and decided to wrap them before they froze.

He felt restless. His father’s house smelled the same. The rooms felt smaller now that he was an adult, but they were still cozy and furnished in his mother’s style. His dad had put fewer of her knick-knacks; Logan wondered hollowly if he gave some of them away.

He stared for a while at a picture collage in the hallway. Color and black and white photos were fading to different shades of sepia in the frame. He and his brother grinned their way through shot after shot at different ages. His brother still towered over him. Logan took after his mother’s short side of the family.

The pictures of his mother holding each of them as infants gave him pause. She looked so content and vital. Elizabeth was pleasantly plump after having children, but her skin was peaches and cream and she had thick black hair, curly like Logan’s.

His feet took him to his father’s room. He flicked on the light and noticed that the bulb flickered slightly, needing to be changed.

Elizabeth’s cane stood in the corner of the room. Logan didn’t even remember crossing the room. All he knew was the feel of the cool, slick wood in his hands as he sank down on the bed. He turned it in his hands and remembered.

Parkinson’s.

She said nothing would keep her from going where she needed to go as long as she was still on her feet. And she was as good as her word. Every Saturday found her at garage sales, and every Sunday found her in church. When it became too difficult for her to stand for long periods, Jonathan began helping her to make dinner, eventually claiming the chore as his own.

Logan called and visited often during those months. It kept him going, and on better days, her voice was still strong and steady, and he almost forgot that anything was wrong. That was how she wanted it.

She touched him often, imprinting him those last few weeks. He wanted to saturate himself in her words, scent and soft glances before it all ran dry.

During her final decline, they lived her pain.

Logan felt his eyes heat up again. Her cane grew warm in his grip. He set it down in the corner again and tried to steady himself.

“Mom,” he whispered. She didn’t answer him back.

The room stifled him. All he could see were bits and pieces of her. Jonathan and Elizabeth’s engagement photo in a silver frame. An old-fashioned atomizer bottle. Her small silver jewelry box sitting atop a mirrored tray. Her faded bedroom slippers peeked out at him from under the bed. His pop had kept them there…

The front door was assaulted by uneven knocks. Logan heard hooting and giggling and silently gave thanks. He rushed from the room, clicking off the light behind him.

They bowled him over as soon as he opened the door.
“Oof!”

“Uncle Jimmy!” his nephew crowed, grinning up at him from his vantage point of bring wrapped around his waist like an anaconda. Laura was already tugging on his arm, urging him to pick her up. He obliged her, pretending – or was he pretending? – to drag himself across the room under their dead weight. They hung on him, talking his ears off at once.

“What’d you bring me?” Laura pried. Logan blew a raspberry on her neck. She exploded into giggles.

“What’d ya bring me? Y’a just expect me ta bring ya stuff every time I show up? What about bein’ glad ta see me fer me?”

“What’d you bring me!!!” she cried. He took umbrage by tickling her until she turned red in the face. Vic took a different tack.

“Did you bring any video games?”

“Sheesh. Ya can’t leave that stuff alone, eh?”

“I wanna play WWE.”

“You know yer sister here always cuts up when she loses.”

“Do NOT!”

“Do too,” Vic insisted. She gave him a shove. Logan separated them before he could return the favor.

“Stop, stop, stop. Don’t get started with that nonsense. I’ve got a movie.”

“A kung fu movie?”

“Nope. Disney.”

“Awwwww!”

“Take it easy. It looks pretty good. No princesses and fairy crap.”

“Okay,” Vic muttered sourly. He wasn’t appeased yet. At eight, he looked like his brother’s spitting image. Neither he nor his sister ended up with their mother’s red hair after all, but their dark brown was shot through with auburn highlights every summer. Logan’s dad was betting on a redhead on the third time around.

“Ya act like I’m killin’ ya…ya used ta love Disney movies! Huh? Huh? Punk!” Logan growled, getting his nephew in a head lock. “Say uncle!”

“Noooooo!”

“C’mon, ya know ya wanna!”

“Uh-uh!”

Within seconds Logan was wrestled to the floor. He was outnumbered and outmatched. Several noogies, tickles and pink bellies later, the three of them waited impatiently for the microwave to ding. The smell of popcorn filled the kitchen. Logan wasn’t restless for his brother and sister in law to
return home, but he eventually wanted some time alone with his thoughts.

Despite Vic’s misgivings, the kids enjoyed the movie, mostly at the top of their lungs.

"Why aren’t you seizing the boy?!"

“I have a big head, and little arms. I don’t think this plan was well thought out.” Logan threw his head back and slapped his knee. He needed this.

By the time the movie was over, the kids were showing signs of exhaustion, limbs spilling over the sides of the couch and a lot quieter than they were when they got home. Logan started rounding up the popcorn bowls and candy wrappers, planning to vacuum the next day. John and Rose came tramping inside, stowing their boots in the kitchen.

“Dad’s sleeping,” Rose confirmed. She picked up Laura, who responded by laying her head on her mother’s shoulder and closing her eyes. Her long spill of dark hair trailed over Rose’s sweater. “How were they?”

“We had a blast. Piece of cake.”

“You know it. Uncle Jimmy’s the man.”

John was as good as his word. He perked a pot of Folger’s once the kids were tucked into bed, bundled under several blankets atop an air mattress. Rose turned in herself, pleading exhaustion. Logan didn’t blame her.

“How long are you gonna be here?”

“For however long it takes Pop to get back. I wanna help him get settled in, and I wanna take care of that furnace.”

“Good.” John stared at him over the edge of his cup. “And what then?”

“I’m headed back up.”

“When are you coming back, Logan?”

“I’ll try to get back. I don’t know when.”

“It’d be nice if you’d work it into your schedule a little more frequently. Pop talks about you often enough.”

“Sure,” Logan shrugged, sighing. “I can’t promise anything.”

“Can’t, huh?”

“I’d be here if things were different. It’s called work.”

“I work. Rose works. We’re still here. All Dad’s gotta do is snap his fingers.”

“Goodie for you.” Logan set down his cup and leaned forward, folding his arms and propping his elbows on the table. “I wanna help out. It ain’t like yer gonna be handling stuff for Pop all by yerself.”
“It’s not just about handling stuff for Pop. He wants you here. He misses you!”

“He knows he can call me.”

“You can call him.”

“Look…”

“Don’t be a stranger.”

“What are ya gonna do if Pop moves? Sell the house? Or is he planning on renting it?”

John looked irritated at the change of subject. “Sell. He doesn’t want to get tangled up in checking on tenants.”

“It’d be a monthly income.”

“Dad’s doing all right already.”

“Tell him not ta write it off. It’s paid off. It’s still a worthwhile investment ta keep it up and list it as a rental property to a nice family.”

“Pop used to want one of us to eventually take the house.”

“It didn’t work out that way.” Logan downed half his cup. “I don’t need this much space. It’s just me.” It hadn’t been once.

“Guess so. Did you get the boxes Rose sent?”

“Yup.” He stared into his cup, swirling the dregs. “Got one from Sara, too.”

“How are they doing?”

“Kids are getting big.”

“Do you ever go to see them?”

“Eh. Nah.” He still felt guilty. Sara had asked him when he was coming back out to visit.

“How’s work?”

“Up ta my ass in new contracts and renewing business. The usual.” Then he added, “Met a decent lady at a training recently. Been playin’ phone tag.”

“Is she a Patriots fan?” Leave it to John to ask about what really mattered.

“Dunno yet. Still early in the game.”

“Any possibilities?”

“I just wanna have fun for a while. Nothing fancy. Not yet.”

“So no chance of bringing her home to meet Dad, huh?”

“Pfft…please.” Logan gave him a look; John snorted.

“We can get the furnace tomorrow, if you want.”
“Yup.”

“I’m gonna take a look at the roof, too. I think there’s a leak that’s making its way into the bathroom.”

“Dad’s got the big ladder in the garage.”

“Don’t worry about getting it out til tomorrow.”

They gradually made a laundry list of projects to complete while Logan was still in town. Beyond that, they bullshitted into the wee hours and finished all the coffee. Despite the caffeine, John yawned like a lion.

“I’m bushed. G’night.”

“Night.”

Logan took the guest room, ironically his own bedroom when he was a kid. Elizabeth used it as a sewing room for a while. Her craft items were still neatly stacked in boxes in the closet. An unfinished quilt still hung on a rack by the window.

He watched the shadows from oncoming cars’ headlights dart across the walls, over and over. It was more effective than counting sheep. Within a half hour, he was asleep.
“Good looking, then. She’s unique.”

“Ya plan on tryin’ a start something with her?”

“Would you care if I did?”

Logan’s fists balled up so tight his knuckles nearly popped through the skin.

The doctors’ estimate of when Jonathan could come home were conservative, at best. It took him ten more days to be released from the hospital.

John practically shouldered him inside until his father nudged him off. “Quit yer fussin’. Damn, it’s toasty in here.”

“New furnace, Pop.”

“Gotta coupla handymen. Now all I gotta do is get ya ta start fixin’ cars. I’ll never hafta worry about whether I’m hirin’ an honest mechanic again.” Logan grinned behind them as he brought his father’s things inside. He had two green plastic personal belonging bags from his hospital room and a folder full of paperwork, two small white prescription bags from the pharmacy, and his father’s oxygen tank that they sent home with him, holstered in a small green hand truck.

In the meantime, his home was a welcome change from intensive care. Logan and John made sure it was clean as a whistle, cleaning old food out of the fridge and restocking it with his favorites, within reason.

“Where are those grandkids?”

“Upstairs, playing their games. I didn’t want them to tie up your big set down here if you wanted to rest on the couch.”

“Well, bring ‘em down here! Don’t hide ‘em away.” Rose patted his shoulder fondly and obeyed, heading for the hallway. She cupped her hand around her mouth.

“Vic! Laura! C’mon down and kiss Grandpa hello!” Their feet thundered down the steps and they came shrieking into the living room.

“Take it easy!” John warned. “Don’t crawl all over him yet! Grandpa can’t handle too much rough-housing.”

“Give me five minutes,” Jonathan promised. The twinkle was still in his eye as he hugged and kissed them, ruffling Vic’s hair. He still looked tired. Rose was still on her feet, running on autopilot.

She had lunch on the table in a flash, Jonathan’s meds in his hand with a glass of water and his oxygen hooked up with little effort. Logan tossed his dad the remote control.
“I’ll be back in a few minutes. I’m gonna check my messages.”

“Ya never get a vacation even when yer on vacation, boy,” he complained, shaking his head.

“I took a little family leave. The office can still reach me by email.”

“It’s like they have you on call,” John muttered. “You missed your calling. You should’ve been a doctor.”

“Might’ve saved me a stay in ICU.” Jonathan blew on his soup. “When are ya headed back?”

“Tomorrow,” Logan said.

“In he comes, out he goes,” his father mused.

“Sorry, Pop.”

“Man’s gotta make a livin’. Call when ya get back. Let me know nothin’ happened to ya with the shitty weather we’re gonna have. Four more inches, according ta the news. Saw that this morning before you kids got there ta pick me up.”

“Let me know when you’re set to go, Logan. I can pack you a lunch,” Rose offered.

“Don’t worry about it, darlin’.”

“Let her do it, man. Save a few dimes on the cost of food on the way back. We stopped at a Bob’s Big Boy on the way down. It was highway robbery,” John complained. “Not that you have to worry about that, anyway.”

“It’s renewal season. Mid-year is a different story. My voice mail’s so empty at work off-season that it practically echoes.” Logan then wondered why he bothered to rise to his brother’s bait. John earned almost as much as Logan did but had a family to spend it on.

“Sounds like they still think yer important.” Jonathan stared at his son thoughtfully. “Hey, Jimmy, c’mon with me for a sec.” He struggled up from the couch. Logan hurried forward to help him, but his father fanned his hands away. “Yeah, yeah, I got it!”

“Hardheaded,” Logan muttered.

“Pot calling the kettle black,” Rose called back from the kitchen. As they passed by the other doorway to it from the hall, Logan saw Rose rummaging in the refrigerator for butter. He wondered what she was preparing to make.

He followed his father upstairs, mentally cursing the steps.

“Ya could’ve sent me up ta get whatever it was ya needed, Pop.”

“I wanted ta show ya a few things. Some stuff ya might wanna hold on to.” Logan still kept his hand at his father’s back as they climbed.

The attic door was still sticky when Jonathan opened it. The scent of lavender sachets and mothballs mingled with dust, making Logan sneeze.

“Gesundheit.”

“Phew. Itchy.” His father roamed the space, poking at boxes and old trunks. He spied a bookshelf in
the corner. “Here we go.” He pulled down two thick albums. “These are gatherin’ dust up here.”

“Pop…”

“Yer brother’s addicted ta that damned computer of his. Scanned a whole shitload of old photos of you kids and put ‘em on disc for me. Yer mom put together these scrapbooks. There’s all the old stuff, and a lot of pictures of you and Jean.” Logan swallowed, suddenly having difficulty.

“Ya don’t hafta give these ta me.”

“They’re yours if ya want ‘em.” Jonathan parked himself on a hassock and gestured for Logan to seat himself on an adjacent trunk. “How have ya been?”

“Things are things.”

“I mean, how are ya managing at home?”

“Things have been quiet.”

“Haven’t found anyone new?”

“I had lunch with someone. She was nice. Other than that, nah.” He didn’t want to get his father’s hopes up, but still… He wanted to give him good news. Logan felt so many times like he was bursting. He didn’t want to unload on his father, since his own burdens weighed heavily enough on him. Sometimes he edited himself. He substituted “I’m fine” for “My life’s turned to shit.”

His father sighed. “Ya can’t blame me for bein’ a little nosy. Or for wantin’ someone ta walk into yer life. Just checkin’.”

“Hey, it wouldn’t be a trip home if I didn’t have you an’ John breathin’ down my neck and fussin’ at me.” Logan leaned his elbows on his splayed knees and returned his father’s smirk. “That’s why I come home.”

“This is still yer home, ya know.” Jonathan handed him the albums. “Take ‘em. There’s some that are a riot. Who knows, I might just keep ‘em around ta embarrass ya the next time ya bring a lady friend home. Maybe that one ya took ta lunch.”

“Not likely, Pop.”

“She pretty?”

“Eye candy,” Logan shrugged.

“What does she look like?”


“Hnh. Sounds like Jeannie. Or like Rose.”

It only struck Logan then that his father was right. Damn.

“Wasn’t what I was goin’ for.”

“Probably not. But it happens. Ya tend ta reach out fer what’s familiar and comfy. Yer mom was a
lot like mine. I never admitted it until years down the line as we both got old. Jimmy…it’s all right to
miss yer mother. And I know it makes it hurt more, but it’s okay to miss Jeannie, too.”

“Pop, I’m fine. Everything’s peachy keen. Okay?”

“I’m sure yer okay. I’m sure yer great. Why wouldn’t ya be? I’m proud of ya. Did ya know that?”
Logan waved it away dismissively. His tone was gruff.

“Yer makin’ me blush, Pop.”

“Smart aleck. I’m proud of both of my sons. Ya’ve done a lot with yer life. I just wanna see ya
happy. Indulge yer old man. Find yer happiness, whether it’s in work, play, or findin’ someone ta
spend yer life with.”

“Jeannie was kind of it for me, Pop.” He leaned back and folded his arms. He looked like a sullen
boy. “There wasn’t anyone else like her.”

“There might not be. That doesn’t mean there’s no one else, though. You’re young. Not bad looking,
either, but I’m biased. Get a haircut, and ya might clean up okay.” Jonathan leaned forward and
slapped his knee. “Ya have a lot ta offer. Don’t ever sell yerself short. Yer not dried up yet.”

“Neither are you, Pop.”

“Shit, who said I said I was?”

They spent another half hour going through old heirlooms and junk. Logan pulled aside a few
clothes and books that he wanted, along with a couple of old model cars that he missed.

His father was snoring softly on the couch an hour later. John and Logan spent the rest of the
afternoon left to their own devices; John took the kids out for pizza while Logan checked his email
and voice mail accounts from his Blackberry and laptop. He used his father’s desk as his makeshift
office. By the time he finished reading all of the memos and reviewing all of the sales attachments, he
felt as though he’d spent as much time working as he would have, had he not been on vacation.

Logan stretched. He needed to get out of the house.

The sun already set; the sky turned from dove gray to inky black.

“Where are you going?” Rose looked drowsy from a nap. She had a pillow crease on her cheek.
Logan watched her heat up a cup of milk for her cocoa.

“The beach.”

“Are you nuts? It’s freezing!”

“I like lookin’ at the ice.”

“Go tomorrow before you leave.”

“I just wanna stretch my legs. I won’t be gone long.”

“Drive safe.”

“Get some rest yerself, darlin’. The kids are gone. Take advantage of it now.”

“Especially while this one’s being cooperative,” she told him, patting her stomach.
“Gimme another niece or nephew ta spoil.”

“You’re a pro.” She gave him a sympathetic look. “You’re good dad material, whether you go that route or not.”

“Might not happen. That’s what Vic and Laura are for.” He wrapped his scarf around his throat and zipped up his coat. “I’ll be back.”

The ocean was frozen, waves held captive in black and gray ice. Moonlight and parking lot lamps shone down on it, picking out diamonds and pearls in the dark. Instead of lapping water, he heard howling wind. He stood against it, turning his face in to it, even though it almost hurt to breathe the cold air.

He was unbreakable. He was immovable.

He didn’t need. Let everyone else need. Even let everyone else need him.

Sure. He told himself that.

His favorite Jim Croce song came on the radio as he sat in his car a few minutes later.

>And they say, "You don't tug on Superman's cape,
You don't spit into the wind
You don't pull the mask off that ol' Lone Ranger
And you don't mess around with Jim."

He tapped his hands on the dash to it, thawing out from his walk down the sand and snow. He wished he had someone to share the sight with, even though he liked being left alone with his thoughts. After developing cabin fever in his father’s home and having the kids underfoot for the past few days, he got too big a dose of the peace that he wished for now. His trip home beckoned to him and yawned open like a black hole.

He drove back and was glad he’d been out a while, having renewed his enthusiasm to be with his family once he collected himself. The house felt warm instead of stifling, and the air was filled with the scent of baking apples.

Rose was still in the kitchen where he left her. She stood by the sink with an apple she just washed, twisting it off its stem.

“What’re ya doin’?”

“Can’t keep out of the fruit. The pie’s not ready and I want one of these.” She continued to spin it. Her lips mouthed something Logan couldn’t hear.

“What are ya doin’? Talkin’ to it?”

“Nope. Figuring out who I’m gonna marry.”

“Yer already married!” Logan practically choked on a sip of the cocoa Rose had made.

“Girls always do this. You recite a letter of the alphabet for every spin of the apple. On the last spin, when the stem breaks off, that letter is the first initial of your husband.”

“Sheesh. That explains a lot.”

A vague piece of his conversation with Tory when they first met haunted him.
Some girls like spinning an apple off its stem. One turn for each letter of the alphabet."

Some girls. Not you?

Not my kind of wish.

He hadn’t a clue what she was getting at before; it didn’t help that she enthralled him and plied him with tequila.

Had she been burned?

Her MO at the office was clearly “hands off, Jack,” even if…well, her hands, said otherwise. And that mouth…damn it, that mouth.

Rose’s teeth crunching through the fruit brought him back to attention.

“You guys miss out on this stuff. Girls get to play all kinds of games like this before we’re old enough to wear lipstick.”

“I’ll stick ta Rock’em Sock’em robots.”

“Wussy.”

*

Ororo looked up mid-click as she cranked out another memo to Selene about an add-on plan for an April renewal when she noticed an envelope zinging across her screen.

New message, Subject: Thank you!

It was from Monet.

Ororo, thank you SO much for coming out to my dinner, and thanks again for the box. Those outfits are beautiful. I’m afraid I’m gonna need ‘em sooner than I thought, I can’t even button my jeans. I’m holding ‘em shut with rubber bands under one of Everett’s long shirts today. I appreciate you thinking of me.

Love, Monet

Ororo sighed. The note warmed her, but her melancholy threatened to come back.

Her weekend had been hell.

Ororo still enjoyed Christmas, but she despised post-holiday clean-up. Taking down a tree wasn’t a problem this year, thanks to her trip, but that left her usual burden of finding room for her purchases and gifts.

That meant throwing old stuff out. It was a bear. Too many decisions, too many promises that she would find the time and place to wear things she’d bought on impulse, and too much guilt to simply take some of it back to the store when she had the gift receipts in her purse.

She went through her closet first, diving straight into the back. About two dozen hangers of goodies hadn’t seen the light of day in months.
She hauled them out and dumped them on the bed, leafing through each one.

Peasant dress from the cotton store downtown. That had to go first. What had she been thinking? It looked like old lady cruise wear.

White pants. No. Gotta go.

Ditto a navy blue dress that looked good in the store but became the most boring thing in her wardrobe fast. It almost worked for work, except it was too casual. The right shoes could save it, the right hair could save it, and some jewelry would pep it up, but that was reaching, trying to build a look that just wasn’t her.

Lycra-blend wrap dress. That could stay.

Slightly faded denim jacket. That could stay in the back until spring. No brainer.

She folded the castoffs and tucked them into a cardboard box, returning some of the hangers to the rod. Ororo paused as she came to several outfits she didn’t recognize.

She held up the first, a long, simple A-line black dress with an empire waist. She held it up to herself in the mirror and scowled. Why was it cut so loosely? She spied the care tag: 100% cotton, tumble dry low. Size 10. Motherhood Maternity…

The room spun for a moment. Ororo sat numbly on the bed; the garment lay draped across her lap. She stared at it, stroking the soft fabric thoughtfully.

She went through the motions with the next several outfits. Only two of them were missing price tags. They were either spanking new or worn once or twice, in perfect condition.

_This stuff always looks cute in the store. Once it’s on your body, it’s a different story._

Those had been her mother’s words the first time they’d actually walked into one of those stores. They rifled through rack after rack. N’dare held up so many outfits against her, clucking over the color, guesstimating how long she’d be able to wear each and whether it was even worth the money.

One by one now, she removed each garment from its hanger and laid them aside in a pile. Dark, boot-cut slacks with a Lycra insert in the waist. A black sweater. A red track suit with black trim on the cuffs. Three long-sleeved tees with gathers in the side seams, forming a convenient “pocket” for her belly. Winter clothes, anticipating a spring baby.

They all had to go. She had no room. No what ifs, no waffling and no promises to herself that they’d come in handy or that she’d miss them.

She folded them and packed them into a separate box. Ororo marked the first collection of rejects “Goodwill” with her Sharpie pen. She addressed the second one to Monet’s home.

Ororo ran her errands next, needing to get out of the house. She played her radio uncharacteristically loud, belting out Mary J. She knew drivers in neighboring lanes must have thought she was nuts, but she didn’t care.

She was restless in the post office, practically shoving the box at the worker in the next window. Ororo whipped out her debit card and paid for the exorbitant express postage, hoping Monet would consider it a late Christmas, early Valentine’s gift.

She went to the Safeway down the street from her apartment and bought groceries she didn’t need.
She contemplated a pint of Ben and Jerry’s Phish Food, playing “should I or shouldn’t I?” until the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey.”

“Hey, who?”

“Whaddya mean, who? I rate that high, huh?”

A cold knot formed in her stomach, and Ororo set the ice cream down on the counter. “Hi. What do you want?”

“Can’t call just to talk, huh?”

“Because we’ve had so much success in that department before.”

“You think it’s from lack of trying, though. That’s what you’ve always thought.”

“No. You’ve just proven me right. Again. Goodbye-“

“No. Don’t. Hold on. I need something. That’s why I called.”

“What?”

“The receipt for the pink slip when we renewed it.”

“The Jeep’s in your name now, Victor.”

“I know that. But you were the one who went to the DMV. Unless you wanna claim it, darlin’.”

“Don’t call me that. And don’t bother trying to be nice.” She thunked the phone down on the counter, not caring that he was still talking. It felt good to hear his voice getting far away as she stalked to her room.

She jerked her filebox out of the tiny cabinet by her desk and rifled through a folder called “Tax records.” She found the receipt exactly where it needed to be.

“Five hundred fifty-six bucks. Paid in full. I’ll drop the receipt in the mail.”

“Ya don’t hafta do that.”

“What, you want an audit? Keep it for your records.”

“Geez…”

“Is that all you called for?”

“Yeah…geez. Shit. No. I just wanted…I guess I wanted ta tell ya I’m sorry. I know it kinda sucks for ya ‘round this time of year, Tory-“

“How would you know? You don’t know that much about me if you think I’m having this conversation with you right now.”

“What, I can’t be sorry?”
“I don’t know. You didn’t act all that sorry before you left. Don’t tell me that just to make yourself feel better.” She softened slightly. “You don’t have to. I don’t need that from you, Vic.”

“Sure. Sure, ya don’t. Because yer all about not needin’ anything, Tory.” Her eyes sparkled with tears she refused to shed.

“Fine. That’s exactly what I’m about. I’ll let you get back to your life.”

“Tory…it hurts. It still hurts. Okay? Am I allowed to tell ya that?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I can’t take it back. It does hurt. I guess…if I’m feelin’ this way, I know yer feelin’ it a lot worse, and I’m havin’ a hard time with that. I hate that I caused a lot of yer pain about this.”

“You’re giving yourself too little credit,” she snapped. Ororo’s breathing grew slightly ragged. Her chest felt tight. She began to fan her eyes to dry them before she embarrassed herself. He just wasn’t worth it anymore.

“Ya don’t wanna hear me out?”

“So, what? You’re guilty? And this is supposed to make it better? That’s like giving me a Band-Aid when I’m bleeding out!” Ororo grew more agitated and began to pace her kitchen.

“I know how ya felt about becomin’ a mother.”

“What you DON’T know was how I felt about being a wife. Didn’t seem to matter to you, did it?”

“Tory…fine. Ya know what? I don’t wanna go here with ya either, any more than ya wanna hear from me. I guess I thought…I don’t know what I thought.” He paused. “It’s all about you. You’re the only one who lost him, huh? Just you.”

“Just me, you sonofabitch.”

“That’s what I thought. Bye, Tory.”

And oh, how it hurt. His pain magnified her own and resonated through her like a corridor of echoes. She slumped back against the refrigerator and stared ahead into space. Ororo didn’t get back up until her heartbeat slowed back to normal.

For a few moments, Victor’s voice had sounded wounded and contrite, almost like a sad little boy. That made it worse, made her feel like the bad guy. More often than not, Ororo knew that was the toughest weapon in Victor’s arsenal before they went their separate ways. He had no right to make her feel that way.

She had no appetite for the ice cream. She stuffed it into the back of the freezer for future emergencies and went to lie down.

* 

Ororo finished her memo and sent it off to Selene for a quick proof. She began to tackle some of her filing, sorting through the stack of paper in her inbox. It felt good to shred the duplicates, and to just be destructive in general. Each sheet made a satisfying, grinding, crunching noise as she fed them into the slot.
She stayed busy. It helped. Somewhat.

A knock on her door interrupted her “spring cleaning” of her emails. She cringed when the system administrator sent her a note that she was on his most wanted list to delete her bulk mail and cut her mailbox down to size to save bandwidth on the server.

“Mind if I come in?” Selene trilled as she entered without waiting for the answer.

“Feel free.”

“I got the memo. I had a couple of tweaks I wouldn’t mind seeing you make.”

Ororo fumed silently. “That’s fine.”

“I see you already sent it out, though.”

“The rates aren’t going to change for what we sold. It’s all there in the narrative and breakdown of what they had with their previous carrier.”

“That’s fine,” Selene agreed quickly. “I just want the memo more…polished.”

“Did you redline it?”

“Of course!” she chirped. Ororo had no doubt that her document was bleeding a slow death in her inbox.

“I can recall the other one and send out a note that I’ll have this one back before lunch.”

“Excellent. That’s my girl. Oh, Tory, before you do that, I wanted to lay something on you.”

*I can barely move now.* “Shoot.”

“Business travel.”

“For…?”

“A conference in Boston.”

“Not more training?”

“No. More of a meet and greet, and the chance to get to know some of the account managers there. It’s just nice to see how they run things at our sister sites, share processes and make sure the left hand knows what the right is doing.” Ororo felt irritated that she used Logan’s phrase but merely smiled.

“Have to keep everyone on the same page.”

“Which is like herding cats sometimes,” Selene admitted. “I just think it’s a nice opportunity to see one of our business hubs.” Something in Selene’s expression gave Ororo pause.

“Why? Are you planning to work there more often?”

“I’m tentatively considering a move there.” Ororo’s mouth dropped open.

“You’re kidding. I thought you loved living here in the Big Apple.”

“I’m ready for something new. Conquer some new territory, see some new faces, have a little new blood.” Her stark red lips bloomed into a smile. “And I have a special interest in that particular site.”
“And that is…?”

“A certain member of our AMT who I’ve been keeping in touch with.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve met someone?” Ororo knew she must have looked like a fish flopping off the hook.

“Donald.”

“It rings a bell.” She was drawing a blank.

“Donald Pierce. The one in Implementation. He’s kind of a pen pal.”

“Kind of, huh?” Ororo’s slow smile made Selene toy with a lock of her hair. Ororo never thought she would see the day.

“You could say that.”

“This is big. How does he feel about seeing more of you, is he excited?”

“He better be!” Selene tossed her hair and planted her hand on her hip in a gesture Ororo recognized, having done it enough herself. “But in the meantime, I had Tessa go ahead and schedule the flight. You know how to fill out the new form for the expense report, right? You’ll have an Amex card for car rental if you need it. Don’t go over fifteen dollars per meal.”

_Huh?_ How did it go from simply telling her there was a conference to actually shoving her on a plane without so much as a by-your-leave? “When is it?”

“Next week. That won’t be a problem?” She didn’t really phrase it as a question.

“I guess it can’t be. I’m on board.”

“We’ll take the same car again, okay? Pack something warm!” And she was off before Ororo could get her bearings. But what else was new?

*

Logan’s inbox was stacked with folders and memos when he got back.

“Good ta be home,” he muttered as he booted up his PC and read the morning news from the company Intranet site.

His dad’s house had been comfortable, but Logan always slept better in his own bed. Part of him still craved the slower pace of his hometown, though. He felt chafed by the city bustle already. Every bus felt too crowded, every street a little too noisy.

He medicated himself with his mug of Dunkin’ Donuts coffee and hit his emails. Despite his efforts on his laptop on his trip, his Outlook still burst with new messages, all red-flagged with attachments.

“Hey, stranger. When did you get back?” Scott’s voice was too chipper that early in the morning.

“Last night.”

“How was your dad?”

“Ornery as all get-out. He’s feelin’ a little better, but he could use a little more meat on his bones.
Rose is takin’ care of that part. She made pie.”

“Heck, yeah, that’s what I’m talking about,” Scott agreed. “How were things back at the house?”

“The same. John and I put in a new furnace, though. Lettin’ someone else do it woulda set Pop back too much.”

“Good job. You only get one dad in this life.” Scott had lost his in a plane crash three years prior and was still feeling his loss keenly. His demeanor was cheerful most of the time, but occasionally sadness lingered in his eyes and around the corners of his mouth. It was a common bond between him and Logan once Elizabeth passed away, something that drew them together for talks over beer and darts.

“Whaddya got goin’ on today, Summers?”

“Tying up loose ends on the X-Factor account.”

“What’s that?”

“That sports drink company. They skimped a little and only bought one out of network plan with flexible spending.”

“Short and sweet, eh?”

“Yup. I have a meeting with their director later this morning. Should be a piece of cake.”

“I miss anything else?”

“Not unless you mean the conference tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Logan scowled and scanned through his emails, finding several with that in the subject line. “Shit.”

“It’s here, on the fifth floor. Pretty mellow. Cassandra Nova and a couple of the other directors planned this as a thank-you for a successful 1/1.”

“It’s not successful yet; it ain’t over. I’ve ten more clients this month alone that want to add on and change everything retro’d back.”

“Hey, take what you can get! It’s catered. It’s nice to get some props every now and again.”

“Could’ve spent the money on a bonus.”

“That would make too much sense.” Logan snorted and took a thirsty gulp of his joe.

“It’ll be a nice break from teleconferencing with everyone here.”

“Fair enough.”

“I’m considering heading out for lunch today. Did you bring anything?”

“Nah.” His cupboard was bare, once Logan threw out anything that spoiled in his fridge while he was out of town. It was time to go shopping.

“Wanna hoagie?” Logan’s mouth watered.
“Now you’re talkin’.”

“Shoot by at eleven so we can beat the rush.”

Three hours later found Logan grumbling under his breath and wanting something much stronger than coffee. He loved it when a client bought more than what was proposed, but waiting for sign-off was the eighth ring of hell.

He finally archived the emails he wanted to save and dumped the rest before checking his voice mail.

*You have five unread voice messages.* He punched his way through each.

“Hey there, Jim. It’s Maddie. You know, Madelyne here in New York. I was wondering if you could manage to pencil me in. I’m flying in for the conference on Friday. I’ll have a relatively early flight, it gets in at five, and I wouldn’t mind…dinner, or something. Let me know what you think. Her voice sounded silky and full of promise. Logan smiled and contemplated the possibilities.

It was just a business trip. It wasn’t like he saw her every day, or anything.

Harmless.

Right?

He pondered it on the walk to the sub shop with Summers. The cold air made his eyes water, but it was good to see daylight.

“They’ve got a decent tuna here.”

“The hell with that. I want meat. Lots of meat.”

“The number nineteen’s practically a heart attack on a plate.”

“I’ll have two.” Logan eventually only ordered the twelve-inch with a bag of sour cream and onion chips, but he tore through it like a lion set upon a wildebeest’s throat.

“Gonna have a full house tomorrow. Hope we have enough space to put everybody if they have to telecommute.”

“Probably gonna be packed asses to elbows,” Logan grumbled around a mouthful of pastrami and cheese. “I almost wanna take another day off.”

“You don’t look like you rested much.” Scott looked concerned. Logan waved it off.

“That wasn’t the point of the trip anyway, Summers. I had to take care of business.”

“So, you’re brother was there? How about the kids?” Scott loved kids and eventually wanted a whole houseful when he found Mrs. Right.

“They’re gettin’ big. Pretty soon, Vic’s gonna be big enough to get me in a headlock.”

“So, what, a few weeks from now?” Scott joked, checking his watch.

“Punkass.”

“Isn’t Rose expecting again?”
“Yup.”

“I liked her when you had her over to that garden party Jean threw.”

“Couldn’t separate ‘em the whole time.” Logan heard more about beauty appointments, compost, feminine product comparisons, catalog parties and how “your body never really goes back to what it was after you have a baby” than he ever wanted to know every time he walked into the kitchen. Rose was Jean’s partner in crime.

“How’re you holding up?”

“Good enough. Still standin’.”

“Any new developments?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Developments,” Scott repeated meaningfully. “Whatever happened after that hookup in Mexico?” Logan choked on his soda and glared at Scott through watery eyes.

“What *aarghh* the *kaff* fuck, Summers! Shit. Ya tryin’ ta kill me. Hookup, he says.”

“Take it easy. What else do you want me to call it? Have you ever heard back from her? Stay in touch?”

What the heck could he say?

He settled on “Ya don’t wanna know.”

“Wait…so you have kept in touch? C’mon, Logan, don’t leave me hanging, ‘bro.”

“Keepin’ in touch ain’t how I’d put it, but fine. I’ll give ya that.” Logan wiped crumbs and mustard off his fingers with a paper napkin. “Found out late in the game that she’s on the network. All the same accounts for our market.”

“Same accounts? Wait…she works for the company?” Scott was incredulous.

“Damn skippy.”

“Which branch?”

“New York.” A light went on in Scott’s eyes. He stared at Logan agape.

“Holy crap.”

“Yeah. Took me by surprise.” He waited for Scott to drop the other one.

“Ororo?”

“That’s what she goes by, apparently.” Logan was still sour about the case of mistaken identity.

“Apparently? Why? She didn’t tell you that was her name before?”

“Nope. She was Tory.”

“Wait…right,” Scott said, slapping his forehead. “That’s why that was so damned familiar. Wow.”
“Wow.”

“How often does something like that happen in the universe?”

“This shit doesn’t.” Logan sucked down most of his soda. “It’s fucked up. She coulda told me.”

“Logan, when? Think about it. You said she left the hotel before you woke up. She was certainly gone when I got there.” Scott grinned. “You were torn up, man.”

“Fuck off, Summers!”

“Still, she was probably embarrassed. One night stand, you guys probably had a little alcohol. What would you have done if she’d been there? What would you have said?”

“What do ya usually say when ya wake up with someone ya don’t plan on seein’ again?”

“That’s just it. You’ve seen her. That doesn’t just happen. This is big.”

“Pfft,” Logan tossed back. “Sure it is.”

“You could have gotten her number.”

“Before or after her dress was hangin’ from the rafters?” Scott sighed.

“It just would have been cool.”

“That’s what you think. I don’t do long distance relationships. I don’t want a pen pal.”

“She seems nice. I like her.”

“So? She’s in the address book. YOU call her. She drives me nuts.”

“Why? She’s awesome. I love her emails. She’s quite the kidder.” Scott crunched a couple of chips. “Cute, too.”

“She ain’t cute.” It was too weak a description and wasn’t a word in Logan’s vocabulary, anyway. She was sex on legs. Hot legs. Oh, what he could do – already did – with those legs…

“Good looking, then. She’s unique.”

“Ya plan on tryin’ a start something with her?”

“Would you care if I did?”

Logan’s fists balled up so tight his knuckles nearly popped through the skin.

“Yup. No go. I get it.” Scott wasn’t blind. “You still have a thing for her. Don’t you.”

“Yer full of shit. As if.”

“Defensive,” Scott tsked. “Man, you’re transparent. Don’t worry. I won’t blame you, and I won’t say anything.”

“Ya’ve already said too much. I ain’t goin’ there. We had fun, but it ain’t in the cards.”

“Why not stop treating it like a game? Talk to her.”
“We don’t get along, in case ya haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve hardly seen you two say two words to each other aside from meetings. You guys seem civil enough.”

“Hand her a few sharp objects the next time ya see her and me in the room, Slim, and ya can probably kiss my ass goodbye.”


“Compatibility’s the problem, somethin’ we don’t have, Scott.”

“If you say so.” They finished their sandwiches and watched the Knicks game on the TV mounted over the counter.

*

The following morning found Ororo staring out the hotel window at the snow flurries and white sky. She didn’t look forward to going back out in it. Selene’s sharp knock interrupted her thoughts.

“Give me a moment,” she called as she retrieved her winter boots. She opened them and whistled at her manager’s long black coat. The collar was trimmed in what looked like real mink. “You want to risk wearing that out in the street? With all those animal rights nuts walking around with spray paint and ketchup?”

“Plenty of women in Boston wear fur,” Selene argued. “It’s not even that much. I’m no Philistine walking around in hides that still have the heads attached, for God’s sake.” Ororo shrugged and tugged on her boots. She tucked her heels in her carryall and shouldered her way into her long violet wool coat.

Ororo walked fast once they left the lobby, partly due to the cold and to make a speedy getaway before PETA caught up to Selene’s mink. They made it to the parking garage with no incident and used the GPS, getting slightly turned around on a couple of one-way streets.

“Remember your badge,” Selene nagged as she parked. Ororo wrestled with her carryall and fished it out of her purse in tandem, wishing she had more hands. Her security lanyard dangled from her hand as she flashed it at the receptionist. Her name plaque on the circular desk named her Yukio. Ororo sighed inwardly; she was garbed in all black, like Selene. It was practically standard issue, the company’s armor for everyone Ororo saw in the building.

“Sign in for me?” She handed the clipboard over the counter. “Wow! Don’t you both look nice!” Ororo smiled back; without turning her head, she felt Selene preening under her praise in her coat.

“Which floor do we want?”

“Fifth. Straight up, down the hall to the left.”

“Is there a…bathroom?”

“Right around the corner, Sunshine.” The receptionist winked. Ororo felt as though she’d been undressed. Selene cleared her throat.
“Thank you,” she said stiffly as they hurried through the double doors, keying the plate with their IDs.

A quick pit stop, makeup touchup, and trip to the water fountain later, they headed up in the surprisingly plush elevator. Music even played softly through the speakers.

“So far, this is nice.”

“I’ll be impressed if they have decent food.”

“People don’t do too shabbily in regard to food here. I’m dying to hit Faneuil Hall if we get to go to Quincy Market this week.”

“It’s not in my day planner. We’re not going to be in town that long.”

“Never mind. It was just a thought.” But Ororo was disappointed. What was a trip to Boston without doing some sight-seeing?

They followed the tide of business suits toward the huge conference room. The tables had been reconfigured into three large circles to enable people to talk more easily without having to lean over their neighbors.

“Hello, stranger,” a deep, slightly nasal voice purred. Ororo recognized it quickly and knew immediately it wasn’t for her.

“There you are,” Selene cooed back. She took Donald Pierce’s hand in both of hers and held it too long. He wasn’t bad looking, Ororo mused; tall, blond, and relatively fit for a man who looked to be in his early fifties. He wore a double-breasted power suit in – of course – black, but interestingly, his shirt, vest and tie were all blazing white. He and Selene practically matched.

“You made it all right.”

“We did. How long have you been here?”

“I came in a couple of hours early so I could finish running the eligibility tapes Nate sent.”

“Eager beaver.”

“Early bird,” he shrugged. His eyes crinkled and he slowly let go of Selene’s hands for appearance sake. And to shake Ororo’s briefly. His grip was so firm it hurt. Ow. Leggo! She smiled with some difficulty.

“Nice to meet you, Donald.”

“Call me Don.”

“Thanks.”

“And you go by…?”

“Tory,” Selene offered for her. “She’s my star underwriter.”

“Oh. Wait…isn’t that…”

“Ororo,” she piped up.
“Ah.” Donald’s expression was bland. “Have you had any coffee yet?” It was directed mainly at Selene. Ororo drifted away, planning to find a table to park their coats.

Halfway down the aisle between tables, she heard her name.

“Ororo?” She was smiling before she even turned around. Scott looked fresh and comfortable in a sweater and blazer. He clasped her shoulder warmly and shook her hand properly, without crushing her knuckles.

“Yay. Someone sane.”

“Jury’s still out on that. And the morning’s young. How was your flight?”

“Short and cold. I had on my coat for most of it and those little blankets they give you suck.”

“You look nice.”

“Likewise.”

“Hungry? They set out a few goodies already to pick at.”

“I could eat a moose. Without condiments or utensils.”

“Easy, killer.”

“Lead the way.”

They wove their way through the growing crowd, doling out a round of “excuse me’s” and “beg your pardon’s.” It was par for the course; Ororo was from the city. She didn’t know what wide open spaces were.

Ororo practically fell over a woman who backed up right into her path, nearly knocking her off her spindly stiletto heels.

“Oh!”

“Gah!” She was petite. Ororo was grateful she didn’t bowl her over.

“I wasn’t watching.”

“No harm done.”

“Didn’t I see you at that training?”

“We sat in the same aisle,” Ororo reminded the redhead politely.

“That’s it. I’m Maddie.”

“Tory.”

“So you work out of the New York office, then? That’s your home base?”

“Yup.”

“You’ve got the accent.”

“So do you.” Maddie sounded like a total New Englander, including the slightly flat vowels and the
Suddenly Maddie looked past Ororo’s shoulder and her face lit up. “Could you excuse me?” Before she could even reply, Ororo watched her gallop off in her high heels toward the exit.

“James! You made it!”

Ororo watched in disbelief as Logan smiled casually at her approach. The redhead heifer shook his hand, holding onto it like it was made of gold. She leaned in and gave him a one-armed hug and cheek rub combo.

“Well…shit.”
Buffet Line

Chapter Summary

“I have a few things on my plate.”

“Looked like Scott was helpin’ ya polish ‘em off a minute ago.” Her brows drew together.

“Were you watching me?”

Ororo bit savagely into a thin, rolled-up piece of turkey. It was her second trip through the buffet line, even though the food was tasteless. She had nothing better to do.

Except eavesdrop. And glare.

“So how have you been?” Scott was good-natured, as usual, but Ororo had a hard time holding up her end of the conversation.

“Not too bad.”

“How’s the weather in New York?”

“Not too bad.” It was unwitting lie. It was ten degrees.

“What color is they sky on Mars?”

“Not too…wait. What?”

“That’s what I thought.” Scott cracked open his Sprite and took a thirsty gulp. “You’re a little distracted.”

“That bad?”

“I’ve been having a conversation with the side of your head since you got here.”

“I’m sorry.” Ororo looked contrite. Scott patted her shoulder.

“Stress?”

“I guess.”

“It’s a hard time of year. I get a little SAD.”

“Cheer up,” Ororo said. “It’s not that bad.”

“No, not sad. SAD. Seasonal affective disorder.” Ororo snickered and rolled her eyes.

“Ahhh, Cabin fever? Psychosis from having to scrape your car and thaw it for twenty minutes before you go anywhere?”
“Now you’re listening to me,” Scott said. His grin created tiny crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

“I just hate business travel this time of year. Scratch that. I hate business travel, period.”

“It’s nice to network,” Scott pointed out.

“I guess.”

“Ever think about working out of one of our sister sites?”

“I like New York.”

“It wasn’t bad when we went for that training,” Scott allowed. “But I like the old history of Boston. I don’t know why. And I’m just used to it. I like riding the trains and looking out over the harbor. Seeing the old statues. Going to Quincy Market.”

“I’ll give you that,” Ororo said. “I loved Quincy Market the last time we went.”

“Have you been to the aquarium?”

“Not yet.”

“Put it in your planner for the next time you come out this way. When it’s warm.” Ororo laughed.

“Fair enough. Then it’s your turn. Off-Broadway show?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Ororo’s gaze drifted off again, and this time Scott followed her eyes across the room.

Logan was engaged in shop talk – more or less – with Madelyne over by the large window that had a view of the street.

“I’ve really been pushing flexible spending. The clients seem to like adding it to their out of area plans.”

“It’s the future of health care. More out of pocket cost for the member, sure, but they have more options of where they can go.”

“Nobody wants a gatekeeper HMO anymore,” she agreed. “But the customer’s always right.”

_The customer’s always right_… Ororo mimicked Madelyne’s words in her head, giving her a nasal falsetto with a New England accent for good measure.

“Are you gonna eat that?” Scott eyed Ororo’s plate.

“Huh?”

“Want your ham roll?”

“Knock yourself out. Actually, I’m full…”

“Waste not, want not. Saves me a trip to the table.”

Ororo listened to Scott with half an ear. Madelyne was getting too familiar, picking lint off of Logan’s blazer and occasionally laying her hand on his shoulder as she laughed at what he said. Frequently.
Heifer.

Asshole… What’d Summers think he was playing at?

Logan found himself staring at the space between Maddie’s perfectly waxed red brows whenever she spoke, but whenever he found a moment, his eyes found Ororo, smiling charmingly at Scott.

He longed to knock him upside the back of the head.

Their conversation looked safe enough. Scott was standing too close for Logan’s comfort, but he was being a good boy and keeping his hands to himself. Except for the random trips his fingers made to her plate to steal an occasional cookie or tidbit of lunch meat. Had Logan watched Ororo while she was in the buffet line? Heck, yeah. Had he watched her eat?

Now that was a dumb question.

He liked watching her eat. There was something about that full, lush pink mouth, watching her push small morsels between her lips and lick her fingers clean before reaching for her napkin. Damn.

“…and I was thinking, after this 1/1 push plays out and things are a little less hectic, what do you think about driving down to Miami?”

“Huh?”

“You know,” Madelyne smiled, “get some sun and fresh air, see different sights than all this dirty snow.”

“That’s, uh, nice. I, uh, don’t know when I’ll get the time-“

“Let’s set a date.” She was already fishing in her purse for her Blackberry. Logan cursed to himself. 

Fuck. Fuck.Fuck.

“I’ve got some time open in March. Pensacola’s nice, too, I have a few favorite haunts down there from the last time I met a client for their July renewal. Or we could check out Epcot?”

“Um. Maddie…here’s the thing.” He searched for that “thing” frantically. “I was thinkin’…maybe a road trip’s a little…ambitious.” Her mouth formed a small moue of disappointment.

“Oh. Well, if you don’t like spending that much time in the car…?”

“Well-“

“How about something closer? I’ve been wanting to see the Smithsonian. Only a couple of hours on the road instead of a day. The Air and Space exhibits are my favorite. Did I mention I used to fly planes?”

“No. Ya didn’t, actually.” That caught his interest, briefly. To her credit, Maddie wasn’t shallow, Logan decided, maybe even multi-faceted.

That made it hard. At best, all he wanted was a distraction. But from what?

What, really?

She went back to her day planner. Logan’s eyes flitted back toward the aisle between table sections.
She was wearing more of that damned black, but she wore it well. This time it was a simple wrap dress beneath a long, slate gray cardigan. Nondescript silver earrings dangled from her ears, along with a silver bracelet that did little to brighten the sedate outfit. Logan wanted to rip down that damned snug bun, too. Who had hair like that and restrained it so much? What was she thinking?

The only benefit was the sight of those long calves, tapered and curving, made even more tempting by a pair of sexy black pumps. All right, he amended, she got the shoes right…

She felt his eyes on her, he told himself. She turned, angling her whole body by slow degrees like a tree reaching for sunlight.

They shared a charged look. Logan saw Ororo swallow, possibly clearing her throat. Was that a flush of pink in her cheeks?

“Sure you don’t want a cream puff?” Scott’s voice broke her trance.

“No. I couldn’t.”

“I can’t tempt you?”

_Not like he can, the bastard… “I’m fine. I might just get another soda.”_

“Sprite?”

“Mugg, if they have it.” Scott grinned and was off before she could get it herself. He was so sweet…

She didn’t read a “spark” from Scott, which was both a disappointment and a relief. But Ororo occasionally missed having good, old-fashioned male attention. Flirting. Quiet dinners. Phone calls and text messages on her coffee breaks. But none of the good stuff came free. The price was drama. Second-guessing and screaming matches she could do without, thank you very much.

Scott came back and they sat down again. He tucked into his dessert while she sipped her drink.

“Did you get the rates I sent out yesterday?”

“Sure did. You updated the database with the attachments?”

“Yup.”

“It’s so good to work with someone who’s actually on top of their game,” Scott mused. “Selene’s old underwriter was a piece of work. You had to practically beg her to route anything to the management team.”

“I won’t even go there.” Ororo hated to speak badly of Amara, her predecessor. She’d spent two weeks just cleaning out old hard files with out of date contacts and duplicate copies of contract revisions that had been rescinded and replaced.

“Yeah. I know. I won’t spend all day ragging on her, either, but I’m glad you stepped in. You’re a good addition to the AMT.”

“Thanks. You’re a pal.” Scott chuckled.

“Just a card-carrying member of your growing fan club.” Scott changed the subject. “So…I heard it through the grapevine that you like Mexico?”
“Huh?”

“You took a trip there this Christmas?”

“Oh. Yeah, I did.” Ororo squirmed beneath his gaze. “It’s no big deal, Scott, but do you mind my asking…where did you hear that?”

“Selene.” To Scott’s credit, he lied well. She smiled in relief. “I was just curious. I’d wondered if you went around the same time I did.”

“Possibly.”

“Did you like it?”

“I loved it. I can’t wait to go again, once things settle down and I’ve saved some disposable funds.”

“What did you like the best?”

*The sunrise. Using Logan as a mattress.* “Probably the beaches. And I liked this little bar where…well, I liked the local color. And the food. Had some good, authentic tacos.” Scott nodded.

“Definitely. I loved the beaches. Turned red as a lobster, though.”

“Ouch. Poor baby.”

“It was worth it. The ocean was like bath water.”

“I don’t swim much, but I like the beach itself, just walking in the sand.”

“That makes me hate being here,” Scott mused. “Present company excepted.”

“Fair enough. Likewise. It was hard to come back. I wanted to make a U-turn as soon as I walked into my apartment.”

“Is it just you? Any pets? Roommates?”

“Thank goodness, no. I’ve been alone since my separation. My, myself and I.” Scott smirked.

“Like your own company more than anyone else’s?”

“It depends on the company. Sometimes, I don’t want to deal with anyone else’s neuroses except mine.” She stirred her ice cubes with her finger. “No one else knows how to deal with them. Does that sound selfish?”

“So you think no one else would have you, or you just haven’t tried?”

“Why do I sense a psych eval coming on?”

“No. No, no. Not at all. I just feel like I’ve had this talk before with someone else before.” Scott sat back in his seat. “How long were you married?”

“About two years, if you count the months after we actually filed the paperwork to split up. Can we talk about something else?”

It was too tempting to vent and pour out feelings she’d kept under wraps for so long. Scott was coming too close to scratching the surface, and he didn’t need an earful.
It made her feel too vulnerable.

She just wanted his friendship, and he seemed to feel the same.

“How about those Red Sox?”

See, she knew she liked Scott.

“So, what do you think?”

“Hm?”

“Dinner?”

That snapped him back to attention. “What’d ya have in mind?”

“Well, you suggest something. I don’t know what you like,” Maddie pointed out. “I like just about anything.”

That didn’t help Logan much. Everyone “liked anything” when you first dated them. That was fine for the first month, maybe two.

Then, the little things crept up and bit you, just like chiggers. She might not like old Three Stooges episodes or action movies or sitting in the back row of the theater. She might hate his favorite shirt or want to sleep on his side of the bed.

That left open another relevant, more immediate question: Did Logan want Maddie in his bed?

Shit. Just look at her… Who wouldn’t? She was hot. Logan wagered that she was a screamer. Or a cuddler, possibly. He didn’t mind some combination of the two.


“Chinese.” Logan could work with that.

“I actually know a nice Szechuan place instead. They’ve got this awesome spicy beef.”

“Friday?” Out came the Blackberry again. Maddie didn’t waste any time.

“Friday. Seven.”

“Six.”

“You’re the boss.” Moments later she breezed away, but not without another hug.

From across the room, Ororo felt her scalp tighten and a flush of heat prickle over her skin.

“Scott? Could you excuse me?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll see you…well, I’ll see you.”

“Ororo?” he said softly.
“Hm?” She jerked back around, flustered.

“Don’t forget to say hi to Logan before you head back to New York.” She wanted to frown. Instead, she looked resigned.

“I’ll take that under advisement.” She turned on her heel and fled, wanting the sanctuary of the women’s room.

Her heels clacked loudly on the tile, whether it was because of the shoes themselves or because she’d resorted to stomping, she couldn’t decide.

That’s what she got for eavesdropping. She’d missed most of Madelyne’s words, only listening to Logan’s voice, for the most part, but she heard “Friday” and “Six” loud and clear.

That was all she needed to know.

*It’s not like I care. So he wants to take her out to dinner. So what? She can have his ass…* She got to the rest room and did what needed to be done. Ororo emerged and gave herself a once-over in the mirror. Her eyes still had that pissed-off look. She also felt a headache coming on, which she marked up to her hairpins being too tight. It was too late in the day to completely redo her hair.

She dampened a wad of paper towels and blotched her cheeks to cool them, then laid them over her eyelids to reduce the headache. Ororo dove into her bag and found the bottle of Motrin, something she’d never traveled without once she started working for Selene. She popped two blue gel tabs and swallowed them with a handful of tepid water. Then she retouched her deep, raisin lipstick, pronouncing her appearance good enough.

The air in the corridor felt cooler now that she wasn’t in a crowded conference room. She was just about to head to the temporary work station reserved for herself and Selene when a deep, raspy voice stopped her.

“What’s yer rush?” She whipped around and faced Logan, confused.

Had he followed her?

“I didn’t want anything else. I figured I’d check my messages. Selene didn’t need me for anything just yet.” Ororo didn’t even know that for sure; she saw her manager networking with Donald and a handful of his reps by the dim sum table.

“Couldn’t be bothered ta stick around and socialize, huh?”

“I thought I was. Scott was regaling me of his trip to Mexico.” Logan’s nostrils flared. Ororo felt her stomach flutter.

“He was, huh? His trip ta Mexico?”

“He said the beaches were nice this time of year.”

“Bet they were.” Logan counted the ways he could kill Scott but came up empty as to how to dispose of the body. Ororo’s posture was haughty. She stood erect and with hands on her hips.

Her lips shone with a fresh coat of lipstick. It drove Logan just a little crazy, staring at it.

It was easier to be a little pissed off, and to annoy her just a little in the process.

“You like the beach,” he pointed out. Ororo’s eyes narrowed.
“Sometimes. Depends on the time of day. Or who I’m with.”

“Hm. Sure. Sure, it does.” His look was sly.

*Bastard.* It wasn’t helping that he looked so good in that suit, coffee brown wool and impeccably tailored to his muscular build. She fought the urge to touch him as Madelyne had and let her palm linger on his chest. Ororo congratulated herself on her self-restraint.

“I have a few things on my plate.”

“Looked like Scott was helpin’ ya polish ‘em off a minute ago.” Her brows drew together.

“Were you *watching* me?”

“Pfft... no.” He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall indolently. “Just saw ya passing by.”

“I saw you briefly,” she admitted, “but you looked occupied.”

“I was networking. It’s good ta get ta know yer coworkers. Build up a rapport and make good business relationships.”

“Spoken like a broker.” *Business relationships, my ass.*

“Ya don’t like me very much, do ya?”

“It’s not that.” Ororo skirted around him. “I just don’t think we ‘network’ very well.”

“But ya network just fine with Summers?”

“I get along fine with him. He’s very helpful, and I have no complaints. We don’t suffer from gaps in communication.” Her voice was dripping with scorn. That didn’t stop him from keeping stride with her as she reached the large suite. Ororo navigated the maze of cubicles, nodding brief hello’s to faces and name tags she recognized.

“Gaps in communication,” Logan mimicked. “Ya mean those carefully worded emails of yers, huh? Or those teleconferences where butter wouldn’t melt in yer mouth?”

“I know my Netiquette,” she insisted.

“That ain’t my point. Yer uppity.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ya know what I’m talkin’ about. Bossy. Most folks say ‘I hope ta hear from ya.’ Not you, Miss High an’ Mighty *Ororo.* It’s always ‘I look forward ta hearing from you.’ Like yer darin’ anyone not ta reply.”

“Of course I expect them to reply,” she huffed.

“But yer bossy about yer expectations. And uppity.”

“You’re so full of it.” *Full of shit...*

“Only time yer not bossy is when Selene’s in on the call. Then yer all about sweetness and light. Do ya squeeze the toothpaste fer her in the morning?”
“God, you’re sick…”

“No. That’s yer mind in the gutter. I just mean do ya ever let her do anything fer herself?”

_Not if she can help it… “She’s perfectly capable of handling an account when I’m not there.”_

“She didn’t even let ya unpack yer bags from yer trip before she was calling ya back in ta the office, did she?”

Darn him. He’d read her mind, the jerk.

She didn’t even realize she’d walked past her desk. He’d practically chased her in a circle around a block of desks. She pretended to need a cup of coffee, stopping by a table that had a pair of guest carafes set up and steaming. Ororo filled her Styrofoam cup and dumped in two more sugars than what she usually wanted, just to give her hands something to do.

“I can’t help it if she values me, can I?”

“Course ya can’t. Ya don’t take a lot of time ta yerself, do ya?”

“And that’s your business, why?”

“Ouch. Touchy.”

“Don’t you have anything to do? Like ‘networking?’” She made quote marks with her fingers. Logan’s lips twitched.

“Sure, darlin’. I’ll just let ya get back ta yer ‘messages.’” He made quote marks back, mocking her. She grumbled to herself once he was out of earshot.

“Yeah, you do that. ‘Darlin’.”

*

Logan’s enthusiasm about his work day being over faded once he crossed the threshold of his apartment. _Alone again._

He replayed his day as he rummaged through his freezer for some ground beef. As it rotated in the microwave on ‘thaw,’ he checked his mail. There were more bills, something he didn’t look forward to. Logan shucked his blazer and unknotted his tie, letting the tails dangle down his chest as he opened each envelope.

He punched the Play button on his answering machine and fixed himself a glass of orange juice.

_Beep._ “Where’s my boy? It’s Pop. John’s heading up this weekend. Wanted ta just check on ya and see if we could count on ya fer dinner on Saturday. It’s Vic’s birthday.” Logan lightly rapped his forehead with his fist. Shit. He’d forgotten. Logan saw a trip to Toys R Us in his future.

Then he remembered. He had dinner with Maddie on Friday. Screw it. There was his excuse not to cancel, just to cut things short, if he begged off with having to leave early in the morning.

The next two calls were hang-ups with blocked numbers.

_Beep._ “Logan, it’s Sara. Could you call me?”
Logan sighed. There went his peaceful night.

He wanted to call on a full stomach, but his phone rang before his spaghetti noodles reached al dente. Logan juggled the phone and the frying pan as he drained the fat.

“H’lo?”

“Logan? Hi. How’ve you been?”

“Hey, darlin’,” he answered, trying to infuse his voice with happiness he didn’t feel.

Sara. Her voice was so much like Jean’s, so many of the same inflections and ways that she pronounced the same words.

“I just thought about you and wanted to see how you’ve been. The kids have been asking about their uncle Jimmy.”

“Uncle Jimmy’s doin’ all right. They around? They wanna say hi?”

“They’re out with their dad.” Sara was in the thick of an ugly divorce. Logan didn’t want to touch that subject with a ten-foot pole, but he let her vent when she called.

“He takin’ ‘em somewhere special?”

“No. But he had some vacation time and wanted to give me a break. Nice of him, huh? I’m fixing a few things around the house and having the carpet cleaned in the meantime. Less foot traffic.”

“Sounds like a plan. Glad ya have a break.” Logan paused a moment. “Ya can always send ‘em my way if ya want. Maybe during their spring break. I don’t mind.”

“That’s sweet of you.” Sara cleared her throat. “I guess I just wanted to see how you were doing. Logan…I was looking online at this support group…”

Oh, no. There she went again…

“…it’s bereavement counseling for people who have lost a spouse.”

“It is, huh?”

“I know that it’s been a while since she’s been gone, but, maybe you’d get something out of it.”

“Yeah?” He couldn’t keep the note of skepticism out of his voice, wanting to bring bitterness with it.

“It’s up to you. But here, I found this link…” She read it off to him slowly, wanting him to write it down, obviously. He didn’t make a move to grab a Post-It from the cube on his counter, or the pen he had Velcro-ed to the fridge. “I just…I went through a lot after she died, Logan. I know you don’t…” Her voice began to break, but she sniffled, clearing her throat before she continued. “I know you don’t need me to unload on you, you have enough on your mind and in your heart.”

“That don’t mean ya can’t talk ta me, Sara. Yeah, I know, well, let’s say there is a limit ta how much I can deal with about how she died-“

“That’s what’s helpful about a group!” Sara’s voice brightened slightly, even though it was still full of unshed tears.

“I know ya think so, and it was thoughtful of ya ta think of me, darlin’. I appreciate it. I know some
folks don’t always get along with their wives’ families, but yer a peach. Ya’ve been a good sister-in-law, and that didn’t end because I lost Jeannie.” His voice faltered on his last syllables, and he had a hard time holding the phone to his ear. He cradled it against his pounding heart and took several ragged breaths. Cold prickles bathed his flesh and he rubbed his palm over his closed eyes.

“Logan? Are you there?” Sara sounded worried. “Logan? Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he muttered before lifting the phone back to his ear. “Yeah, darlin’, I’m okay. Peachy keen.” He heard her sigh.

“Okay. I believe you.” He gave a hollow little laugh. She echoed it. “God. It’s just good to hear your voice. But anyway, I was talking to my therapist, and she’s been helping me lately. I dream about Jean, sometimes.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you?”

“Not as much anymore.” It was a lie.

His dreams were merciless. Either so cold and empty he thought he was dying, or so red-hot with rage that waking up felt like an escape from hell.

“Wow. Is that…good, do you think?”

“I don’t know. That doesn’t mean fer a minute that I don’t think about her, kiddo.”

“I know.” She sounded indignant; maybe he was imagining it. “I didn’t say you haven’t been.”

“Glad ya got someone ta talk to.”

“It might help you, too.”

“I’m doin’ all right, Sara. I’m workin’. Things are goin’ all right. Scott’s been like a friggin’ mother hen.”

“He came to one of your parties once, right? The nice one with dark hair, kind of tall? Nice looking?”

“I ain’t a good judge of that, but yeah, that sounds like him. Boy Scout.”

“Yes!” she chuckled. “Definitely.”

“Just went ta lunch with him a few days ago. He’s doin’ fine.” Logan forced a smile into his voice. “He’s still single, FYI.”

“Oh! Silly! No, that’s nice to know, but I’ll pass.”

“All right. Just thought I’d lay that out on the table.”

“Okay.” There was a heavy silence that she broke with another sigh. “Logan…”

“I’m managin’ just fine, Sara. I promise.”

“It’s just…she was taken away from us too young! It wasn’t supposed to happen, none of it was supposed to happen…” Sara ran on autopilot, working her way back into the verbal breakdown that
characterized so many of their earlier talks. “She loved you so much, Logan.”

Logan’s grip on the counter white-knuckled. “Yeah,” he agreed. The spaghetti sauce in the skillet began to spatter his range top, but he didn’t care.

“I know things were rocky between you two.”

“That doesn’t matter. Once ya’ve lost someone, Sara, ya kinda see things in a different light.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t be sorry. Ya meant well. Ya’ve always meant well. Sara? Do me a favor. Don’t be sad. Not fer me. There’s gonna be days where yer gonna wanna cry, and I’m always here if ya wanna talk. But don’t be sad fer me. I have you and the kids and my dad, brother, his wife and kids. I have family. That means more ta me than anything else. I loved Jeannie, but I also love everyone she left behind.”

Except himself. That dangled unspoken between them. But his words had the effect he wanted.

“You’re so strong.”

“So are you.”

“No. I’m not. I’m falling apart. She was my big sister.”

“I know. Had it been Johnny, it’d be the same fer me.”

“Okay. I’ll stop. This is getting morbid.” Sara sniffled again. He almost saw her on her end of the line, mastering herself and wiping her green eyes. “So, how’s work?”

“Work. That’s about it.”

“Getting any new sales?”

“You know it. Busy renewal. Winter’s always busy.”

“Good. I hate how dark it is at this time of year.”

“We’re gainin’ light. The sun rises earlier in the morning, lately. Makes it easier ta get outta bed.” Logan believed that, completely. He had to.

“Let’s keep thinking of how to do things for the kids’ spring break, though. Maybe you could come down and see them?”

“I could do that. I ain’t got anything on my calendar yet, at least not travel-wise.” Logan suppressed a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“This coworker of mine. Well, she works off-site. But she asked me if I wanted ta go on a road trip.”

“You’re kidding. Wow.”

“Wow? What ‘wow?’”

“Well…wow! It’s just sudden. That’s funny. How long have you known her?”
“That depends. What time is it now?”

“Sheesh!” Sara chuckled. “Eager?”

“I guess.”

“What’s she like?”

“Pretty. Pleasant.”

“Would Joey call her a hottie?” Sara’s son was already ten and getting too worldly for his own good. Logan snorted.

“Yeah. He ain’t as picky as I am, but he’d be right on the mark.”

“You’re picky, huh?” He pictured Sara rolling her eyes.

“Hey, give me some credit.”

“Uh-huh. Suuuurrrre.”

“She’s all right. I’m on the fence. I suggested dinner.”

“Good.”

He wavered.

He almost wanted to ask Sara if she was okay with him seeing someone new, but he didn’t want the answer. He really didn’t. To his relief, she didn’t press him.

“I’m glad,” she insisted. “And it was really good to talk to you tonight.”

“Likewise, sis.”

“Take care.”

“Oh. By the way, I did get those boxes ya sent.”

“Did you get the chance to go through them?”

“I looked. Was that everything?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Appreciate it, darlin’.”

“Call you soon.”

“Sounds like a plan. Bye.”

“Bye.”

His stove looked like a Jackson Pollack painting. Logan turned off the thickening sauce and served himself a plate with little enthusiasm.
Chapter Summary

It didn’t make sense. The usual formula should have made perfect sense. See pretty woman. Flirt with pretty woman. Take pretty woman to dinner. Invite pretty woman inside. Make love to pretty woman until she spoke in tongues. Offer to call pretty woman next week. It all added up. Right?

Ororo nearly kissed her desktop monitor when she crossed the threshold of her office. She set down her Starbucks cup and multitasked, hanging up her coat and shucking her boots while her hard drive booted up.

The morning was crisp, still freezing, but there were patches of blue peeking through the clouds for a change. The piles of plowed snow on the sidewalks were finally beginning to shrink, but the weather forecast promised more snow by the weekend. Ororo was fine with that. She planned to hide on her couch in ugly pajamas, under a pile of blankets, remote in one hand and a pint of Haagen-Dazs in the other.

She despised Valentine’s Day.

The stores had pushed the season again once the last of the clearance-priced Christmas cards disappeared from the shelves. Every store window display was screaming red or cotton candy pink. If Ororo saw one more diamond commercial, she’d puke.

It brought back too many annoying, even embarrassing memories.

In elementary school, the holiday just meant making a mailbox out of a milk carton and getting paste on your fingers. Ororo’s mother was in her element, domestic diva that she was, and sent Ororo to school every year with a stack of perfect Valentines, one SweetTart taped to each envelope and made out with each child’s name in her elegant script. Ororo only had to scrawl her own name on the “From” line in red marker, and it was a done deal. And N’Dare always made cookies, sugar cookies with red M&Ms.

After sixth grade, it all went to hell.

Carnation Day.

It was the universe’s cruel joke on Ororo Munroe, karmic retribution for every white lie she’d told or bug she’d stepped on during her ‘tween-aged life.

Junior high was bad enough. Carnation Day was just wrong. The posters went up around school as soon as everyone came back from Christmas break. The sales in the cafeteria were advertised with fluffy Cupids in diapers, picked out in silver glitter. They mocked Ororo.

Red means romance. Pink means affection. White means friendship. More useless information someone had to beat into everyone’s heads, in every school bulletin and the student newspaper. Get your carnations for your sweetheart, only a dollar each.

Dutifully, she bought one white one for Anna, a no-brainer. Anna bought her pink ones, inevitably,
just because Ororo liked pink.

The Cuckoos had a field day on Valentine’s. It never failed. Emma showed up in home room with a big, fat bouquet of red roses from her parents, then “complained” at having too many flowers to stuff into her locker as the teacher began delivering the carnation orders, one name at a time.

It was humiliating.

There were always three or four kids who didn’t get any flowers at all, acknowledged with a shrug, or a simple duck of their face behind a text book. Or, like Ororo, with one lonely white flower (or pink), that she’d carefully tuck into the rings of her binder and carry around all day, watching it wilt.

But freshman year, her order got screwed up. Ororo received a red carnation.

“Ho. Lee. Shit.”

Anonymous.

Her heart pounded in her ears. Ororo’s eyes scanned her homeroom. No one was glancing her way, except Emma and Sophie, who smirked at the solitary little flower clutched in her sweaty grip. She inhaled its musty fragrance. Carnations didn’t smell particularly sweet, but still…red. Bright, passionate, romantic red.

No luck. No one looked like the likely sender. Shit.

She racked her brains all day. Anna caught up to her in the library. They ducked the media lady on her rounds and whispered at a table by the nonfiction section.

“Red? Ya got a red one? Lucky,” Anna Marie hissed. “Ah just got yers, and a white one from Betsy.”

“I don’t know who sent it. I can’t even ask anyone if they sent it.”

“No one was watchin’ ya when ya got it?”

“Nope.”

“Crap.” The librarian peered sternly over the rims of her glasses, silencing them.

They passed notes.

What about that guy in your gym class?

Nah.

There’s that guy that sits in caf 2. You’re in sixth lunch, right?

No. Couldn’t be. That didn’t mean that Ororo didn’t want it to be, however.

Lucas. Bishop.

He was fiiiiiiine. And he ignored Ororo completely, except for the occasional smirk when she tried to pretend she wasn’t staring. She always liked watching him play ball or hang out with his friends by the lockers in front of the field house.

It was wishful thinking.
Still…

Maybe she willed it. Maybe she’d stared too long again. But he turned and stared at her, long and hard. His eyes flitted over her, landing on the red carnation, slightly dented, protruding up from her binder.

Her feet betrayed her. Before she even rehearsed what she would say, she inched forward. Anna Marie looked up from her carton of milk.

“C’mon and eat, ‘Roro. I wanna fix mah hair before seventh-“

“Oh, fix it, already!” she hissed.

“Girl, where ya going? Oh. Shit. Girl, ya sure ya know what yer doin’? ‘Roro, get back here!” Anna Marie cried in a loud whisper.

Behind her, Anna Marie crossed her gloved fingers, then scratched her eczema from nerves.

There he was, sitting by the window. He peered back up at her, distracted from conversation briefly. He held up his hand to halt the chatter and focus on their new interloper.

“‘Sup.”

“H-hi, Luke.” She was about to quiver into a little puddle on the floor, and wanted to disappear into it. “Um. I just wanted to uh, y’know, say hi.” He smirked, leaning back against the edge of the table and crossing his arms.

“That all, girl?”

“Um. H-happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Whatever,” he huffed. He nodded to her limp red flower. “Do you know who gave you that?”

“N-no.” She was hopeful.

Her hopes were dashed.

“Neither do WE!” he crowed. His laughter was harsh. Ororo’s face flooded with heat and shame.

She bolted past Anna. “Roro, how’d it go?”

“Leave me alone,” she whimpered. She escaped to the refuge of the bathroom. The carnation promptly went into the trash, sticking up among the wadded up brown paper towels. She smashed it in more deeply with her fist, then pounded futilely against the mirror.

The ride home on the bus was hell. Ororo hated red carnations, Valentine’s Day, Luke Bishop, the Cuckoos, and herself, plus Anna, for good measure, who if she was a good friend would have tackled her to the ground before letting her walk over there.

Her mother looked up from her stack of bills at the dining table as she stomped inside. “How was your day?”

“Awful.” Ororo dropped her backpack on the chair by the kitchen door. Her pink carnation from Anna Marie tumbled out. Her mother looked surprised.

“That’s the only one? You didn’t get a red one?”
“Why?” Ororo asked sourly.

“Your father wanted to surprise you,” N’Dare said mischievously. “Sent you one on the fly.”

“WHAT???”

“He wanted you to have a red one from a mystery admirer. I put in the order with your school when I dropped off your permission slip for that field trip you went on last week.”

“Oh, God!”

“What’s the matter?”

“You guys ruined my life!!!” Ororo darted upstairs. N’Dare sighed, shaking her head.

“How did we do that now?” she muttered, throwing up her hands.

It took an hour of unloading on the phone to Anna Marie, giving the “short version” to her mother, and consuming half a loaf of chocolate chip cookie dough before the humiliation began to fade.

* 

Valentine’s Day wasn’t just “any other day.” It was Ororo’s day to fall off the grid. Forget it. Check-out time. High school wasn’t much different. Her only consolation was that Luke wasn’t as cute by the time senior photos rolled around, and she read his name on the police blotter of the local paper a year later for burglary and forged checks. Small consolation.

Ororo hummed to herself as she listened to her voice mails one at a time. Delete. Delete. Archive. Delete.

There was one from Monet. “Hi, girl. Your dress came in. I know you already paid the deposit. You can pick it up any time, but call me when you do.” Shit. It flew her mind.

* 

Logan fucked up.

The voice in his head berated him the whole trip downtown on Friday morning.


So there he was. Trapped in a Hallmark Gold Crown store, surrounded by fluffy teddy bears in red shirts that spelled out cheesy messages. “Cold toes, warm heart.” Logan wanted to gag.

This was harder than he remembered. Jean had loved Valentine’s Day, so back then, he knew the drill. Back when he thought he knew Jean.

Jean appreciated gifts that he bought specifically for her, not “ulterior motive” gifts like red lingerie. Give Jean a mylar balloon any day, and she was all set. Roses were also a sure way out of the doghouse. Red and white ones. Logan wasn’t just her husband, he was her best friend. Logan never understood that philosophy, shrugging when he read those words on the card she gave him for their first anniversary. He didn’t marry her because she was his friend; he wanted a mate.

* 

But to her credit, Jean started out as a friend. They met at a house party; both of them arrived with
dates and ended up by the appetizers, uninterested in the movie Scott’s brother Alex rented. They kept up a nodding acquaintance and continued to run into each other at sporting events. The supermarket. The gym. Jean asked Logan to spot her on the weight bench. His mind wandered to inappropriate places. If Jean noticed, she gave him no clue. There were more parties, more random encounters in restaurants where they gave up pretense of having somewhere else to hurry. They made time to talk.

They went from being acquaintances to confidantes. Before Logan ever shopped for Jean, she helped him pick out reasonable gifts for his girlfriend at the time, Carol Danvers. They had similar tastes and were even the same size. Jean complained about being lonely when Jamie was out of town, playing different venues with his band Madrox and the Multiple Men.

Logan and Jean reasoned that the strain and distance between them and their respective mates had nothing to do with their burgeoning friendship. They never voiced it aloud that it was a lie.

Logan and Carol broke up first. What they had was past its last gasp. Logan came home to Carol standing in his kitchen, with all of her personal belongings she’d kept at his apartment packed up in a duffle. The zipper was still open as she stared him down.

They fought. He paced. She paced. She cried. But he didn’t humor him.

“You’re so damned distant. How can you treat someone you love like this? Who does that?”

“Maybe that’s the problem.”

“What?”

“Carol, darlin’, maybe we don’t love each other anymore.”

She paled and reeled back as though he’d slapped her.

“That was all I needed to know,” she whispered. Her fingers were pressed over her lips to keep from saying anymore, no more damning words that would rip them both apart. Silvery tears slipped down her cheeks, but she was silent as she zipped her bag shut and hurried out. Logan’s words landed on deaf ears, he could only talk to her hand as she slammed the door.

He felt numb. That was all he had left to give Carol and what they had.

Logan never came right out and said “we broke up” when he spoke to Jean next. In the meantime, he was at a loose end.

What he had with Jean was no longer “safe.” A woman in a committed relationship didn’t just stay friends with a single, unattached man, not unless she was asking for trouble.

He was almost ready to congratulate himself on avoiding Jean until the night mulled over the shit in his life over a pitcher of beer at Harry’s. Logan was watching Scott line up the shot that would sink Alex’s last striped ball, running the table for the third time in a row. He’d always joked that his best friend had laser vision. He never missed.

The hairs on his nape stood up as soon as he felt her presence at his back, before she laid hand on his shoulder. Not a tap. A caress. Logan shivered at the scent of her cologne. He knew Jeannie with every sense he owned.

“This seat taken?”
“Hey, Jeannie.”

“Hi, stranger,” she accused. Her green eyes searched his face for clues. She took the bar stool next to his without further invitation. He nodded to the pitcher. She took a plastic cup off the stack beside the cash register and handed it over for him to fill.

“I thought about you the other day,” she told him.

“Yeah?” Logan took a generous swallow of beer and made little eye contact.

“I’d randomly thought of you anyway, and it was a real coincidence when I ran into Carol at Macy’s.”

Shit.

“Ya saw Carol, huh?”

“She looked good. It had been a while. I just ran off at the mouth, and she let me. So you can imagine I felt like a real bitch when I asked her how you were doing, how things were going with you two.” Logan’s laugh lacked humor and he shook his head.

“I ain’t imagining anything of the sort, Red.”

“She said it had been a while.” Jean’s hand appeared again, stroking his forearm exposed by the rolled-up sleeve of his flannel shirt.

She was surprised when he gently collected her hand and removed it, laying it on the bar.

“I bet she did.”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Nah. Ya never have. This ain’t yer fault. Not what happened between me an’ Carol.”

“What?” Her red brows drew together in concern. “Logan…”?

“Long story short. Carol and I split, because she thought I wanted ta be with someone else. That wasn’t the main reason why, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t thought about it once in a while. More than a guy should think about that kinda thing. Jean…I hate sayin’ anything about it, but this…” he gestured between them. “This, when ya touch me like ya did just now, it’s distracting.” Her hint of a smile evaporated, and she folded her arms over her belly.

“Really. I-I’m sorry. I didn’t know I was being inappropriate.”

“It shouldn’t be, but it is. Not because yer doin’ it.” Logan’s throat felt tight. “Because of how I feel when ya do it.”

“What are you saying, Logan?”

“Whaddya think? Why are ya here alone, talkin’ ta me?”

“I felt like going out.”

“Where’s Jamie?” Jean looked annoyed that he asked.

“I don’t know.”
“Whaddyay mean ya don’t know?”

“What do you think I mean?” She threw up her hands in frustration. Scott called to them from the pool table.

“Logan, wanna play winner?”

“Nah,” Logan replied. Scott waved to Jean briefly before telling Alex to wrack up the balls.

“I don’t know where he is tonight. I never know where he is anymore. I called his job after he said he was working late. I called his cell. I called one of his band mates and he had no clue, either. So when you add it up, it doesn’t add up. And you know, Jamie doesn’t call me back, but I am getting phone calls from someone who doesn’t bother saying hello whenever I pick up. Weird, huh?” Jean’s posture didn’t stiffen, and she drank her beer casually enough, but Logan’s body went on red alert. She was still sitting too close, smelling too tempting, and sounding too much like a woman scorned.

“Maybe he jus-“

“Fuck maybe. Maybe this, maybe that. Uh-uh.” She shrugged. “I’m tired of guessing. I’m tired of waiting by the phone, and waiting for this to ring.” She took her call out of her pocket and tossed it on the bar. It skittered across the slick surface and bounced off the small tray of drink condiments. Jean helped herself to a maraschino cherry, sucking the sweet off its stem. Logan digested her words. Then he poured her another beer.

The night progressed with more beer, games of pool (Scott let her win one to be polite), darts (Logan accused her of trying to kill the bus boy when she put too much mustard on her second shot), and a gradual “drift” out to the dance floor when the bar became too crowded. It was late. Logan was past drunk. Jean was venting and repeating herself after making the switch from beer to tequila. The crowd buffeted them. They allowed the tide to sweep them toward the mirrors. It was instinctive on Logan’s part to tug her out of the way whenever anyone looked like they’d back into her.

He was temptingly solid. She clutched at his shirt. “I’m drunk.”

“Eh.”

“No. I mean, really drunk.”

“All riiiiight,” he slurred. “Attagirl.”

“I hardly ever get this drunk. This is your fault.”

“Guilty,” he shrugged. She swayed a little, whether because of the drink or because of the slow song playing over their heads, he couldn’t tell.

Logan didn’t care.

She leaned into him, smiling blearily up into his face. His hand lay in the crook of the small of her back, protective and gentle. He didn’t dance. Jean had her own ideas about that.

“C’mon! Move it, bub! Dance with meeee,” she whined. She slumped against him and leaned her head against his shoulder, craving his shelter. Logan stiffened, then gave in. Logan felt like someone poured warm syrup over him when her arms draped themselves loosely over his shoulders. He fell into step with her and groaned at the feel of her soft, tender curves pressed against him and the painful throbbing it caused between his legs. Damn it...
“Could’ve told me you weren’t together anymore,” she murmured into his ear.

“S’no big deal,” he shrugged.

“Uh-uh. Yes, it is.” Jean’s voice was husky and almost strained.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been waiting a long time, hating myself because of how much I’ve wished for you to tell me that.” He’d been absently stroking her back as they danced; she’d toyed with his collar, growing used to the feel of his neck against her cheek.

His blunt fingernails gently scored her back through the thin sweater she wore, and Jean’s fingers tangled in the back of his hair. She felt him shudder with need.

“Don’t hate me,” she pleaded. He leaned back and stared soberly into her eyes.

“Damn it, Jeannie,” he muttered. Emotions warred within him, but he silenced every voice in his head when he closed in on her, crushing her mouth with his. Time stopped and the music dimmed to a low buzz in their ears. Logan’s skin felt feverish beneath her touch. The kiss was too long, thorough and needy, doing nothing to quench what was burning between them for months.

His entryway wall ended up with a dent in the plaster when the door slammed open on their way into his apartment. They made a drunken stumble toward his room, punctuated by giggling, kisses and curses. Logan didn’t turn on any lights. While he craved the sight of Jean, her voice and the satiny feel of her skin was enough, almost too much for his tipsy mind to handle.

They collapsed onto the bed, hands already tangled in each other’s clothes. He was impatient to have her bare and warm against him; she took mercy on him and reached behind her back, one-handed, and undid the clasp of her bra with a deft pop.

She writhed beneath him, growing accustomed to the feel of him, to his taste as she drained kiss after kiss from his mouth. Her name was both litany and curse, superseding any self control he thought he had every time it left his lips. What began as languorous and slow changed, escalated into groping and possession. He rutted into her, fingers clutching her thick sheaves of hair back from her face.

Once again, she felt like warm syrup poured over him as they lay together, spent. Jean purred and sighed beneath his touch.

“I love you, Logan.” She blamed her candor on the alcohol.

“I ain’t lettin’ ya go.” He could just as easily blame the beer, but no buzz ever felt that good. Left him craving that much more…

He didn’t let her go. Jean didn’t wait for Jamie to make excuses. She moved her things out of his apartment one bright Saturday morning, while he was supposedly “on tour.” Neither of them ever looked back. They married in a small ceremony at Jean’s parents’ church at Annandale-on-Hudson. Both their families saw it as a stepping stone to grandchildren.

Sometimes the best laid plans unraveled despite any effort to hold them together.

*  

What was a good Valentine’s Day gift for someone who wasn’t technically his girlfriend? Logan didn’t have a clue.
He eventually settled on a stuffed pink teddy bear. No tee shirts, no saccharine messages. Safe. Not a heart in sight. On his way out, Logan laughed at the panty roses displayed in the window of Frederick’s next door. All of the gag gifts in Spenser’s display made him wish he’d chosen differently.

Logan grabbed himself an Orange Julius at the food court. His cell phone beeped at him; Logan didn’t have a musical ring tone. Somehow, the thought of “You’ve Lost that Lovin’ Feeling” announcing his calls at random times, like a meeting, at a grocery checkstand or during a prostate exam didn’t appeal to him.

“This is Logan.” He half-expected Maddie, but it was Scott.

“What are you up to?”

“Last minute stuff.”


“Yup. Dinner date.”

“Anyone I know?” Now he sounded hopeful.

“Madelyne Pryor. The cute redheaded account manager. Likes flex plans with flexible spending? Nice legs?” Those were the easiest qualifiers he could come up with. Scott chuckled in recognition.

“She seems pretty nice. Kind of bubbly, I guess.”

“Bubbly. Sure.” Logan wanted to use the term “eager” but left it alone.

“So you’re taking her to dinner?”

“We’re having Szechuan.”

“Do you have a reservation? Every place in town’s gonna be booked.”

_Shit._

“We’ll muddle through. Worst case scenario, we go out for ice cream instead.”

“In the middle of winter?”

“Doesn’t melt,” Logan shrugged. He sucked his drink hungrily through the red straw, debating on a hot dog. He scratched that; he still needed to select something from his closet to wear on a semi-casual “safe” dinner.

“Are you gonna get her flowers?”

“Nah. Got a cute little bear.”

“Not too bad,” Scott agreed.

“Didn’t know if she was the chocolate and a card type.”

“Do you usually give cards?”

“Never.”
“Then there’s your answer.”

“Didn’t know ya were a Valentine’s expert.”

“Eh. Been there, done that, got the tee shirt. I bought candy.”

“For what?”

“Just some goodies to set out on my desk.”

“Yer such a mom,” Logan accused. “Suck-up.”

“Don’t knock it. Makes me a chick magnet.”

“Ya gonna get some of those little Valentines ta take ta school, too?”

“Fucker!”

“Roses are red, violets are blue…”

“I get it, I get it. Fuck off, already.” Logan fished in his shopping bag and fiddled with the bear, trying to make it sit upright on the table. “I’m interofficing a little something to the underwriting unit, too.”

“Like what?”

“A little something for Ororo.”

Logan squeezed the bear’s head to relieve the niggling aggravation throbbing in his temples.

“Why? She yer Valentine now?”

“No. I just thought it would be fun.”

“Yeah. It’s just so much fun. The woman’s a barracuda, Summers.”

“She’s a pussycat.”

“That’s what she wants ya ta think.”

“I just think she’ll get a kick out of it. Valentine’s Day is a taken woman’s holiday and another reason for a guy to end up in the penalty box. She’s single, she might enjoy it.”

“Ya thinkin’ she’ll show ya her gratitude?”

“Why do you wanna know?” Scott asked pointedly. “Listen, I’ll let you go. I’m headed to the gym. You watching the UFC fight tomorrow?” Logan was relieved at the change of topic.

“Might, but I’m gonna end up seein’ it at my dad’s or my brother’s if I do.”

“Too bad. Alex ordered it already. He’s planning pizza, maybe a trip to the sports’ bar after for pool.” That beat Logan’s dinner plans by a mile, except for the possibility of after-hours… possibilities.

“Ya have any means of recording it?”

“I’ve got DVR,” Scott said.
“I’ll be in yer debt.” They rang off. Logan took his drink with him after stuffing the bear back in the bag.

What Scott said nagged at him, pulling him back past the store window displays.

A wicked thought crept over him.

He shouldn’t.

He couldn’t.

Oh, but he had to…

His errant feet walked him into Spenser’s.

Ten minutes later, his conscience screamed at him That’s just wrong. Scooter’ll kill you. It was worth it…

*

Ororo came back from lunch early and was about to plunge herself back into a pile of spreadsheets when she spied a yellow interoffice envelope on top of her inbox.

“Hello, what’s this?” she murmured. Ororo sat down and unwrapped the string from the tab. She made a sound of surprise as her hand found something lumpy and hard. She withdrew the bag of Dum-Dum lollipops, one of her favorites from her childhood. A square red envelope also slid out onto her desk. Ororo unwrapped a root beer-flavored candy and sucked on it before peeling back the gold foil stick of the card.

The message was cutesy enough, but she jumped back in her seat as it began to play “La Bamba.”

“Gah!” she yelped, nearly dropping it. “Oh…that’s…good grief,” she giggled. She was glad the lollipop was on a stick so she didn’t choke on it.

The “From” line on the envelope showed the Client Services department in the Boston office.

“Scott,” she chuckled, shaking her head. She opened up her email as she enjoyed the candy. “You’re such a brat, boy.”

Subject: Interoffice delivery.

You stinker. Thanks for the treats. I’ll have to hoard these before everyone in my office gets the scent and descends upon my desk like jackals. That was very thoughtful of you.

Ororo

She was just chewing the last crunchy bits from the stick as a new message popped up.

Re: Interoffice delivery.


Re: Re: Interoffice delivery.

Nada. Ugh. Wake me when it’s over. My couch and I have a double date with a pint of chocolate
Ororo sighed as she read her own words, then hit send.

She wasn’t completely surprised when her phone rang minutes later.

“Underwriting, this is Tory?”

“You should go out,” Scott accused.

“Lord have mercy,” she muttered, shaking her head even though he couldn’t see the gesture. “There’s nowhere decent to go, anyway. Every restaurant and movie theater will be packed. I’m thinking about hitting the video rental store at lunch instead of on the way home. The line to the cash register will be a mile long with women like me in ugly sweats and bunny slippers…”

“You have bunny slippers?”

“Something you reveal under threat of death by stapler.”

“Never turn your back on a woman wielding office products. Learned that from an ex of mine.”

“That’s a story I want to hear.”

“Ya don’t wanna know.”

“Now I really wanna know.”

“Seriously, though, you should go out.”

“And your big plan for the night?”

“My plan, my plan…intimate dinner with a real sweetheart.”

“Anyone I know?”

“She goes by the name of Betty. Maybe you’ve heard of her? Betty Crocker?” Ororo snorted. “No. Seriously, my brother is having me over for dinner. His little girl is making cupcakes.” Ororo felt wistful.

“Bless her heart.”

“Say a blessing for me too. I’m gonna hafta eat one. She’s seven. They’ll be dreadful.”

“And you’ll tell her they’re the best thing you’ve ever sunk a tooth into.”

“Bingo.”

“You’re a good uncle.”

“Gives me practice if I ever have a family of my own.” Ororo didn’t turn the phone on speaker, choosing instead to cradle the phone against her chin as she typed out a message to Selene’s admin, Jeanne-Marie. She’d looked two steps away from postal earlier at the coffee pot; Ororo figured she could use a sugar boost.

“I still hate this holiday.”

“Hope you can hate it a little less today.”
“For the moment, I can. Thanks again, Scott.”

“For the record, you can call me Tory, if you want.”

“Do you prefer it? Selene mentioned she has an easier time with it, but once I found out what your real first name was, it seemed silly not to use it. And it’s a great name. Strong. It suits you.”

“All right, then. Ororo it is.” She was pleased, but her smile faltered a bit as she remembered her last exchange with Logan.

He’d looked awfully chummy with Madelyne at the luncheon. Were they…?

She didn’t want to think about it.

He could mess around with whoever he wanted. Big whoop. It wasn’t like she was interested in him, or anything.

Jeanne-Marie breezed in moments later without knocking, swooped down and grabbed a handful of Dum-Dums from the bag, grinning at Ororo.

“Thank you,” she mouthed before she breezed back out. Ororo chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Selene’s admin. She needed a boost and just absconded with some of my loot.”

“It’s Friday. She probably has a lot to do.”

“Don’t we all.” Ororo wasn’t looking forward to her weekly updates or expense reports for her trip to Boston.

“I’ll let you get back to it,” he said, remembering himself.

“Enjoy your cupcake.”

“Take it easy.”

She did anything but. She juggled reports and spreadsheets, benefit summaries and meetings all day. In-between tasks, she thought of Logan.

“Wonder if he’s taking Miss Thang out for Valentine’s,” she mused under her breath. Madelyne wasn’t even that bad, she considered, but she was just too…familiar.

It wouldn’t frustrate her so much if they got along better.

If she didn’t resent him so much…her resentment started to feel misplaced. Really, how long was she going to be mad at him? He approached her that day, right? He wasn’t entirely repugnant?

The trust issue was her own fault, but Ororo thought at the time she was being pragmatic.

There would have been the usual song and dance of empty promises if she’d stayed in the hotel room that morning. Ororo was done with performances like that from Vic.

It nagged her, even after she left work for the night to begin her frustrating, long weekend.
Some time after 9PM:

“Nice place,” Madelyne remarked as she nodded in approval of his living room. Her high heels clicked over his hardwood floor. Logan watched her wander around, running her fingertips over side tables and edges of picture frames, smiling.

She wore red. Just the kind of deep scarlet that Logan loved and that heightened her coloring, setting her auburn hair on fire and making her creamy skin more luminous.

Dinner had been promising and relaxing. Madelyne generally made him comfortable, giving him the same eye contact and open body language that made an impression on him on their lunch date. The problem was, he was still on the fence.

Logan didn’t know what he wanted from her, or what he wanted for himself.

“Want anything ta drink?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him as she went back to examining his pictures. “These your niece and nephew?”

“Yep.”

“Cute, cute,” she cooed.

“Ya like kids?”

“I totally want them,” she admitted. “I mean, come on, I have everything else. House, great job, nice car, I’ve traveled and already finished my MBA. I just renewed my pilot’s license.”

“Ya mentioned ya used ta fly planes.”

“The bug bit me again. I don’t know why.” She crossed the room and stood before him, looking slightly coy. “I could take you, if you want.”

Logan raised one brow, a questioning smile on his lips.

“Flying,” she added. “Just say when.”

Logan felt his face grow hot. “Let me think it over.”

“Mmm.” She reached up and toyed with the collar of his shirt. “You looked nice tonight. I enjoyed dinner. We should do it again.”

“Kinda hard ta juggle my work schedule, an’ I know yer busy, but yeah. Sure. I wouldn’t mind.”

Now that she was touching him, Logan suddenly felt restless. “Um…why don’tcha sit down for a sec, watch some TV?”

“I’m not really one for television,” she admitted. Her hand flattened against him, caressing his chest. Logan’s nipples hardened into stiff points. Her perfume tickled his nostrils and his pulse pounded in the side of his neck.

“That’s…fine. I’ve, uh, got an early day tomorrow. Headed to my family’s place fer dinner.”

“Okay. I won’t keep you up,” she promised. She was standing so close – too close – and her breath
steamed his lips.

Indecision was killing him, had been killing him all night.

Dinner was predictable. They joked around over spicy beef and noodles and took in a comedy act downtown. It was shorter than a movie and “safe.” It was a suitable choice for a first date.

His hesitation wasn’t her problem. Madelyne stared at his lips knowingly, then met his eyes as she leaned in and kissed him. Her hand cupped his nape and fingers curled into his hair. Logan went with it, allowing himself to loop his arm around her waist. He made a low sound of surprise as her tongue darted into his mouth.

They came up for air five hungry seconds later. Logan broke the kiss with difficulty and pulled back, gently prying himself loose.

“Are you sure you have to get up early?”

“Yeah. I really do.” She pouted.

“I can’t change your mind?” She was stroking his chest again, unerringly finding his nipple through the thin fabric of his shirt. There was a hard knot of tension in his gut to match the stiff throbbing between his legs. Damn it.

Sure, she could change his mind. His libido screamed in his ear, What the heck is wrong with ya, bub? She’s hot! His fingers twitched, then balled themselves up into fists by his sides.

“Maddie…”

“I can give you a second to make up your mind? Can I use your bathroom?”

“Sure,” he agreed easily. She pecked him briefly before he pointed the way to it down the hall. Logan finally breathed again.

He heard her click on the light once she shut the door. His mind raced. His heart raced. Indecision still swamped him.

“Fuck,” he hissed under his breath. Why was this hard?

Really, why?

It didn’t make sense. The usual formula should have made perfect sense. See pretty woman. Flirt with pretty woman. Take pretty woman to dinner. Invite pretty woman inside. Make love to pretty woman until she spoke in tongues. Offer to call pretty woman next week. It all added up. Right?

The sound of her shoes moving quickly back to the living room startled him.

“You know, Logan,” she began, looking slightly flustered, “I might just go, after all. You’re probably right.”

“Eh?”

“You probably have a long drive ahead of you. Dinner was…nice,” she assured him. He reached for her shoulder, and she jerked uncomfortably.

“Ya all right, Maddie?”
“Fine. Just fine. Where did I leave my purse?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Right. Kitchen.” She cleared her throat and practically skipped away.

Now Logan was definitely confused. It seemed like his decision was being taken out of his hands. She retrieved her small clutch and coat from the back of his kitchen chair and nearly jumped out of her skin when she turned and found him right behind her.

“Mind if I call ya when I get back this weekend?”

“Oh. If you want,” she offered. There was a strange pink flush in her cheeks. Why the heck was she…embarrassed?

Hadn’t she just been coming on to him a few minutes ago?

She didn’t give him time to figure it out. He followed her to his front door as she undid the dead bolts.

“Thank you for a nice time, Logan. I’ll just get moving along.”

“Want me ta walk ya ta yer car?”

“Oh. No. I’m fine. Fine.” She turned and gave him an awkward peck before she backed out into the hallway. “Um, Logan?”

“Yes?”

“I…I just thought I should let you know, I’m...let’s say, I’m an uncomplicated person. My tastes are pretty...conservative. I hope I didn’t make you think otherwise.”

“Huh?” Conservative?

“Good night.” She hurried away in a swish of red hair and flurry of clicking heels.

“Night.” He slowly closed his door, more confused than ever.

Yet why did he also feel relieved?

Logan sighed as he went back into his living room and clicked on the set. He needed a dose of Letterman more than anything else right now. He moved about the apartment, gathering up comfort items and shucking his date clothes. Within moments, he was clad in sweats, fuzzy socks and bundled under a thick football blanket, devouring a large Tupperware bowl of cereal.

Women. Who could figure them out?

When he got up later to brush his teeth, he drowsily clicked on the light.

There, on the bathroom counter, lay the black furry handcuffs he’d bought at Spencer’s, sitting atop the pink plastic shopping bag. He cocked his head.

“Huh?” It dawned on him that he hadn’t taken them out of the bag earlier; he’d merely parked the bag on the counter while he took his shower to get ready, not giving them a second thought.
Maddie…

Logan slapped his thick palm over his eyes in self-disgust. “Fuck. FUCK!”

His gag gift to Ororo backfired before it had even made it into an interoffice envelope. He was such an idiot…

Without even trying, she was making it impossible for him to forget about her and move on to someone else.

“Conservative,” Logan muttered, tossing down the cuffs. Yet halfway through brushing his teeth, he laughed. And laughed.

That would teach her to rifle through another man’s bathroom cabinets…
Wait a Minute...What?!?

Chapter Summary

Dimly he wondered how Her Highness Queen Uppity Britches ended up spending her Valentine’s, and now St. Pat’s. She probably wasn’t drinking green beer tonight.

Ororo listened to her heels thud against the mottled gray tile as she headed to Selene’s office. Her heart was still racing from her morning cup of joe, and she was glad she hadn’t eaten anything yet.

She hated impromptu meetings more than anything. She’d checked her calendar furtively before she headed out of her office. It wasn’t time for her annual review.

She knocked on the door and waited patiently outside the door. She heard Selene hanging up from a conversation, ending on a note of forced laughter before she called out, “Come on in, Tory.” Ororo dutifully came inside, gently closing the door behind her.

“How’s going on?”

“I wanted to talk to you for a minute, if you don’t mind.” How could she mind? “I’ve been thinking a bit about the efforts you’ve been putting into the accounts lately, and you’re doing a good job. Don’t get me wrong.”

What was there to get wrong? Ororo went into panic mode, sitting up straight as a board in her seat.

“Oh, thank you. Thanks. No problem.”

“I have a proposition for you. More of a request.” Selene was typing, her fingers flying rapid-fire over the keys as she spoke. She hit enter and finally faced Ororo fully, beaming. “I want to send you out of the state.”

Wait. What?”

“Actually, I want to take you with me,” Selene said, chuckling at the alarmed expression on Ororo’s face. “Don’t worry, Tory. I think you’ll like what I have planned.” Ororo laughed hollowly, but didn’t feel any more sure.

“What kind of plan?”

“You know that Amelia Voght is leaving the company. She wants to be a stay at home mom once she has her baby. They just had her office shower last week.”

“That’s nice. That’s a big decision to make,” Ororo agreed.

“It wouldn’t be that hard for me. I plan to keep working if I ever have a baby,” Selene shrugged.

Goodie for you. “So the Boston office is losing another account manager.”

“And her underwriter. Sally Blevins just put in her notice two days ago. Didn’t you get the email?”
“I’m still sorting through a big stack of it now.”

“You should take some time to clean out your inbox,” Selene accused.

Some of us don’t have an admin or an email-happy manager asking for every little thing five times a day by note instead of picking up the phone. “When is she leaving?”

“Three weeks. They just posted her job opening online.”

“That isn’t much time to find someone. Who’s handling her accounts?”

“That’s where you come in.”

Shit.

“Sally and Amanda have always worked our eastern market. They know our states’ regulatory guidelines and our customers’ needs. I’ve been wanting a change of scenery. I don’t plan to work for this branch forever, even though I do want to be with OFW for the long term.”

“Okay.”

“So what I had in mind was to bring the idea of you and I moving to the Boston site on the table to Cassandra Nova this morning.”

Ororo reeled. Was she kidding?

“You’re kidding.”

“No. I think it’s pretty feasible.” Of course she did…

“Permanently?”

“Actually, just for six months.”

“Why that amount of time?”

“It usually takes that long to finish up all of our big renewals. After 1/1, we end up with all of the June and July rush. It would be nice to put the offer on the table. Didn’t you like working in Boston when we went to the luncheon?”

“It was all right. I never imagined living there.”

“Oh, Tory, are you kidding? Boston’s just another big city like New York. You’re used to hustle and bustle.”

“It’s a different kind of hustle and bustle.”

“There’s just as many nice restaurants and good shopping. Public transportation. Shows. History. Think about it.”

“Well, I-“

“I’m talking to Cassandra shortly. I’d like it if you could conference in with us.”

“I still haven’t decided yet. I need to think about it.” Selene’s smile faltered.

“Don’t take too much time making up your mind. Tory, this is a good opportunity. I wanted to offer
it to you first before Human Resources starts shopping around for an external applicant. You can do this. You’re one of the best underwriters we have in the eastern market.” Flattery would get her nowhere; Ororo knew when someone was trying to sell her snake oil.

But at the same time, it tempted her. Boston…

She considered the pros. Scott worked at that site, so she’d have at least one friend. It wasn’t horribly far from New York, less than one day by train.

“I have some engagements here in the city coming up. One of my best friends is getting married, I’m going to be her bridesmaid.”

“When?”

“April.”

“Oh, that’s not too far off. It should still be fine. I’m having Amelia’s admin line up all the cases that Sally’s handling for her that still need wrapping up. You’re going to inherit a third of them anyway.”

Somebody shoot me now…

“So there won’t be any interruption in work once Sally leaves. This won’t be a problem.” Selene’s smile was sunny again.

“This is just so sudden,” Ororo said hollowly.

“Think of it as an adventure. You might come to love Boston.”

“I love it here.” And she did.

“Keep an open mind. There will be some familiar faces. You remember Scott Summers, and Madelyne Pryor?” Ororo forced a smile onto her face at the redhead’s name. “Oh, and what about that broker? The one at the training who showed up late? Jim, something…”

“Jim…?” Ororo held up her hands, shrugging.

“James, I think. Didn’t he go by something else?”

“You mean…Logan?” Ororo cleared her throat.

“That’s it. Yes. Sharp dresser. Kind of rude, though…he was brusque with me one day when he was looking for your office.”

“He’s…kind of blunt,” Ororo supplied.

“There’s a good word for him,” Selene agreed. “But again, another familiar face. And don’t forget Donald.”

“Donald?” Ororo felt clueless.

“Pierce.” It dawned on her. Selene’s smile was smug.

Then suddenly, it clicked.

Selene wanted to move closer to her man. And she wanted to drag her right-hand man…er, underwriter, with her. What a crock of shit!
“I figure we can look at making a move by mid-April.” It was March first. That gave Ororo appallingly little time to end her lease on her apartment, or to sublet it instead. At least she could go to Monet’s wedding with no difficulty, but it was going to be sheer chaos trying to plan it all.

“I don’t even know where I would stay.”

“I’ve got six different apartment listings lined up for us to check out,” Selene informed her cheerfully. “Isn’t this going to be fun?”

*

Green beer wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

“Is my tongue blue?” Scott asked him, turning and opening his mouth wide. He stuck out his tongue and waggled it back and forth. Logan snorted.

“Beautiful,” he muttered.

“Mission accomplished. Now we can stop.” Logan helped himself to a handful of beer nuts to help scrape away the bitter aftertaste of the blue dye.

“Lightweight. Yer gettin’ old, Summers.”

“Suck my fat ones.” Scott finished the last of the greenish Bud Light in his mug and wiped his mouth. Logan was annoyed that he’d let the bartender desecrate a perfectly good pitcher of Molson that way.

No one dared pinch him because he hadn’t bothered wearing green. Scott’s only concession to the holiday was keeping on his wisteria dress shirt from work that he wore beneath a black sweater vest. He politely obliged two women coming off the dance floor to let them kiss him, presuming that he was Irish. It was a handy enough excuse. Several women looked at Logan with interest, but he hardly even glanced out at the dance floor. It backfired; they continued to watch him all night, whispering furtively over green melon ball shots that were the night’s special.

“There’s Sally,” Scott remarked, nodding and waving over to an inebriated blonde on the dance floor. She was murdering the eighties standard “Relax” at the top of her lungs and dancing in that sweaty, wanton fashion that carried some women away after too many mixed cocktails. Sally Blevins was nice enough at work, usually buttoned up and untouchable, the kind of girl who didn’t let people get that close. They were losing a decent underwriter. And, Logan snarked, the only one in the eastern market who didn’t have a needle stuck so far up her butt that she’d need a tractor to pull it out.

Dimly he wondered how Her Highness Queen Uppity Britches ended up spending her Valentine’s, and now St. Pat’s. She probably wasn’t drinking green beer tonight.

She wasn’t really a beer girl, in his estimation. But it didn’t help to think about that, not when it brought unwelcome memories of lime pulp bursting on his tongue, mingling with salty, deep kisses and the tang of tequila.

It had been one night. It drove him nuts. The fates hated him. One incredible encounter with the most amazing woman out of his darkest fantasies whom he never thought he’d see again, and then what happened? The universe spit her back out at him completely unrecognizable in librarian glasses and sensible shoes. Then again, maybe not that sensible. Still…
“I’m gonna go over and say hi,” Scott shouted over the din. Logan shrugged.

“Give my regards. I’m just about done.” Scott wove his way through the crowd. Logan chuckled over Sally’s sloppy hug. Poor guy was downwind of fumes that were about ninety proof as she grinned and shouted up at him. Logan saw her mouth the words I’m SO drunk two or three times before she introduced him to her two friends. Scott just continued to smile and laugh at her jokes; she was oblivious to the fact that she was the punchline.

She practically had him in a headlock, hanging on him.

“This is my lassht night OUT,” she slurred. “I’m gonna get sssssshitfayshed before I hafta start packing. I HATE moving, didja know that?” She punctuated it with a dangerous sounding burp. Scott winced.

“I bet. Can’t blame you.”

“I don’ pity whoever takes my playsh…place,” she admitted. “Poor baby’s gonna get all the hard cases. Clients SUCK.”

“It’s a living,” Scott shrugged. She laughed. There was a lot of vodka breath involved.

“I hate the rat race,” she shouted at him. Her friends nodded in drunken agreement. They were both striking, a tomboyish blonde with a spiky blonde haircut and a slender girl with strawberry red hair and tempting curves. “I’m tired of it. This isn’t what I wanted to be when I grew up.”

“What’d you want to be when you grew up?”

“A fairy princhessh,” she admitted. She goosed him. He twisted out of the way, making her chase him back out to the middle of the floor with her friends. She began to dance up against him, making him feel relatively helpless. Her friends, Tabitha and Terry, weren’t much help.

“They’re makin’ a Scott sandwich,” Logan muttered. Lucky bastard…

But he wasn’t jealous. If anything, he was glad it wasn’t him. Logan wanted to head home and be alone with his thoughts for a while. Even among the huge crowd, he felt lonely. Empty.

Logan tipped the pretty bartender. She reached for his hand briefly. “Eh?”

“Here,” she chirped, peeling a sticker off a long paper roll and pasting it into the back of his hand. A green four-leaf clover winked up at him, ordering all who approached him to kiss him, he was Irish. “Me first!” she cried, leaning over the bar and plastering a smacker on his cheek. He grinned back and pried himself loose. She didn’t look sorry.

He caught Scott’s eye, debating on whether to rescue him. Scott made up his own mind, making his excuses and gently peeling away six different hands as they tried to pull him back. They pouted; Sally’s intent was clear. One more for the road. She cupped Scott’s face in her palms and gave him a sloppy kiss as her friends looked on and cheered.

“Talk about nothin’ ta lose. Sheesh.”

“They shoved their numbers in my pocket. I think. Or they stole my wallet,” he said with a sigh. They gathered their coats from the attendant and emerged into the cold night.

“Sometimes I wonder why I even bother with this shit.”
“It’s tradition.”

“I’m gettin’ old. Too old ta be out among the rabble.”

“You’re not that old. You’re still ‘rabble,’” Scott justified.

“Thought when I got married, all this just went away.”

“Make some adult friends.”

“Why, got a 900 number fer me ta dial, Slim?”

“Not that kind. Just someone nice to hang out with on the weekends.”

“Yer about it.” Scott and his younger brother Alex were his two oldest friends. Many of his “grownup” acquaintances were one half of a couple, all people he knew while Jean was still alive. Many of those couples evaporated into the ether once their condolences were given. Logan was at a loose end. Logan didn’t know who he was anymore, once he wasn’t one half of “Logan and Jean.”

“How did that date go, by the way?”

“What date?”

“Valentine’s.”

“Oh. Heh. It went fine. Fine.”

“No drama? No second date?” Scott fished.

“No. And no.”

“Man…why not? Maddie seemed nice.”

“Ain’t sayin’ she ain’t. She’s great. She’s just not-“ Logan stopped himself.

“No. She isn’t,” Scott agreed. Logan assumed his friend thought he was talking about Jean.

He wouldn’t tell him he was wrong, this time.

*

Four weeks later, Ororo stood checking her makeup in front of the wide mirror in the church conference room. Several feet away, Anna Marie and Jubilee helped with last minute preparations, removing Monet’s white satin pumps from the box, fastening on tricky clasps to necklaces and bracelets, fluffing the veil and finding her lipstick.

“I shouldn’t have eaten those eggs for breakfast. Why didn’t someone stop me?”

“If we’d have pulled that plate away from ya, sugah, Lord knows how many fingers we would’ve come away with,” Anna pointed out. Their bridal brunch helped settle Monet’s nerves for a while, but once everyone climbed back into their respective cars and headed for the church, it became crunch time.

“I feel so fat,” she complained bitterly as Ororo came around to zip her into the gown and do up the row of tiny buttons.
“Shut up,” Ororo told her. Her smile was warm yet envious. “You’re carrying small. And we can hardly tell.”

“Liar.” She reached out and tweaked one of Ororo’s spiral curls. “You look so nice. I need to have that done to my hair one of these days.”

“Go for it. This will be the best hair you’ll have in your life, your consolation prize for nine months of having to pee every five minutes. Enjoy it now.”

“Ah can’t wait til it’s mah turn,” Anna murmured.

“Babies?” Monet asked.

“Not yet. This part.” Anna Marie fished out a handful of bobby pins from Monet’s makeup kit and beckoned to her to sit down. “Ah wanna find mah Mr. Right.”

“Good luck,” Ali muttered. “Just don’t do the Internet dating thing. Profile pictures liiiiiie like a rug, let me tell ya.” Ali was still fresh off of her breakup with Arthur, a local triathlete she met at a club following one of her performances. The newspapers billed him as “Longshot” when he won his heat following an ankle injury. She’d found him in bed with a dark-haired stunt woman, discovering the hard way that she was double-jointed. The vision still dominated her nightmares…

“How about that one guy who’s been coming to your shows?” Anna asked.

“Cain? Aw, he’s just a big teddy bear,” Ali said dismissively. “Bless his heart. He always shows up first and takes the same table down front.”

“That’s devotion,” Jubilee pointed out.

“I don’t think he’s my type,” Ali shrugged.

“You never know,” Ororo pointed out. “You don’t always have to have a type.”

“Was Vic your type?”

“No. But don’t use that as an example. I should have known better.”

“No one ever ‘knows better,’ kiddo,” Jubilee reminded her.

“Has he called lately?” Monica asked, hands already on her hips. She looked poised for a lecture, which Ororo planned to avoid.

“Nope.”

“Good.”

“I thought you’d have to leave the state to get away from that guy,” Ali scoffed. She turned away before she saw the color drain out of Ororo’s face. Ororo then busied herself with opening the box of corsages and handing them out.

The meeting with Cassandra had gone well. Too well.

They romanced her with the title “Senior Underwriter, Eastern Region” and upgraded her benefits package to the Classic plan with no change in premium. They gave her a cost of living increase, even if there was no real difference in expenses between the two states, but it looked good on paper. Or, at any rate, better than the word “bribe.”
She was due to move to Cambridge in two weeks. Anna Marie had mercy on her and sublet Ororo’s apartment for the remaining three months of her lease and even said she might renew to help her keep it, in case things went sour. The past three days had been hell, juggling wedding preparations with hair appointments, getting moving boxes, packing, taking things she didn’t need to Goodwill, and changing over her utilities and phone.

Her father was more in favor of the move than she was. “Go where the money’s at,” he said bluntly. Ororo felt the wrongness of it all in every bone of her body, but she was resigned. New York was comfortable. Her job was comfortable. Her “still single because I need another man like a hole in my head” status was comfortable.

But inside, she felt restless, and even a little lonely.

The minister interrupted her reverie. “Are we ready?” Monet looked nervous. Anna Marie handed her the bouquet while Ororo held her hand.

“Yes,” she said.

The church was beautiful; springtime sunlight poured inside through the stained glass windows. Arrangements of purple and white agapanthus, gladiolas and irises topped the altar and tables of the pulpit. Jubilee and Ali both had blisters from tying to many ribbons into pew bows, but it was worth it. Monet’s younger twin sisters sang a duet during the service that moved the guests to tears. Monet and Everett read handwritten vows. Following their kiss, they jumped a broom festooned with plum ribbon and silk flowers, a souvenir Monet planned to hang over her fireplace mantle of their home.

The majority of the pictures were taken in the front lobby of the church due to the still chilly weather. The clouds above began to thicken and darken, expediting the guests’ return to their cars.

“Let’s beat feet!” Anna Marie cried as she shooed their fellow bridesmaids into the parking lot. They made it just in time; once they turned onto the freeway minutes later, the first droplets of another April shower splattered onto the windshield.

The reception was raucous, happy and loud. The DJ dusted off all the old standards once Monet and Everett finished their first dance. Monet led the first pass of the electric slide, cha-cha slide, chicken dance and Macarena before she begged off to go to the bathroom. It was a frequent nuisance. Ororo knew how she felt.

The more time Ororo spent watching her friends enjoying the festivities and letting them drag her out of her seat to dance, the more trepidation filled her heart at the thought of leaving them behind.

*please, let it all be worth it. Please, Lord. *

Logan hurried into the front lobby, chewing on half a bagel and unbuttoning his trench coat. Yukio looked up from her typing and grinned at him.

“Late again. You’re getting predictable, Logan-sama.”

“And yer workin’ so hard ya don’t even have the time ta notice things like that, huh?” She stuck out her tongue.

“Even our new team members beat you to the office today.”

“Whaddya mean?”
“The two transplants from the New York hub,” she reminded him.

“They came today?”

“Yup. So there’s another account manager’s ass you have to kiss. Pucker up.”

“Long as I don’t hafta wear knee pads.”

“Ew.”

He caught the elevator moments before it closed, excusing himself and nudging his way to the back. He wrapped the rest of his breakfast into a napkin and planned to toss it. In the shuffle of people coming in and out on the next floor, he spilled a river of coffee down his coat. “Shit!” The woman next to him struggling with a huge file box mouthed an apology at him just before he got out. He cursed under his breath as he headed down the hall to the right.

Slim was always prepared for the contingencies. He’d had a stain stick or something on hand, Logan just knew it. At least it didn’t spill on his shirt or blazer.

He reached Scott’s door and automatically swept inside without knocking, out of long habit. “Hey, Summers, ya got anything ta get a stain out, one of those fabric-“ His words were cut off by a familiar blue-eyed glare.

“Do you mind? I’m on the phone.” Ororo sat back in Scott’s leather swivel chair and folded her arms across her chest.

Logan’s coffee fell from startled fingers. The to-go cup bounced off the hard track carpeting, splashing up onto his pants leg. “SHIT!” he hissed.

His worst-case scenario in the elevator came to pass; he had messed up his suit.

Ororo sighed without pity. “And you told me I needed a coffee IV.”
Who's Lovin' You

Chapter Summary

“Vic showed,” she pointed out.

“Yeah. He did.”

“It was hell, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Want another drink?”

“Uh-uh.”

The constant tap of her fingers across the keys began to take on the rhythm pumping its way into Ororo’s headphones while she updated her spreadsheet. They were still the same jacked up pair Anna threatened to throw out the last time they spoke. Some things, some people, and some habits never changed.

* 

Anna was appalled that Ororo didn’t own an iPod yet, and was even more aghast at the pitiful pair of ear buds she took to work everyday. Anna got a hold of them one day when they went to Ororo’s gym for a step aerobics class. She picked up the coil of wires and carefully unwound it, curious.


“What?”

“Why on earth haven’tcha buried these miserable thangs?”

“They’re perfectly good,” Ororo reasoned.

“They are NOT. Look at this! The foam’s practically worn through…naw, look, it ain’t even that, the cover keep’s fallin’ off this one! Yer gonna be trottin’ along on the treadmill after class and go to stick this in yer ear, and the cover’s gonna be gone somewhere, swimmin’ in the dustballs in the cardio theater.” She shook them accusingly at Ororo. “That’s pitiful. Pitiful.”

“Don’t hurt their feelings,” Ororo pouted.

“The wires aren’t even the same length. Whaddya do, just let ‘em hang from yer ears lopsided?”

“No. I just tie another little knot in them where they split-“

“So they’re still technically lopsided…”

“…but less lopsided than they would be otherwise. And voila. I don’t have to buy another pair of headphones.”
“No shit. If ya’d let me get ya an iPod and drag ya kickin’ and screamin’ into this century, ya wouldn’t have ta worry about it at all.”

“I like listening to the news sometimes when they turn on CNN.”

“Woman, please!”

“What? I like the financial reports.”

“Of course ya would,” Anna groaned. She stared at her friend long and hard, sighing. “C’mon. Let’s go ta Costco. Go iPod shopping.”

“No,” Ororo insisted. “I’m saving up for a rainy day. I’ll get one eventually. It’s on my wish list.” At the bottom.

“Hardheaded.”

“I don’t want you spending money on me. You know that.”

“Ya don’t mind on yer birthday.”

“It’s not my birthday. And I do mind. I like it when we just go out to dinner.”

“Ya always spend money on me,” Anna pointed out.

“That’s different.”

“Naw, it ain’t.”

Ororo didn’t want to voice out loud that she felt guilty about having a wealthy friend. She didn’t want to be part of Anna’s “entourage” and be “taken care of” just because she had money to spend.

In the meantime, Anna was up her way for the weekend, and they were having a ball. The weather was finally warming up enough that Ororo could wear her lightweight spring trenchcoat to work with a simple silk scarf instead of weighing herself down with layers of wool and fleece. They were off to Ororo’s new gym for a workout before they went window shopping, and Anna’s presence was helping Ororo shake off that “disjointed” feeling she’d had since her move. It was hard to decide if Boston was her cup of tea yet.

They parked in the back of the lot and made their way inside. Ororo smelled chlorine wafting inside from the club’s pool and Jacuzzi. Even if it was heated, it amazed her that anyone could be brave enough, or just dumb enough, to jump in and swim laps in the middle of April.

Ororo greeted the membership check-in desk’s clerk with a smile and presented her keys and Anna’s guest pass.

“Here you go,” she told them, handing them fluffy, warm towels and bottles of water.

“We still on time for the step class?”

“There are still a couple of open spots.”

“Phew,” Anna breathed, pleased.

“Let’s roll.”
The classroom was in a newly remodeled suite with spanking new hardwood floors, wall to wall mirrors, and racks of workout toys, rolled-up yoga mats and dumbbells behind them.

The instructor was pint-sized and built like a Spartan. “Spread out and give each other some room,” she chirped. Everyone stretched out on the mat first, then grabbed step blocks and lined them up.

“I haven’t done one of these forever,” Ororo confessed.

“Bad girl,” Anna chided.

“Shut up.” Anna stuck out her tongue.

They were making good on their New Year’s resolution four months after the fact. Ororo spent most of winter happily hibernating when she wasn’t traveling to client sites. Her gym visits had been too few and far between, but now that the weather was brightening up, she walked downtown for her lunches and was enjoying the first hints of sunshine.

“All right! Let’s get in a nice little warmup!” Ororo’s stomach twisted in anticipation. She was in the mood to sweat, but it was the promise of pain that made her leery. The instructor looked like a miniature sadist and had an evil gleam in her eye.

Twenty minutes in, Ororo’s fears were fully realized. Her lazy quads and hamstrings were beginning to feel the burn as she did her best to keep up with the class. Keeping her step block low helped, but the workout routine itself was full of fast changes and turns that she could have done without. Anna, on the other hand, was having a field day and hardly looking winded at all.

Ten minutes later: “C’mon, now, let’s bring up those arms and burn more calories!”

Twenty minutes later: “Breathe through your diaphragm, ladies!” Ororo silently wondered to herself how well Bambi could breathe with her tiny mic stuffed down her throat…

Thirty minutes later, and Ororo was drowning in her own sweat, bringing it down in a cooldown exercise that still felt too much like work. But she felt euphoric, like she’d shaken off the brain fade and spreadsheet psychosis from so many months of renewals and too much time behind her desk.

“That felt good,” Anna Marie said as they hunkered down and stretched.

“Uh-huh.” Ororo’s tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. She greedily sucked down half of her bottle of Evian and wiped a stray drop from her lip.

She had the eerie feeling she was being watched. Anna looked at her oddly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just…” She peered around the class, only seeing a sea of women as whipped as she was, fanning themselves and removing sweat-shirts with damp, triangular stains in unflattering places.

She craned her neck and looked over her shoulder toward the entrance.

*Logan.*

His dark eyes swallowed her up, making her feel naked.

Again. Ororo felt herself going up in flames.
“Shit,” she hissed under her breath.

“What’s amatter?”

“Nothing,” she insisted.

“Okay…”

“Thought I saw someone I knew,” she scoffed.

“Not a good somebody?”

“Nobody important,” she corrected.

“Ya mean that short, burly lookin’ guy with the six-pack starin’ in through the window?” Ororo looked up from her task of retying her shoes and caught Anna’s wicked smile. She gave a little wave.

“Anna! Stop that! Don’t encourage him!”

“It’s no big deal. He’s already leavin’.”

“Wait…he is?”

Ororo peered back around, and Logan was already gone. “Good,” she muttered.

So why did she feel disappointed?

They retreated to the treadmills and managed to find two next to each other. They signed up for a half an hour. The jog Ororo promised herself started off as an unsteady walk for the first five minutes as she caught her bearings. Ororo caught sight of herself in another mirror along the wall and winced. She looked like hell, no surprise. She’d abandoned her sweatshirt and tucked it into her cubby, but her tank in the meantime was clinging to her and patchy with sweat, emphasizing the edges of her sports bra underneath. Her hair was flying, too, fuzzy bits sticking up from her ponytail. Her skin was flushed and gleaming under the harsh gym lights.

Anna Marie was having no such problems, still looking fresh as a daisy, and she had sweat-proof hair. It was an injustice. Ororo decided she felt a little more up to running now, and she peeked at the red digital display on Anna’s treadmill, slowly increasing her own speed until they were running at the same pace.

“Attagirl,” Anna encouraged. She had her iPod on and was blasting her favorite techno music in her ears, indicated by the faint movement of her lips as she mouthed the words. Her paces followed the rhythm set by those beats, and Ororo felt jealous, now that she was stuck with a choice of infomercials, a Knicks game, or a Fabulous Life special on VH1.

There was that eerie feeling again…

Ororo caught a glimpse of someone in dark clothing out of the corner of her eye, just beyond her own reflection in the mirror. She pretended to be watching her incline and calories burned, but that feeling of dark eyes watching her wouldn’t die.

It didn’t help that her clothes felt like they were riding up on her, she had a stitch in her side, and so much sweat had pooled on her skin that it was dripping from her brow. Screw looking graceful…

“Roro? What’s up?”
“I’m done,” she huffed as she punched the large red emergency stop button and jerked to a halt.

“That’s all ya wanted t’do? Ya’ve got some time left!” Anna insisted.

“I’m fine.”

“Okay…” Anna Marie slowed her pace to a cooldown jog and watched in confusion as her best friend stalked off, furiously rubbing her nape with her towel. “Yer ‘just fine’, mah ass,” she muttered.

She turned off her iPod and stopped her workout in an attempt to catch up with Ororo, then noticed a familiar face over in the free weights. It was Mr. Short, Dark and Burly, and he was still staring after Ororo like he’d been stranded in a desert for a week, and she was a gallon jug of Gatorade.

Anna decided to cut out the middle man and go straight to the source.

She tapped him sharply, interrupting his reverie. He turned and met her gaze, slightly annoyed. Anna almost chuckled at his expression.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer.”

“Scuse me?”

“Why’re ya givin’ ‘Roro the eye?”

“Ummm…” Her directness left him temporarily speechless.

“I’ve gotta ask, because she ain’t bein’ all that forthright in tellin’ me, and I know there’s a juicy story behind this. Ya can’t blame me for askin’ ya, shoog, since one, ya don’t look like a psycho at first glance.”

“Okay,” he agreed, still flummoxed. Anna liked his mouth, which was twitching at the corners.

“And two, last Ah knew, she was single, somethin’ that’s been a topic of conversation for the last few trips ta Starbucks that have involved hours of bitchin’ about men in general and consumption of obscene amounts of chocolate.” Anna folded her arms beneath her chest and flung her hair back. “So if ya know somethin’ Ah don’t, now’s yer chance ta spill.”

“Well…hnnn…” Logan scratched his nape. “I plead the fifth?”

“I like a pleadin’ man as much as the next woman, shoog, but naw. That ain’t gonna fly.”

“ANNA!”

Before Logan could even come up with anything more than monosyllables, Ororo rounded on them, looking thoroughly irritated.

“Okay, this won’t do at all. For your information,” Ororo said, hand on her hip, glaring at Logan, “this is my best friend, Anna, normally a well-meaning girl, even if she is consortin’ with the enemy.”

“This is the enemy?” Anna was impressed at the enemy’s biceps, which were currently folding themselves across his very, deliciously broad chest. She licked her lips.

“Anna, this is Logan,” Ororo continued, “who isn’t anywhere near as innocent as he looks. Believe nothing that comes out of his mouth. Nothing.”
“Who said anything about innocent?” Logan muttered.

“He ain’t had much chance ta tell me anything, yet. Seems like the strong, silent type.”

“Nah. That’s yer girl here. She’s in the habit of only givin’ ya half the story.”

“Who, ‘Roro? We ain’t talkin’ ‘bout the same woman, bub.” Anna chuckled and shook her head.

“That’s because we aren’t talking about me at all.”

“Don’t know who I’m talkin’ about half the time anyway, when anyone’s talkin’ about you, darlin’.”

“Don’t. Call. Me. Darlin’.”

“Woo-hoo,” Anna whistled, raising her auburn brows.

“Don’t mistake the ‘strong, silent type’ for a Cro-Magnon man who can barely eat with utensils,” Ororo sniped.

“Cro-Magnons invented utensils,” Logan argued with her. “But ya don’t like talkin’ in person much, anyway. Yer more of an email girl.” Ororo cut her eyes at him. “Ain’t that right?”

“Like she said earlier, I’m Anna Marie Darkholme, Ororo’s best friend,” Anna interjected, extending her hand. To her delight, Logan had a strong, brisk grip as he shook it. But she kept a straight face.

“Don’t ya mean Tory’s best friend?”

“Eh. Either one. We’ve known each other since high school,” Anna shrugged. “Thought we normally told each other everything,” she added, giving Ororo a telling look. Ororo looked like he wanted to strangle her. “Til now, anyway.”

“High school? Ya mean ya were actually a kid once?” Logan didn’t seem convinced.

“Metallic lip gloss, stonewashed jeans and all, shoog,” Anna confirmed.

“I’d give fifty dollars to see that.” Ororo wanted to smack the smirk right off his face.

But in the meantime, well, he was making that difficult.

Logan looked really, really good.

Burly, like Anna said, and wearing a snug black, Lycra blend muscle tank entirely too well. He also had on a pair of navy blue basketball warmup pants that snapped up the sides and black and white Adidas on his feet.

His skin was ruddy from his own workout and his own hair was behaving for the most part, except for a few curls around his temples and nape that were damp from his sweat.

He was so close to how she preferred to see him, remembering how he looked windblown, half-buttoned and tanned. It took everything not to touch him, to flatten her hand against his hard chest and let her fingertip brush his nipple, which was standing out in relief beneath his tight shirt.

His eyes jerked down to follow the path of hers, then defiantly, his swept over her body from head to toe. Ororo swallowed, completely unnerved. Bastard.

Her own chest wasn’t cooperating, either. Ororo whipped her towel around her neck and tugged the
ends over her breasts, pretending that the gesture was natural.

“Rough workout?” Logan’s voice made it indiscernible whether it was an observation or an offer.

“Why don’t you get back to yours?” Ororo suggested. She did her best to flounce off, but it felt suspiciously like limping.

“Ah should prob’ly go with her,” Anna sighed.

“Yup,” Logan shrugged.

“Nice meetin’ ya.”

“Likewise.”

“For the record…and this is off-the-record…”

“Shoot.”

“Was it a one-night stand?”

“Does it count if it lasted all day?”

“Damn…”

“She looks like she’s about ta kill ya.”

“Pretty much. I’ll, uh-“

“Later, sweet cheeks.”

“Bye.”

Logan watched them with little discretion, clearly enjoying himself. He headed back to the assisted weights and laid back against the bench, plugging the pin two-thirds of the way down the stack. He snuck looks at them between sets as they worked their way around the stationary weights amid a sea of women who weren’t in as good shape.

Damn, she’s hot.

It was frustrating. She finally seemed less buttoned up, even disheveled, making him want to mess her up a little more, get her alone, and there they were in a crowded gym. There wasn’t any justice.

Her little white tank top clung to her in all the right places, and he liked the sight of her long legs and sweet, round hips shrink-wrapped in black yoga pants. Her friend Anna was just as easy on the eyes, but she wasn’t the one who caught his eye. Which was too bad, since she was easygoing and didn’t currently hate him. Yet. Logan had the feeling – no shit, genius, really? – that Ororo hadn’t filled her best friend in on the torrid details of their tryst yet. So by extension, Ororo’s best friend could end up hating him, too. It was the law of the jungle. It was a shame.

From her side of the gym, she told herself that Logan had a nerve…no, that he had some serious balls if he thought he could exchange dirt with her best friend. She fumed her way through three sets of hip abductors, mentally chanting “Die, James” with every breath.

“Ya gonna hog that one, or can Ah work in a set?”
“Why don’t you go spot him?” Ororo wheezed. “You looked…*phew* like…*gasp*…you wanted…*gasp*…to work out with him.”

“Ya ain’t exactly makin’ the case fer me not to, shoog.”

“Traitor.”

“News flash, ‘Roro, the man’s fine!” Anna’s hand darted out and smacked her in the shoulder.

“OW!”

“What’re ya doin’ over here, mad at him? Ah can make mahself scarce, ya oughta be over there spottin’ him or offerin’ ta dry him off!”


“Why. NOT.” Anna was aghast. “Yer gonna waste that hunk of man meat over there over…what? A one-nighter? When yer still speakin’ ta him?”

“We don’t ‘speak,’” Ororo clarified, with air quotes. “He’s an ass. I work with him.”

“Since when?”

“Since New Year’s, when I got back from my vacation.”

“Shit. That sucks. So when did this little ‘oopsie’ happen between you two?”

“Before that. Shortly before.”

“Ya didn’t know ya worked together?”

“Never. That’s the beauty of telecommuting.”

“Geez. That puts a damper on things.”

“There’s nothing to put a damper on. We have nothing in common.”

“He seems nice, but Ah see where yer goin’ with this. Can’t shit where ya eat. Messin’ with a coworker’ll land ya in a whole world of hurt.”

Ororo thought she felt his eyes on her again, but when she looked up, she only saw his retreating back.

And his hard, firm, rolling glutes draped so appealingly in navy Lycra blend as they walked away… wait, as he walked away. Ororo mentally wiped away drool.

“Need this?” Anna handed her a towel.

“Huh?”

“Yer droolin’.”

* 

Ororo liked her new digs well enough. It was fun going to lunch with Scott from time to time, but there were a few old haunts that she missed back home. The only consolation was the shopping. Ororo wiggled her toes in a new pair of Vivienne Westwood pumps and was grateful that her larger
paycheck allowed the occasional splurge. But she still hated her overpriced, tiny apartment. That much hadn’t changed. Ororo packed the majority of her things and stored them in a rental unit back in New York while Anna babysat some of her things that were too delicate to move.

It was just frustrating to be so far away from her friends. Anna had a standing invitation to come stay with her any weekend that she chose, but it was harder to finesse Stevie and Monica to come out, since they had significant others and children that couldn’t do without them for five minutes.

But her visit with Ali helped a bit when she made a jaunt back to Long Island.

*

“Monet’s getting so big. It’s cute. I love talking to her belly.”

“Pregnant women hate that,” Ororo pointed out.

“You didn’t hate it,” Ali argued.

“Yes I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” she insisted.

“No. I did. I pretended I didn’t, but I did.”

“But it was so much fun, you were so cute!” Then Ali sobered. “Wish things could have turned out differently. I’ll shut up, now.”

“No. You don’t have to. We can talk about it, once in a while. Sometimes I just…take it off the shelf to reminisce, and then put it back when I’m done.”

“He would have been beautiful,” Ali said, looping her arm through Ororo’s as they walked through the park.

“I know. I think his eyes would have been blue.”

And it still hurt. Not just losing the baby, but in the wake of that, losing Vic.

“Men suck, Al.”

“Yeah, they do,” she agreed heartily. “Wanna get a drink? Better yet, wanna see where I’m singing tonight?”

Ororo brightened. “Lead on.”

They stopped at a tiny nightclub that charged a hefty cover and promised a special on shots after seven PM. Ali said hello to a few familiar faces as the busboys cleared away the last of the mess from the dinner crowd.

“Alison!” a deep, thick voice boomed from behind the bar. Ali caught sight of its owner as he came around the corner, carrying a rack of empty beer pitchers.

“Cain!” she cried, grinning. “Staying out of trouble?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, grinning. “Not fer lack of tryin’.”

“Attaboy. Cain, remember Tory?”
“Good to see ya again, toots. Haven’t seen ya here in our lil’ stompin’ grounds lately.”

“I’ve been out of town. This isn’t technically home anymore.”

“Where, then?”

“Boston.”

“Eh. Not a bad trade.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Then ya need a taste of New York ta refresh yer memory. What happens here tonight, stays here. Yer drinks are on the house.”

“Talk about letting a bull loose in a china shop, or a kid in an unsupervised candy story,” Ali warned, reaching across the bar to punch his arm. She had to reach up a ways to do it. Cain was enormous, easily seven feet tall and built like a linebacker. Despite his size, his face was boyishly handsome, a crooked nose from when he broke it in a fight its only flaw.

“Hey, if the cops ask me, I didn’t know nuthin’,” he claimed, holding up his hands.

“Ororo who?” Ororo chimed in, winking at him. He winked back.

“Ooh, I’m so excited!” Ali hugged Ororo hard enough to make her say “oof!” and hopped up and down. “I’m so glad my best girl’s here to get into trouble with me tonight! I’m gonna dedicate a song to you, I swear!”

“Al…” Ororo hated unwanted attention. “Don’t do that!”

“Aw, let her do it. Everybody’ll get jealous,” Cain said. He was watching Ali with his usual admiration that he hid behind easy banter, but Ororo knew how fond he was of the petite songbird. It never failed. Ali always ended up attracted to the pretty assholes that talked a big game, like Arthur. Then she always ended up being used. Half of Ororo’s talks with Ali over coffee read like dialogue from *When Harry Met Sally*: “You’re right, you’re right; I know you’re right.”

They bade Cain goodbye and headed back to Ali’s apartment to change and plan out their night. They left an hour later dressed to the nines, but Ororo wasn’t running on all four cylinders yet.

Alcohol helped. Ridiculous amounts of alcohol.

Ororo sat back and watched her friend belt out each song in awe, amazed that she could change her style so easily and completely with each one. One of her connections “in the biz,” Lila Cheney, was sitting out most of the numbers while Ali sang along with her backing band, Cat’s Laughing, while she enjoyed her own drink at a table off to the left.

The faster number that Ali was finishing gradually shifted, slowing to a more sultry beat. Ali was slightly out of breath and her brow was gleaming with sweat as she took a gulp from a glass of water. Ororo was babysitting her cosmopolitan back at their table, and she blew her a kiss.

“Whoo,” she breathed, enjoying the crowd’s applause. “You’re an awesome crowd!” They cheered and threw cat calls and whistles, and she bowed and curtsied, laughing. “Listen, I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. Real life sucks sometimes, doesn’t it?” More catcalls greeted this. “Makes you get tired of all that teeny bopper shit they play on the radio, doesn’t it?” The crowd agreed.
“Here, here,” Ororo muttered, saluting Ali with her glass.

“So I have a special song for you guys tonight, but especially for my best friend, she’s here to support me tonight,” Ali informed them, pointing. The spotlight followed her hand. “There she is!”

“Shit!” Ororo hissed, freezing mid-sip.

“Hi, baby!” Ali cooed innocently. “That’s my buddy Tory, sucking down one of the dollar specials, folks, give her some love!” Ororo flushed and cursed Ali but gave the members of the audience and the band an embarrassed smile.

“This one’s for you,” Ali promised, and the lights on the audience went down, thankfully killing Ororo’s spotlight.

Ali licked her lips and swayed to the slow, yet familiar beat of one of Ororo’s favorite songs. When she opened her mouth, she was a different woman, suddenly one who had loved, survived, and been around the block.

When I had you,
I treated you bad
And wrong, my dear
And girl, since you went away
Don’t you know that I, sit around, with my head
Hangin’ down, and I wonder, who’s loving you…

That brat. She was right. It was one of her favorites, maybe even the favorite out of the old love songs she still dug out from the dustballs of her old vinyl LPs. And Ali wasn’t channeling Michael and his four brothers, or even Smokey.

Terence.

Ororo was just about ready to fall over. Ali just had to sing it like Terence. The girl was killing Ororo. Killing her dead with her rendition of that song.

Ororo was so rapt, gently swaying to the music that she hardly noticed someone had approached her table, hovering over her from behind.

“Tory?” The voice was low and gruff, achingly familiar.

The smile on her lips died a slow death as Vic hunkered down, claiming the seat across from her at the small round table. “Hey.”

“Hi.” The small spark in her eyes died, all signs of mischief gone. Her voice was flat when she asked him, “What are you doing here?”

“Came with a coupla buddies of mine. Just saw a UFC match that one of ‘em bought on Pay-per-View.”

“How nice for you.”

“Don’t get out much lately.”

“You’re preaching to the choir.”

“Looks like the songbird dragged ya outta the house, eh?”
“It didn’t take much. Some people actually think I’m fun to be with, Victor.”

“Yeah. Bet they do.” He took a gulp of his beer. She turned away from him slightly, pretending not to know him as she sipped her fourth drink of the night, longing to simply down it and order another tray of tiny glasses, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

He’d never enjoyed being ignored. Even when they’d fought, when she’d given him the silent treatment, he was a giant nuisance, always nudging himself into her personal space, bumping into her and pretending she was in the way, even when she cut him a wide berth. Whenever they fought, and she attempted to give herself a time-out, away from the sound of his harsh, braying voice and its accusations, he’d follow her throughout the house like a playground bully.

Tonight it didn’t feel any different.

“Ya look good, Tory.”

“Thanks.” She didn’t want to encourage him, but she tried to be polite. “Life looks like it’s agreeing with you.”

“It is. More or less.” Her eyes darted his way briefly, then returned to the stage. Ali wasn’t looking her way yet, too caught up in the song and too busy slaying her audience, hitting every high note like her life depended on it.

**I, I, I, I should have never ever, ever made you cry**
And girl, since, since you’ve been gone
Don’t you know I, sit around, with my head hangin’ down,
And I wonder, who’s lovin’ you…

Victor was still a handsome man, certainly. He was still tall and brawny, and he still wore his long, thick blond hair clubbed back in a ponytail. Ororo used to love to wash it and run her hands through it when they were in the shower. That memory was a bitter one now; she wondered if the woman he left her for enjoyed that privilege.

“I ain’t with Raven anymore,” he said out of the blue, as if reading her mind.

“That’s too bad.” Ororo really wanted to say “I told you so.”

“We wanted different things.”

“Don’t we all.” He sighed.

“Yeah. Guess we do.” His robin’s egg blue eyes studied her thoughtfully. “Ya look thinner.”

“I guess I would. It’s been a while since-“ She stopped herself.

“I know.” He didn’t need her to finish the thought. It still weighed heavily on them both.

“I know.” He didn’t need her to finish the thought. It still weighed heavily on them both.

“I’m just getting settled into a new office,” she offered, as an olive branch.

“Where?”

“Out of the state. Boston.”

“Shit.” He looked surprised, and slightly disappointed. “Guess that’s why I haven’t seen ya.”
“No. You haven’t seen me because you haven’t seen me,” she countered sourly, finishing her shot. “Not that it should matter, anyway. I needed a fresh start.” She was lying through her teeth, in a sense. She didn’t have to tell him the move wasn’t permanent. All he had to know was that her plans didn’t revolve around him anymore.

*Life without love is oh, so lonely*
I don’t think, I don’t think I’m gonna make it,
All my love, all my love, yeah, belongs to you only
Come on and take it, girl, c’mon and take it

“Startin’ over again, eh?”

“I’m trying my best.”

“I tried, too. I know ya don’t think so, but I did.”

“Victor.”

“Hear me out.”

“I can’t. I can’t listen to this. You betrayed me,” she pointed out. “That’s a symptom, Victor. That’s not even the full reason we broke up. If you cheated, you weren’t happy. I didn’t make you happy.” Saying the words out loud made her sick.

“That ain’t true, babe.” Then he changed his mind. “It ain’t that simple. I loved ya. Things were weird between you an’ me. And then…we were expectin’ Nate.”

Ororo turned away from him and took a deep breath to compose herself. Their son’s name was a sacrilege coming from his lips.

His large hand took hers very, very gently, only tightening his grip when she tried to pull away.

“I wanted a son more than anything. But I was worried that we were bringin’ him into all the problems we were havin’.”

“I was happy, damn it. I wanted to make things work, and knowing he was coming into our lives made me happy, and made me happy that he was *yours*, with *me*!”

“He wouldn’t have fixed what was happening between us.”

“No. But he would have made me stop regretting the day you and I met. At least there would have been a purpose.” There was steel in her voice, but her hand trembled as she reached for her drink. “We would have loved *him*.

“He would’ve been perfect,” Victor said, and there was a sadness in his eyes that stabbed her, but it didn’t dilute her anger, or the helplessness she felt about so much that had been out of their control. “And there was always a purpose. I know yer pissed, but I know ya don’t mean that.”

“Yes. I do mean that.” She took her hand back and folded her arms to avoid him making any more attempts at even friendly contact.

They sat and listened to Ali finish her song, and Ororo was staring straight ahead when she heard his voice again. Her face was a stony mask.

“Raven wants ta know if there’s any unfinished business between us.”
“Ink’s been dry on the divorce papers for a long time, now.”

“She wants ta know if there’s any feelin’s left that she should know about. That’s why she’s all of the sudden givin’ me space.”

“Because you’re all about needing space, Vic.” She longed to tell him *Chickens come home to roost,* but she squelched her urge. “Tell her I’m not carrying a torch for you. I have no claim on you or on what we had. She had a hand in killing whatever I used to feel for you, Victor.”

He looked disappointed and relieved at the same time. His touch was fleeting, a brief caress of her shoulder before he got up and left. He even took his empty beer glass with him. Her body felt bereft of his touch, but that part of her that had mourned for him, cried for him when he left her now stood up and cheered and shook her fist.

Memories of how it felt to hold him or to watch him from across the breakfast table or to hear his voice murmuring in the dark before she fell asleep came flooding back.

She reversed the tide and drowned them out with Ali’s songs. By the time the show was over, she was practically marinating in vodka from the drinks she’d already had; her buzz faded to a quiet melancholy.

Ali’s glow from her performance faded slightly as she approached Ororo’s table, but she gave her a tentative smile. “Vic showed,” she pointed out.

“Yeah. He did.”

“It was hell, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Want another drink?”

“Uh-uh.”

“I need one,” she decided. “Just keep me company. Cain?”

“Yeah, babe?” he called back from the bar as he dumped half-empty glasses down the drain.

“Rum and Coke, and one regular Coke.”

“Comin’ up.” He winked at her. She sighed and focused her attention on Ororo.

“I told him I don’t want him back. So why do I feel like shit?”

“It’s how we’re made. We tell ourselves that when something goes wrong, it must be our fault. ‘Why did he leave me? What’s wrong with me?’ But it’s more than that. You like investments.”

“Sheesh,” Ororo muttered, rolling her eyes.

“No. Not just the big bucks. You put a lot of time and effort into Vic. You wanted the payoff and you ended up taking a loss, and it’s hard for you to let it go.”

“So now what, oh wise one?”

“You diversify.”
“You suck at fiscal analogies.”

“You love me anyway.”

“I do.” Ororo nodded to the bar. “So does he.”

“Shut. Up.”

“Hey. I’m just sayin’.”

“We’re just buddies. I don’t like him that way.”

“Okay.” Ororo didn’t argue.

“I mean, we’d never work out. We’re too different. He wants someone he can put on a pedestal.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not into nice guys. Well, I mean guys who are ‘too’ nice.”

“Eeerrgh,” Ororo grumbled under her breath. “Woman, LISTEN to yourself.”

“What?”

“Not too nice? Okay, that’s Vic or Art in a nutshell.”

“They were assholes.”

“We asked for it. We indulged their assholishness.” Ororo was still feeling her shots and waxing philosophical. It felt good. “We stroked their egos. We acted like we didn’t want the nice guy, but let’s face it, Al, we did. We still do. But we say that we don’t because we don’t want to be disappointed when a guy shows his ass in the long run.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“No. It just sucks.”

“It’s too much fun to chase the dicks. You want to talk about an investment? How about chasing a guy and trying to act like you aren’t chasing a guy?” Their conversation was suspended when Cain brought their drinks, serving them with a flourish. He dropped a cherry into each glass and gave them a silly bow. The gesture looked comical, given his size and demeanor.

“You’re good to me, Cain,” she said with a sigh.

“Whatever yer little heart desires, babe.” His voice held irony and a hint of longing that Ali cheerfully ignored.

He went back to his business. Ororo and Ali mulled their drinks and chatted until the owner reminded them that he needed to lock up.

“So now what?”

“Diversify,” Ali reminded her.

“No junk bonds.”
“Long-term.”

They punned until they laughed themselves hoarse and shared a hunk of cheesecake at Denny’s before they caught a cab home. Ororo was bone tired, but she felt mentally recharged.
“Logan?”

“What?”

“Don’t think.” She leaned down and captured his lips, draining him of his resistance.

*

She found her old CD of Terence’s greatest hits and ripped the songs to her hard drive’s library, and they still moved her. She felt nostalgic, reminded of stonewashed jeans and metallic lip gloss and how it felt to want a boy to notice her, and to see if making out with one was all it was cracked up to be.

She chuckled to herself. Once the initial “ick” factor of tasting someone else’s tongue in her mouth had passed, the experience lived up to her expectations. Too bad everything else was more complicated than that.

She was humming along to “Delicate” in a low enough voice not to sound off-key; not too much, at any rate. “Don’t Call Me” and “Wishing Well” really brought it back, the kind of songs that made Ororo and Anna jump out of the bleachers once the slow songs were over and gather back at their abandoned spot amidst their girlfriends, lack of a partner temporarily forgotten. Ororo’s fingers were adopting the rhythm of the music again, and she went with it, glad to do something as mindless as keying if only to enjoy her disc a little longer before her conference.

“Ooh,” she murmured, “there it is. Aw, yeah, baby.” Terence, picking up where Smokey and Michael left off, taking his medicine for being a dog.

She just had to sing.

Badly.

Uninhibited.

*

Logan was glad the break room was stocked with coffee cup sleeves for a change, cuppa joe comfortably gripped in one hand and manila folder of hard copies in the other.

He headed back toward his office, and was surprised to see two men putting up yellow tape across a nearby doorway.

“What’s goin’ on?”

“We need to do some work in this office. Pretty soon we’re redoing the copy room beside it to take out the back wall and make it bigger.”
“Must be nice. At least someone’ll get some more space.”

“You.” He let them go on about their business and headed back to his desk.

He no sooner opened up his inbox than-

ZZZT. ZZZT. ZZ-ZT. BANG! BANG! ZZZT!

“Fuckin’-ay,” he muttered. His train of thought was shattered.

ZZZZT. BZZZ-ZT! BANG BANG BANG!

“Hell, no,” he grumbled as he headed back out to the main corridor.

“Hey, man, how long are ya gonna be workin’ on this today?”

“All day. We leave the site at five.”

“Shit.”

“It’s gonna be a little noisy for a while. Sorry, pal.”

Fuck.

The conference was in five minutes.

He decided to stop by Scott’s office. He could bunk with him for a half hour and be far away enough from the noise, hopefully.

No go. Scott’s door was locked and his windows were dark.

“Where’s Scotty?” Logan asked Amelia, one of the girls in clerical support.

“Home sick. He felt like crap.”

“Shit.”

“He’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I can’t borrow his office, can I?”

“Why?”

“Because I need a break from that racket.”

“Why don’t you see if anyone else is on the conference on this side?”

“Most of the management team’s off-site.”

“Tory isn’t,” Amelia reminded him.

The idea left a sour taste in his mouth.

“Knock on her door!” Amelia suggested cheerfully.

“Yeah. I’ll go do that,” he muttered.
Logan trudged to her office door and tapped lightly on the glass. She had her blinds pulled but her lights were on.

…what was that sound?

Wait…was she singing?

He contemplated knocking again, then decided against it.

It was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

She’d paused in her typing, or so he guessed, and was…using her stapler as a microphone. Ingenious. A grin was slowly spreading its way across Logan’s lips. Her back was slightly to him and she was hitting the bridge of the song.

It was the best part. Clearly, she thought so, too, because she was currently murdering it.

This is rich. Aw, man. Logan wished he had a Web cam, or that he could grab a few guys from the mail room to share in the spectacle.

“Life without lo-o-oove-WHOO! is oohhhhh, so lonellyyyyy…I don’t think, I don’t think I’m gonna make it, BUT- all my love, all my love, yeah, belongs to you only! Come on and take it, girrrrrl, c’mon and take it! Be-“

It had just been getting good. She was up from her seat, working up to a little dance that was comical, yet also sexy, her moves making her blazer cling to her more snugly.

She was belting it out, eyes squinched shut in the manner of James Brown. Logan was in pain from trying not to laugh.

Then it was over. She opened her eyes. She saw him.

Her voice cut off on a little squeak, just before the high note. Logan didn’t know whether to be grateful or disappointed. She dropped her stapler in surprise, fumbling to catch it, but it slipped through her fingers.

“Damn it!” she hissed. She yanked her earbuds out and flung them back onto her desk. “Oh! YOU!”

Logan was howling, leaning back against the doorframe, arm wrapped across his middle as he tried to hold it in. It was hopeless.

“Bastard,” she muttered miserably. Her pout almost made him take pity on her.

Not likely…

“Ahhahahaha…whoooooooo…” He tried to master himself, but it was difficult. “Man…”

“Shut. Up.”

“Sorry, sorry…”

“No you’re not. It’s called knocking.”

“Don’t think…*snerk*…ya could hear me over yer little solo there, darlin’.”

Kill.
She looked thoroughly put out. She got straight to the point. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Whoo…erm. Yeah. I, uh, needed a place ta dial into the conference.”

“Not here?” she argued.

“Why not here? Ya’ve got enough room.”

“Oh, that’s not a good idea.”

“Am I gonna be in yer way?” He cocked his brow in that way that she found so annoying. Ororo gave him a rusty sigh.

“You love getting in my way. Don’t you have some clients to finesse somewhere?”

“Look,” he said, “I need a quiet place ta dial in. My office is in the middle of that mess they’re makin’ by the old copy room. Cut me a break, Tory.”

There it was. That name again.

Her pet name.

His tone was straightforward. He wasn’t there to play any games. For the moment.

“Do you promise to behave yourself?”

“C’mon, what is this, third grade?”

“Hey, it’s my office. My rules,” she insisted.

“Geez. Fine. Yer rules.”

“You can sit over there,” she said, pointing to the small guest table she had across the room.

“We can both sit over there,” Logan argued. “It’s gonna sound weird with both of us talkin’ on different phones in the same room.”

“So?”

“Just use one phone. You won’t hafta use the headset, too, just put it on speaker.”

His logic was sensible enough, but Ororo was still embarrassed and wanting to commit homicide by stapler.

Speaking of which, she realized, it was still on the floor. She bent down to retrieve it.

Logan silently drooled at the way her tapered skirt hitched up, despite that she bent her legs and stooped down gracefully. She caught his glance and scowled.

“What’re you looking at?”

“Nothing.”

“Sure,” she said, doubtful.

“It’s probably a good thing that yer so good with numbers.”
“Jerk,” she muttered.

“Don’t quit yer day job.”

They set up the call and dialed in once Ororo brought up her email.

“Donald here.”

“And Selene. Tory?”

“Up and at ‘em,” Ororo offered. Logan saluted the phone with his coffee cup.

“Jim here.”

The perfunctory greetings were brief, since everyone was busy, and they all seemed to be typing a mile a minute from their desks.

Ororo was in fact tired of staring at her screen. Annoyance with Logan was tightening and enhancing the pain in her temples as they sat, and her patience was paper-thin.

“…so we have the rates ready for the X-Effect mid-year renewal?” Selene inquired.

“I left them on the shared drive.”

“That’s why I love her,” Selene bragged.

“Any time,” Ororo said.

“Any time,” Logan mimicked in a falsetto by her elbow.

“Ssshh!” Ororo’s eyes were blue chips. Logan made a face at her, and then made talking motions with his fingers, making it look like a hand puppet.

“I left them on the shared drive. I’m Ororo. I’m a good little underwriter. I have email older than the Ark,” Logan teased under his breath, straight-faced. His own deadpan was even worse than the mimicking.

“Asshole,” she mouthed.

The conference continued on at a steady pace.

“Jim? What’s the status on that seven-one new account?”

“It looks good. They bought flex and life.”

“Of course they did,” Selene griped on her end.

“Whatever Lola wants…Lola gets…” Selene hummed playfully. Ororo wondered if Donald was in her office.

“Ew,” she murmured, hitting the mute button.

“Oh, so yer brave now, with it on mute, huh?”

“I wouldn’t have to if someone wasn’t being distracting and noisy and inappropriate.”

“Least they couldn’t hear ya a little while ago.”
“You wouldn’t have if you’d knocked.”

“I did knock.”

“You. You tapped.” Rats. She got him, there.

“Same thing, darlin’.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Ya liked it when I called ya that before.”

“I had a lot of tequila. My judgment was impaired.”

“Bullshit.” Logan shook his head. “What you call impaired judgment, I call a helluva good time, sweet cheeks.”

“It was such a mistake. I should have known better.”

It irritated him, perhaps even bruised Logan’s ego to have been a lapse in Ororo’s fabled good judgment. But what was fair, was fair, wasn’t it? Hadn’t Logan done the walk of shame back to coach class? He was just thankful that he had his clothes on right-side-out.

“Why do ya always hafta know better? Why can’t ya loosen up?”

“Are you calling me uptight? It sounds like you’re calling me uptight!”

“No. I didn’t say that.”

“But you’re thinking it.”

“An uptight person would be concerned about that.”

Once again, she longed to bludgeon him with her stapler.

“I am who I am,” she told him. “Sorry if that rains on your parade. I don’t have patience for anything messy like one-night stands or trying to even explain myself, or my personal affairs, with someone who doesn’t like dealing with me much so far.”

He scowled. “Ya haven’t explained any of yer personal affairs. Far as I can tell, this is it. This is as ‘personal’ as it gets.” He was back to making air quotes.

“Stop doing that. It’s annoying.”

“Now I’ve annoyed Miss Perfect.”

“IT’s Tory, damn it!”

“Is it?”

The teleconference was just background noise as the volume rose in Ororo’s office between them.

All of the voices in the back of her head, all of the pieces that composed the whole were moving faster and heating up like stimulated molecules, ricocheting off each other and causing friction within her. It was heady, and the angry rush of words felt too good tumbling out of her mouth to stop.

So help her, she liked arguing with him.
“We’re back to square one. We work together. That’s it.”

“It was just a misunderstanding in communication,” Logan scoffed.

“Yours,” she huffed.

“Mine, my ass.”

Ororo’s reading glasses were lying on the table. Logan noticed she wore a minimum of makeup and again decided she didn’t even really need it, but she was still heaping insult on top of injury with that hair. It was killing him, seeing her look so damned frigid every day. If anything, it had gotten worse since she moved to his branch. She wore her clothing like armor equipped with a platinum chastity belt.

“Maybe you should take your ass out of my office.”

“That make ya feel big, kickin’ me out?”

“No.” Yes.

“Go ahead, then. Take it off mute.”

“Maybe I don’t feel like it yet.”

“Yer a brat.”

“Sticks and stones.”

For some reason, he knew that wasn’t true.

But he’d rattled her. Her posture was elegant but stiff as she rose from the table. She marched to the door and flung it open.

“You had to step away. It’s an easy excuse. It’s believable. Don’t let this hit you on the ass on your way out.” Her expression was proud and unrelenting.

“I don’t trust ya enough ta turn my back on ya while yer holdin’ on to it like that.”

“You don’t trust me,” she scoffed.

“Give me reason to.”

“Oh, get real. Find your own,” she snapped. “I don’t have to spoonfeed you any reasons to like me.”

Yet despite himself, he was beginning to like her. Bit by bit.

“I don’t need ya ta spoonfeed me.”

“That’s right. You have opposable thumbs.”

His nostrils flared.

His senses betrayed him. He didn’t even realize he’d gotten up from the table until he was standing by the door, since it looked as though she really was about to kick him out. But he heard the shift in her breathing and caught a whiff of her scent, her light perfume, or maybe her shampoo tantalized him. It was too temptingly feminine and too subtle, demanding to be explored more thoroughly,
through closer contact.

Her lips parted. The tip of her tongue almost imperceptibly darted out to lick the plump lower one, not enough to desecrate her perfect mauve lipstick.

No. That was Logan’s job.

His eyes dilated. Before she could form any further words of reprisal, she felt his hands close around her upper arms.

“Don’t-!”

“Damn it,” he grated out before he pulled her against him, closing the too-narrow gap between them.

Why did a man who made her so mad have to taste so good? Her voice was a strange, breathy little sigh that she didn’t recognize as he kissed her without mercy. His lips were firm and the way he used them took away her ability to think straight.

Her hands didn’t obey her commands to stop clinging to him, which certainly didn’t help matters any. We must touch. We must explore. We must caress, they chanted back to her.

Damned hands…

But he just felt so right, radiating heat and smelling so virile. She nuzzled his throat, needing to get closer to his scent.

“Mmmmf…” There it was again, that sound he loved to hear her make. Was that her tongue, lapping wickedly at his earlobe and making him erect as a tent pole?

He wasn’t going anywhere. Clearly. The door was kicked shut once again, and this time Ororo reluctantly let go of him with one hand to punch the button lock in on the knob.

“Please, darlin’,” he whispered roughly. His blunt fingernails scored her through her clothes, and the sensations that caused gave her goosebumps.

Her blazer had to go. That was first and foremost on his mind. She didn’t fight it, even shrugged her arms out of the sleeves when he jerked open the buttons.

Her blouse was a simple white satin with cropped sleeves and just a few buttons, no real barrier between Logan and paradise. He felt hot and itchy and worked up, and it only made sense as she wrangled him out of his jacket, too. He was relieved to be free of the warm wool, needing her touch so badly as her palms smoothed over his hard slopes of muscle through his crisp dress shirt.

“Ya make me crazy,” he groaned.

“Don’t blame that on me,” she accused, then whimpered as he bit her pulse. She shuddered with need as his large hands found her breasts, scorching them through the thin, slippery fabric. The bodice fell open and his fingertips stroked the satin of her skin instead, mapping out her curves. Her breast betrayed her, craving his touch and yielding easily to the weight of his hand as he cradled it in his grip.

His tie was a nuisance. He could always retie it, if need be, but Ororo was sick of it. It had to go, plain and simple, and she worked her fingers under the stiff Windsor knot, yanking it loose and flinging the offending accessory away. Her fingers clutched greedy handfuls of his shirt, pulling it from the waist of his slacks inches at a time until she found hot, smooth flesh. She savored the feel of
him and he jerked in surprise when she discovered his sensitive nipple.

Blouse and dress shirt were both gaping open shamelessly, one more ineffective barrier between them stripped away. His hands were back in her hair, tugging it loose and fanning it out, clutching it, running his fingers through its lush mass and thickness as their kisses grew dizzying, even ravenous.

They knew they should stop. They just didn’t know how.

The front clasp of her bra gave way easily beneath his finger and thumb, and she cried out with need as he dipped down and suckled her, hardly believing that was really the feel of his mouth, hot, sultry, damp, pulling on her. She felt oversensitized and far too needy with each lap of his tongue, and he was making that groan of satisfaction that she, too, tasted too good, felt too good, too right pushing her way into his mouth.

Scorching kisses rained over her face, closed lids, parted lips, and she returned them with just as much passion and need. Her own hunger frightened her, but her heart was pounding as she kneaded and groped him.

He was burning up beneath her touch. He craved it. She was soft and yielding, such a contradiction to Ororo Munroe, the Underwriter from Hell. She didn’t make any bones about letting her hands slide down his back, now bare once she dragged his shirt down his arms. She palmed his firm ass and squeezed, memorizing and appreciating its shape. He “mmphed” in surprise but ground himself against her, pressing himself against the divide of her thighs. Her boldness thrilled him, because it was unexpected.

He pulled back, and a low whine of complaint escaped her, but his arm was still curled around her waist, and he raised a shaking hand to flick away a few strands of her hair that were stuck to her lips. Their breathing was ragged, and his eyes were dark with need, yet full of confusion.

She nibbled the edge of his thumb, and he groaned at how erotic it looked, then nearly lost it when she sucked the end of the digit into her mouth, closing her eyes at how good he tasted.

“I shouldn’t want this,” he rasped.

“You don’t?” For a second, she sounded like an unsure little girl, almost crushed, but he shook his head.

“I do. Damn it,” he recanted, torn between common sense and total, thrilling ruin.

“Logan?”

“What?”

“Don’t think.” She leaned down and captured his lips, draining him of his resistance.

He’d been planning to pry himself loose. The best laid plans were a fucking wet blanket, as far as he was concerned, when the temptation between her thighs was a mere skirt hem away. No, nononononononononononononono... He wasn’t going anywhere. Hell, no. He bunched her skirt in his hand, sliding it up over her rump. She felt like satin, her skin was cool and soft beneath the whispering slickness of her pantyhose, and he loved running his palm over it, skimming the contour of her thigh as she wrapped her ankle around his calf.

They stumbled back against the wall. He was so close, fingers working beneath the waistband of the detested No Nonsense taupe sandal toe control tops, and her moans were getting to him as she kissed him.
He was thrown off balance, and they slid and stumbled again into the small conference table.

Ororo’s backside collided with the phone, knocking the handset to the floor with a loud thunk.

“Oh! What was that? You okay out there?”

Ororo and Logan froze. Her intake of breath was sharp they stared into each other’s eyes, momentarily aghast.

“Shit,” Logan mouthed.

“Fuck!” Ororo hissed.

“You guys have been quiet, Tory. Any thoughts? Questions?”

“Questions?” she said blankly.

“Just—just gimme a second. Questions? Uh, no real questions, for the moment,” Logan stammered as they disentangled themselves and began to search for their clothing.

“Why do you sound so far away?” Donald inquired. “Got up to stretch your legs?”

_Oh, if only he knew._

Ororo felt the draft of her still rucked-up skirt as she tried to smooth it down over her thighs while trying to yank her bra closed at the same time. It was hard to try to snap the tiny clasp shut and think of something believable to say.

“Um…Selene, any takeaways? Action items?”

“The rate revision for seven-one, Tory,” she said, slightly impatient.

“Right. Right. No problem.”

“Thanks for taking the time to call in,” Donald said pleasantly.

“Any time.” That came from Logan as he fought to rebutton his shirt, now hopelessly wrinkled.

He was frustrated and his itch was unscratched. His sense of blue balls was contagious, if the desperate look on Ororo’s face was any indication. He turned away from her and plowed his fingers through his hair, already disheveled from Ororo doing exactly the same thing.

They resumed the meeting for another few minutes, as Ororo and Logan sat calmly by the phone, a safe distance apart. Ororo offered her feedback while making some sense of her hair. Logan watched her despondently as she bit by bit returned to the no frills, take no prisoners woman who frustrated him every day.

So he hardened himself. He slipped his mask back on and clipped his notes back into his folder, leaning in toward the phone as he spoke.

“I’ll send a memo out to the client. We’ll wait for their approval and signoff.”

“We’re already going to print. Just ask Contracts,” Ororo argued.

“Tell them to stop the print job until we get the signoff. Otherwise it’s wasted postage, paper and time,” he snapped.
Her blue eyes narrowed dangerously. “Fine.”

One word heralded the death knell of the spark lingering between them. It flickered and died as they logged off the call. Logan left her office without another word. She didn’t even look up as he closed the door behind him.

They were back to business as usual.
Chapter Summary

But being beside him was comforting. Easy.

Ororo darted out of the elevator at a fast clip, clutching a manila folder against her chest. Yukio caught her eye as she stepped out of the women’s rest room into the hall.

“Where’s the fire?”

“There’s been a mixup,” she huffed. She thought better of hurrying away and whipped around mid-step. “Where’s James?”

“Logan? He has plans today. He’s gonna be out of the office.”

“Oh, no he doesn’t,” Ororo snapped as she resumed her path, loaded for bear.

“I think it was important!” Yukio called after her. Ororo didn’t pause to wonder why she sounded slightly frantic.

“Important, my ass,” she muttered under her breath. “Gonna just email and run, buddy? I don’t think so.”

He tried to ambush her again with a midterm plan renewal flexing the wellness benefit to ninety percent for retirees. Of course that was going to raise their rates; since when hadn’t he taken sixth grade math?

No go. Enough was enough.

Her knock on his door was brisk. She didn’t even pause to think about what she was going to say.

“Just a minute,” he barked from the other side of the door, a stark change from the low, even tones of what sounded like a phone call.

Ororo fumed and tapped the heel of her pump against the gray tile. Fine. She’d wait. Oh, this was going to be good.

She heard him throw out a few “yups,” “uh-huhs” and “I got its” before ringing off. At the thunk of the handset, she barged inside and slapped the folder onto his blotter.

“What are you trying to do to me?”

“What?” His eyebrows drew together and created dangerous little divots between them. Ororo didn’t check herself.

“You always just assume this is fine. You don’t make a change like this-“

“Like what? Like one that gets the sale?”

“Excuse me?”

“Ya heard me, Ororo. I got the sale. I hopped into my rental car, drove out five hundred miles ta
meet the client, sat through a two hour lunch and listened ta their spiel about how they stuck with their last carrier fer ten friggin’ years, and that we had a pretty big bar ta jump over if we wanted ta welcome ‘em into the OptforWellth family. I schmoozed, kissed their asses and bent over so far backwards that I nearly snapped myself in half. Whaddya want? Huh? Ya wanna give it a go? Play with yer little calculator and go take a nap!”

It wasn’t just his words that made her mouth drop open. It was the venom dripping from them that stunned her. “Play with…you did NOT just say that.”

“Darlin’, I ain’t got time ta say anything else. Ya interrupted me in the middle of tryin’ ta head out the door.” Belatedly she noticed his open briefcase on the table and what looked like an expensive black leather and tweed suitcase on wheels propped in the corner.

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t see why ya need ta know. But feel free ta check yer inbox if ya want my out of the office message ta keep ya company while I’m gone. I’d take a picture of my sunshine-smiley face for ya ta tape over it, but I ain’t got time.” He was already up from his desk and running on autopilot, logging off his computer, unplugging his Blackberry from its charger, closing the cap on his commuter cup and reaching for his coat.

“So it’s a big secret when you’re coming back? Fine. Sell and run. Let me pick up the pieces of this mess.” Ororo turned to leave, then thought better of it. “Why do you do that? I know I’m just the underwriter, and that doesn’t mean shit to you, but seriously, Logan? Stop throwing me under the bus and making me look like the bad guy. Could you just once not walk all over me-“

“I get it, I get it. Enough. Out.” He fanned her away, and Ororo complied, indignance simmering in her eyes.

“Fine, then. Have fun,” she flipped toward his retreating back once they were out in the corridor.

Evidently, that was the wrong thing to say.

He spun on her, and she saw his broad chest rise with one massive breath before he let her have it.

“Fun. Did ya just tell me ta have fun? News flash, Ororo: This ain’t a pleasure trip. I ain’t plannin’ on havin’ fun of any kind. I have a family emergency that isn’t just about me whistlin’ Dixie and eatin’ beer nuts in coach class.”

She felt her scowl shift down a gear as shame trickled over her flesh like raw eggs. “Oh. Oh, no.”

“It’s my dad,” he told her.

“Oh, Logan, I’m so-“

“Fine. That’s fine. I don’t need ta hear this right now. I’ve got a plane ta catch.” Part of him almost gave in to the softer, chastened look of concern on her face and the way her body language lost its aggression. He didn’t have time to ponder it.

“How are you getting there?”

“Cab,” he threw over his shoulder. He was surprised that she didn’t take his previous statement as a goodbye.

“Uh-uh,” she insisted. She was keeping stride with him all too easily with her long legs, despite her...
She wasn’t wearing a coat, but Logan was relieved to find that the chilly morning wind had died down to a moderate breeze and the air had warmed by about ten degrees since he arrived at work. She looked nice, he thought. More black, but this time it was a soft wrap dress that flattered her curves in a clingy knit. Her hair was up again, but she wore dangling gold earrings shaped like Chinese fans with small tassels at the ends. The only benefit of her spinsterish chignon was that it showed off the line of her graceful neck and small, well-shaped ears.

And her shoes… Logan gave her an A for effort on the sexy black pumps with large buttons over the toes finished in leopard print suede. Ordinarily Logan could care less about women’s footwear, but she seemed to enjoy hers. Better yet, her legs enjoyed them, too. It was impossible to ignore the flash of her long, tapered calves and her even strides.

“Ya aren’t cold?”

“It’s not bad out today. As long as there’s sun out, I can handle a little chill,” she shrugged as they caught the walk light at the corner. Logan wasn’t convinced, particularly since her pace sped up slightly as they strolled down the block.

“Where’d ya park?”

“The garage on Fifth.”

“Ya walked all that way with no coat today? Yer frickin’ crazy, woman. It was cold this mornin’!”

“I left my coat in the office,” she reminded him smoothly, eyeing him as if to say “Duh!”

“Ya didn’t hafta do this,” he grumbled.

“I never do anything I don’t have to do. I do what I want to do.” The sidewalks were crowded despite the fact that it was mid-morning. They were buffeted by the stream of people, pushing them inadvertently closer together. Logan found that he didn’t mind.
She smelled nice. He didn’t mind that, either. Her perfume was subtle and spicy, with notes of sandalwood and ginger, and he guessed she used it sparingly. It worked well with her body chemistry, blending well with her natural pheromones as her skin warmed it. One thing Logan hated was women’s perfumes and colognes that overwhelmed his nose or covered up her natural scent too much. Jean had been more of a floral body wash girl, which suited him fine, even if she did fog up the bathroom every morning with it.

They hit another intersection, drawing to a jerky halt as they caught the red light. The crowd of pedestrians behind them seemed to close in on them again. Ororo drew closer to him instinctively, using him as a buffer; she hated crowds, ironic since she lived and worked in a huge city.

But being beside him was comforting. Easy.

The walk light came on. Ororo misjudged the curb and stumbled on her way onto the crosswalk. “Ooh!” she hissed. Logan’s hand immediately darted out and caught her, hauling her against him.

“Careful, Tory!” He was practically dragging her by the arm as they crossed, helping her to keep a step ahead of the surging flow of feet. She felt chastened and awkward, heat flooding her cheeks.

“Sheesh. Nice,” she muttered. “I don’t know how to walk, or anything,” she added self-deprecatingly. Logan let go of her arm once they reached the opposite side, but only when she gave him an odd look.

His touch seemed to linger. His hands were strong and delightfully warm through the thin knit of her outfit.

“Watch yer step.” He didn’t counter her words with a wisecrack, which surprised her. “Yer makin’ me cold just lookin’ at ya with no coat.”

“It’s no big deal,” she argued.

“Yer so frickin’ stubborn.”

“Kettle, meet pot.”

“Here,” he said, reaching for her free hand. She still hadn’t given him back his briefcase, which amused him. Logan tugged her hand through the crook of his arm until it was looped all the way through, then clamped his arm close to his body, ensuring that she shared some of his heat and the warm heft of his coat.

Ororo squelched a smile. Bossy, she thought.

They made it to the parking garage and strode up to the second level.

“It ain’t a good idea for ya ta be out here alone at night ta get yer car.”

“Normally I’m not. I usually take the red line and the city bus. I’m leaving an hour early tonight for that reason,” she shrugged.

“Then this is puttin’ ya outta yer way.”

“No. This is giving me a break I wouldn’t have taken. I planned to work through lunch today to get caught up. I needed the air. I was about to start climbing the walls or pitch a bitch if Selene emailed me one more message with a red flag on it.”
Logan snorted. “I don’t envy Don havin’ ta listen ta that.”

“She’s all sweetness and light for him, the poor bastard,” Ororo mused as she clicked the keys. Logan was greeted by the low thunk of the locks on a showy silver Honda Pilot. She reluctantly disengaged herself from him and popped the trunk. Logan loaded the suitcase in the back and closed the hatch with a hefty slam while Ororo climbed in and turned on the heater. The radio came on with the vents, and Logan was assailed by R&B music that he wouldn’t have chosen himself.

She turned down the volume until it was almost mute, creating a background buzz that wasn’t unpleasant. “What terminal are you flying out of?”

“US Air.”

Ororo wrinkled her nose. “Not my favorite. I like Jet Blue.”

“Couldn’t book one on time,” he admitted. “That’s my favorite, but I needed a flight this morning.”

“What happened to your pop?”

“Pop wanted ta meet my brother John and his wife. They all met up in Maine for one of my aunt’s birthdays. So everything was goin’ fine, but Pop complained that he didn’t know why he was tired after they got there. Pop’s been off his oxygen for a while since his heart attack.”

“Heart attack? Good grief, Logan, was that recent?”

“Coupla months ago.” Then he looked stricken. “He had another mild attack yesterday.”

“I’m so sorry!” She shot him a sympathetic glance over the steering wheel as she maneuvered them out of the gate, paying the attendant at the booth. Ororo was a decent driver, even though she despised rush hour traffic and got antsy at red lights.

“Logan, are you warm enough?”

“I’m fine.”

“Let me know, okay?”

It was just weird seeing her so solicitous and concerned, instead of looking like she wanted to smack him with a skillet.

The ride to Logan Airport was uneventful; Ororo smothered a chuckle as she noted the signs.

“Yer laughin’ about how I got the same name as the airport, aintcha?”

“No,” she lied, smirking.

“Liar.”

“I’m not.”

“Brat.” He considered something. “Why do ya go by Tory?”

“It’s easier for people to remember.”

“What’s so hard about Ororo?”
“The spelling. How to pronounce it. How people murder it and call me Laura or Aurora, or even worse, Uhura.”

“Yer kiddin’.”

“I wish.”

“Ouch.”

“So Tory it is.”

After a few seconds, he murmured “I kinda like both.”

*

Ororo steered them through the tunnel for Logan’s concourse and fretted behind a long line of cars.

“Shit. Wish I could have gotten you here sooner.”

“This ain’t any worse than a cab,” he offered.

“Except they drive like maniacs,” she reminded him. “You might not have gotten here in one piece, but they might have saved you a few minutes.” Ororo pulled into the loading zone and clicked open the trunk. Logan promptly hopped out and retrieved his suitcase, nerves making his gut roil and knot. Ororo left the engine running and followed him with his briefcase.

A strong breeze in the corridor ruffled the stray strands that worked their way free from her bun. Logan restrained the urge to brush a couple of them free of her lips when they got stuck in her makeup.

“Have a safe flight,” she told him. “Maybe you could email me when you get in.”

“I don’t know when I’m gonna get a free minute, darlin’.”

“I know. Never mind, that’s fine. Spend some time with your family. Have a nice trip. Take good care of your pop.”

“I’m tryin’. Old geezer’s hardheaded as a mule.”

“Gee, wonder where you got it from, then?” Her blue eyes danced and a smile teased the corner of her mouth.

They paused a moment, watching each other. The urge to share an embrace of some kind, even a little peck was strong.

“Bye, Ororo.”

“Bye.” She waved after him as he rushed toward the check-in line inside. He turned one last time and gave her a cavalier wave.

Ororo kicked herself the entire way back to the office.

“I can rip off his clothes and stick my tongue down his throat at the office, but I freeze up when I drive his ass to the airport,” she muttered, turning up the volume on the radio again. “What’s wrong
Scott was waiting for her in the break room as she made for the coffee pot. “Where were you?” He patted her arm companionably, then winced. “Why do you feel so cold? Were you just outside?”

“Just for a quick errand,” she explained, filling her commuter cup with the bitter brew.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to get lunch out.”

“Can’t. I used up what free time I had.” And not badly, but she didn’t add that.


“Nah.” That was a lie. Greasy pepperoni sounded good to her. “Gotta research something and get caught up on some email.”

“Ugh.” Scott sighed. “Now you’re making me feel guilty for taking a lunch. I’ve got just as much crap myself.”

“Probably more,” Ororo added. A client services rep’s job was never done.

“At least I don’t have to travel,” Scott reasoned. “I don’t envy Logan having to get on a plane every month.”

“It wasn’t business this time,” Ororo chimed in.

“What do you mean?”

“His trip to his brother’s.”

“Wait…shit. He left already?”

“Yes.”

“Shit, shit, shit. I meant to offer him a ride. I’m a shitty friend.”

“Please. Not true.”

“It’s not just that. I wanted to check with him to see if he had any action items while he’s gone. I’m his backup for some of his clients.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s a full-time job trying to keep up with him.”

“Maybe he should have been an account manager.”

“Logan doesn’t like being the boss. He likes to do things his way, too. Sales is right up his alley.”

“He definitely does things his way,” Ororo grumbled as she creamed and sugared her coffee.

“So you saw him this morning?”
“More or less. I caught him going out the door by accident while I was trying to barge my way in.”

“Rate problems?”

“Bingo.”

“You could send some of that communication through me, you know.”

“Why make you the middle man?”

“Being the middle man is what Client Services does. It’s job security.” Scott took a generous gulp of his coffee. “Seriously, there’s no need to take him to task if there’s a problem.”

“I wouldn’t have to if he’d listen to me once in a while. Or at all.” Ororo was just getting warmed up.

“He deletes his emails when his box gets too fu-“

“He just runs roughshod all over my rates when I quote them,” Ororo continued, fuming.

“He probably didn’t mean-“

“He’s always got to have the last word,” she added, shrugging emphatically with her coffee cup.

“Logan’s always been a bit of a —“

“Does he even KNOW how to look up state mandates for what we can sell?”

“…talker,” Scott finished. “Ororo?”

“Huh?”

“Can I get a word in edgewise now?”

“Uh. Oops…sorry, Scott.”

They left the break room, chatting companionably.

Scott mused to himself that his best friend and his team’s underwriter had more in common than they would ever admit. But he decided not to point that out, at risk of being hit by a skillet.
Chapter Summary

What was a little white lie to herself once in a while?

After a week, the lie became routine.

Logan sometimes hated staying in his own room, but it didn’t make sense to stay in a hotel. Amusingly, everything was still almost the way he left it, but it looked like Rose had aired it out, anticipating his arrival. Before she’d passed, his mother had kept it in pristine condition, and her sewing and craft items had been packed away, or perhaps his father had finally given them to charity. That corner of the room felt empty, and Logan longed to feel her presence in it again. The house was beginning to feel more and more devoid of Elizabeth’s warmth.

Even his old posters still hung on the wall, including the macabre, grinning face of “Eddie” from an Iron Maiden print that was curling around the corners. None of them hung symmetrically or parallel with the ceiling crease; when he was seventeen, Logan hadn’t given a damn. It was his room; John was the neatnik and slept down the hall as soon as he’d entered junior high and decided his brother was more of a social handicap when his friends came over to listen to their Pink Floyd tapes and play Pac-Man. When he was ten, Logan had felt ousted and indignant at first, but slowly the contents of his toy box spilled out bits and pieces at a time. GI Joes occupied his desk and dresser, and a pennant and large Styrofoam finger from a Sox game hung from the corner of the mirror. The only difference now was the bed. His mother had replaced the twin with a full mattress that was pleasantly firm. The splashy floral print of the bedspread was at odds with the masculine décor of the room, but Logan didn’t mind.

The smell of the house was familiar, welcoming him when he came back, but it was unnerving to be there while his father was still in the hospital. Logan busied himself with mowing the front and back yards, pulling weeds, and fixing the drip line for his mother’s roses. He’d just found the slightly rusted loppers in the garage and was about to start pruning them when Rose and John pulled up into the driveway. John made a beeline for Logan and took the shears from him in lieu of giving him a hug.

“I’ll do that. Why don’t you head over to see Pop?”

“I wanted to clean up a little first and make it nice for when he got back.” Guilt niggled at him, though. Logan had spent the past two nights sleeping on a cot to keep an eye on his father, but he eventually gave in to the need to get some decent rest and came back to the house. As soon as he set foot in the door, Logan was all about staying occupied, taking care of things that needed attention. Repairs, cleaning, rearranging the garage, anything he could get his hands on; Logan needed to stay busy to stay focused and in control.

He reached for the loppers, but John wouldn’t let go of his side of the handle. “I can do it, Jimmy.” The use of his childhood nickname annoyed Logan, relegating Logan to his “kid brother” status. A warm flush of irritation crept up the back of his neck.

“Where are the kids?”
“Staying with their friends.”

“Pop ain’t in intensive care.”

“We didn’t want to second guess yet.” Logan hated his brother’s tone of voice and the implication behind his words. He gritted his teeth and wrested the loppers from him again. Rose sighed and placed a hand on her disappearing hip. Her pregnant belly negated the remaining hollows and planes of her body, leaving behind only the looming mound that ate up her silhouette and puffed up her cheeks, fingers and feet. Logan knew she was physically miserable and impatient, but she and John still shared the expectant, hopeful glow.

It hurt to watch. Memories that Logan wasn’t in the mood to indulge clawed at his consciousness. Rose saw him eyeing her body and her brows drew together in concern. “You all right, Jimmy?” She reached for the loppers, and to Logan’s own surprise, he let her wrest them from his grip and toss them into the bushes. “Take a break. You look tired.”

“I don’t wanna sit down, or I won’t get up again.”

“Then don’t get up. Rest. This doesn’t all need to be done today.”

“I’ll do it while you’re seeing Pop.” John stood by the front door, holding it open and waiting for his brother to come in. Logan’s exasperated sigh gusted from his lips as he marched up the porch steps, feeling like a chastised child. The fresh air had given him a temporary reprieve and fortified him, but he felt his energy drain away as he took in his surroundings, felt the “gap” left in the house without either of his parents lending it their warmth. He didn’t want to contemplate the day that condition would become permanent.

Logan crept up to the upper story bathroom and drowned out the noise in his head under hard, pelting spray, letting the water rush in runnels through his thick hair as he braced his palms against the tile and bowed his face. Rose was right; he was exhausted, but he meant it when he said that rest wouldn’t help. Logan didn’t have the safety net of his bulging inbox or the clutter on his desk when he was at home, or clients whose concerns about their accounts dwarfed any crisis on his plate. What’s the matter, James? You say you’re bleeding to death and killer clowns kidnapped your lawn jockey? Cry me a river. My employees have a problem with their flexible spending plan. Logan needed well-ordered chaos to lose himself in, in sense, so he wouldn’t “lose himself.” He could thrive in teeth-grinding stress if it was of his own making.

Minutes later he headed downstairs, dressed for a springtime Saturday in a pastel oxford, khakis and deck shoes. Rose beamed when she saw him, and John nodded in approval over the edge of his coffee cup.

“You clean up nice, little brother in law,” she commented.

“Ya like it, eh?”

“No putting the moves on my old lady, bub.”

“Gotta keep ya on yer toes. All right. I’m out.”

“I told Pop you might pick him up something decent to eat.”

“Sounds good. I could use a little something myself, the hospital cafeteria sucks.” And it was overpriced. The salad bar and sandwiches were sold by weight, and Logan paid seven dollars for their meager attempts at both on his last trip. There was a Subway down the street from the hospital parking garage.
Soon Logan arrived at the hospital’s Definitive Care ward dangling two clear plastic bags in his fist, wrinkling his nose yet again at the signature aroma of disinfectant. His father was up and around, surprising Logan with how alert he was.

“Tell me that’s something besides this swill,” he mocked, nodding to the tray of dishes with their covers still slightly askew. Logan winced as he lifted the lid to a cup of watery chicken noodle soup that only had a few sips missing. The vanilla pudding wasn’t particularly promising either, and the string beans looked like they came straight out of a freezer bag.

“Hope it says in yer chart that ya can have ‘turkey and turkey-derived products,’” Logan informed him. He passed him the sugar cookie and unwrapped the six-inch chicken sandwich for him, setting the medium iced tea on the sliding bed table. “You cold?” His father had a few extra blankets draped over his bed and wore his flannel shirt around himself like an open jacket over the hospital gown.

“They blast the air conditioning in this place. By the time I leave, I’ll have icicles growing off my ass. Pass me the mustard. How’s work?”

“I haven’t checked in since I got here.” It was too tempting. His Blackberry was burning a hole in his suitcase. The workaholic in him was restless and chomping at the bit to check his email and voice mails or to shoot Scooter a note. At least he had someone in his corner to keep tabs on a certain underwriter on a power trip about experience ratings and add-ons.

The thought made him smirk. His father paused in taking a bit of his sandwich. “What’s so funny?”


“That ain’t nothin’. That’s a cat that got the canary look. You used to wear that look when you were ten, whenever I caught you in the middle of something that would have gotten an adult arrested.”


“What’s No Big Deal’s name? Is she a looker?”

“Pop! Geez…” Logan’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment, out of old habit.

“C’mon, now, bub, don’t leave me in the dark. ‘Fess up. What’s she like?”

“She isn’t like anything…it’s complicated.”

“What’s with you young people today? What’s this ‘it’s complicated’ baloney? Sheesh. ‘Complicated,’ he says. Do you like her?”

“No. That’s the problem.” His father grunted and took a bite of his sandwich, leaving Logan a reprieve to do the same. His stomach had been grumbling, but now it was in knots. He sighed and fought back a burp that snuck out anyway. “There isn’t any point in pursuing anything with her. I work with her. I don’t want things gettin’ outta hand, Pop.”

Jonathan snorted. “Last time anything ‘got outta hand’ between me and your mother, squirt, the rabbit died.” This time Logan choked on a sip of his lemonade. He coughed and sputtered, and his father reached over with a grin, whacking him soundly on the back. “Lugnut,” he muttered fondly. “Don’t make things complicated. If you like her, be up front about it. Don’t tiptoe around it.”

“It…*kaff, kaff*…ain’t that easy, Pop. See, it’s…” he faltered.

“Don’t say it’s complicated. I get the impression ya got a little ‘familiar’ with this young lady, and I
don’t want the details, God forbid. Again, I don’t get you kids today. All this hemming and hawing about commitment and ‘the right time’ and all that other shit they talk about on Dr. Phil. Ya jump into bed first and think about the consequences later.”

Logan shuddered. His father was clearly feeling better, if this feisty turn was any indication.

“In my day, you met a nice lady. You told her she was pretty. You asked her to go for a walk, then out to get a soda or coffee. Then you took her to a movie. Then, if you got her in trouble, you gave her a ring. That’s not complicated.”

“Sure ain’t.”

“That’s love. You kids call that ‘old school,’ but it made more sense than the crap you do now.” His father sighed. “Jean was a corkscrew. There ain’t anyone else in the world like her, Jimmy. Or like yer mother.”

“This one ain’t like Ma or Jeannie, either, Pop. Far from it.”

“Well, what’s the problem?”

“She’s a control freak. She’s just…bossy. I met her away from work and didn’t know she was one of our counterpart’s people.”

“Where from?”

“New York.”

“A New Yorker, eh? Bet she’s tough. You can’t be soft living somewhere like that, but it builds character. Nice, strong woman. Bet she has spunk. Your mother was bossy.”

“Mom made it work.”

“No argument there, bub. My Elizabeth ran my ranch, and I never regretted it. Ya don’t hafta be a doormat, Jimmy, but once in a while it’s okay to let a woman be a little bossy. That’s what Monday night football’s for. And hearin’ her nag ya sure as hell beats the silent treatment. She could be smilin’ and sweet as an angel and hiding a rolling pin behind her back.” His father broke his cookie in half. “Yep. I don’t mind a bossy woman.” Logan shook his head and sighed.

“Pop, Pop…gads. She ain’t the one for me, all right?”

“Fine. That’s fine. Ya don’t hafta rush right out and get me another daughter-in-law, but keep an open mind.”

“Dunno if I can be that flexible with this one.”

“Whaddya like about her?”

That was a loaded question and evoked images that made it hard to keep tight rein on his facial expressions. “She’s…smart. I guess. Snarky.” He took the lid off his drink and took a hearty gulp, crunching the ice cubes. “Pretty,” he mumbled around a mouthful.

“Does she make ya laugh?”

“Not on purpose.” Her impromptu, unintentional serenade was still fresh on his mind, and Logan’s mouth twitched. Then a low chuckle escaped him. “I’ll tell ya one thing, though, she sure as hell can’t sing.”
“That ain’t the worst thing in the world. Just don’t take her out for karaoke, and yer fine.”

“Pop, when are ya getting out?”

“Change the subject, then; be that way, Jimmy. Yeah, they said maybe tomorrow. Gonna run some more tests. Feel like a pin cushion already; look at all this shit.” He nodded to the IVs and blood pressure monitor. His father squirmed uncomfortably back against his pillows while Logan eyed his sandwich. His father barely touched it.

“Full already?”

“I’m done. It wasn’t bad. M’just not hungry as I thought.” His father coughed and cleared his throat several times; it was a harsh, wet sound.

“Pop…that sounds pretty bad.”

“It’s just a tickle. Quit fretting. Here. See if you can find the game. This ain’t the greatest remote, but at least this place has a little cable.” Logan fumbled with the clunky appliance, which also doubled as a call button. The nurse’s voice came on the tiny intercom when he hit the red one by accident before he got it right. Logan stayed with him and they watched it until he turned to ask his father a question and was greeted by soft snores. Logan settled his father back more comfortably and pulled his blankets up to his neck.

“Bye, Pop. Sweet dreams. Don’t wear yerself out, ‘kay.” He kissed his cheek and clicked off the set. His drive home was contemplative and troubled.

*

Ororo felt fidgety and disconcerted ever since she left the airport and watched Logan’s retreating back disappear through the partitions. She lost interest in the *Without a Trace* rerun halfway through, sensing the outcome already and smirking nostalgically at the eighties music on the soundtrack whenever they flashed back to the time of the crime. The pickings were appallingly slim at eleven o’clock at night, but she didn’t feel like upgrading her cable package just to have more channels that she’d hardly watch. She flipped absently through informercials, penis enlargement commercials, QVC, CNN, and *Adult Swim*. None of it was distracting enough.

She was worried about Logan. It made no sense. For the most part, if memory served, she didn’t even like the man. The talk on the way to the garage and the deceptively easy rapport they shared in the car rattled her. He was almost…nice. They couldn’t have that, that wouldn’t do at all.

Ororo paused long enough on her least favorite Extenze ad to recite along with the actor, “…and that increase in size? Well, that can be fun, too.” She sighed, muttering “Sure it can, pal.”

Television wasn’t cutting it. Sourly she clicked off the set and cable box, and her living room fell dark once bereft of the illumination of the large plasma screen. It left her with the impression of a square-shaped patch of glare in her eyes as she made her way stumbling down the hall to her room. Ororo sat at her desk and booted up her laptop. She logged into her Blackberry and synched it with her PC so she could get her work messages. There were already three from Selene, even though it was Saturday night. That didn’t surprise her, but she still had no intention of answering them until Monday morning, like normal people did. Her weekends were her sanity, no manically compulsive bosses allowed. Ororo rubbed the bridge of her nose as she waited for her Windows to refresh themselves and her icons to appear on her desktop.

No messages from Logan. No surprise. When he said he was taking care of family business, he
meant it, and she respected that.

Surely it wouldn’t hurt to check on him, would it? Ororo pondered it a moment, then clicked on File/New Message before she could talk herself out of it.

To: Howlett, James  
From: Munroe, Ororo  
Subject: How are you?

Ororo wondered if the subject was reasonable, in light of the kind of day to day working relationship they shared. Shoot, it’d have to be good enough. She began typing in earnest, puzzling over the strange, nervous rash of prickles crawling over her scalp.

*Hi. Just wanted to see if you had a good flight. Hope your dad’s okay. How sick is he?*

Ororo was at a loss for what else to write.

*I’ll keep you both in my thoughts.*

Was that too presumptuous?

Ororo contemplated the keys, drumming her fingers on her mouse.

*Logan, about the other day; I’m sorry. Perhaps I came on a little strong about my concerns with the account, and I know you were having a bad day. In hindsight, I apologize if I made it worse.*

She mouthed the words to herself, then shook her head. “Nah. ‘Concerns with the account’ will make me sound like a bitch. Probably already thinks that, anyway. Just call me Ororo, Wicked Witch of the West.” She highlighted that line and backspaced. She muttered peevishly and shrilly under her breath, “I’ve got you now, my pretty, and you’re little dog, too…”

*I was out of line when I came to your office and way too aggressive.*

“Like I’ve ever regretted being aggressive with anyone else,” she mused. She hummed to herself as she continued to compose her note, and in the back of her mind, she visualized what he looked like that day in his suit and coat. It made her miss his guayabera shirt and khakis, walking along with him as they pushed their bare feet through the warm sand, dangling their sandals from their fingertips.

She added a carriage return and paused, staring at the blinking cursor. “C’mon, what else?” she asked it futilely. The remaining, vast block of white space onscreen begged to be filled, but she hated to ramble. She hardly knew the man... platonically, anyway. Scratch that; she was barely civil to him, and the feeling was mutual, as far as she could tell, even though she occasionally caught him staring at her legs. *Lech.*

She decided to keep it short but sweet. She seldom talked to the man above and beyond a) attempting to tear him a new one when he went over her head with a plan change, and b) letting him kiss her stupid, inevitably when she couldn’t be more pissed off at him. The man drove her nuts. Ororo sighed again and made her mind up quickly; fatigue was setting in, increasing her chances of putting her foot in her mouth.

*Take care of yourself. Take care of your dad. Have a safe trip. It would have to do.*

As an afterthought, she added *Tory.* Not “Love, Tory,” not “Sincerely,” not “Your friend.” What they had didn’t allow frippery or pretty phrases that she didn’t mean. Logan didn’t consider her a friend.
Did he?

Her hand hovered over her mouse. Now or never. Plenty of time to hit Delete Message and just go to bed before she got herself in trouble.

The tiny white, solid arrow drifted up, left, and landed on the aqua-gray button, highlighting it; her speaker confirmed this action with an audible click. Send.

Now she’d done it. Ororo prayed she hadn’t just pulled a steaming heap of shit down on her head.

*

Logan lay back on his bed, arm propped on a pillow as he thumbed through the messages on his PDA. John and Rose accepted his excuse that he was turning in early, knowing he would make a beeline for his briefcase as soon as he closed his door, but they made no comment. His small desk light was on, providing a dim, yellowish glow, even though Logan knew the bedside lamp would have been a better choice. By the time he was drowsy enough to fall asleep, he would have to get back up from bed, but the amount of light, not close enough to irritate his eyes, felt more comfortable and matched his mood.

His inbox had twenty new messages in it, just enough for people to get the clue after reading his out of office reply that he wasn’t at his desk, and not to come knocking. He opened the one from Scott first out of habit.

To: Howlett, James
From: Summers, Scott
Subject: hey, buddy

What’s going on? How was your trip down? When did you get in?

That was Scott in a nutshell, always the mother hen.

Logan hit reply, even though he knew Summers had already gone to bed.

Pop might be coming home in a couple of days. He looks a little better. Ornery sonofagun. Got in without any problems that night. I’m fine if anyone asks. Logan hit send, content that he’d have one less unread message in his folder when he got back to the office. He deleted Scott’s original note and scanned through the rest.

Munroe, Ororo?

“Whoa. Hold up.” He opened it out of disbelief and curiosity. Surely she wasn’t chasing him about rates all the way to his pop’s house?

No. She actually wasn’t. Logan’s brows drew together as he mouthed the words aloud, then rose.

To: Howlett, James
From: Munroe, Ororo
Subject: How are you?

Hi. Just wanted to see if you had a good flight. Hope your dad’s okay. How sick is he? I’ll keep you both in my thoughts.
Logan, about the other day; I’m sorry. I was out of line when I came to your office and way too aggressive, and I know you were having a bad day. In hindsight, I apologize if I made it worse.

Take care of yourself. Take care of your dad. Have a safe trip.

Tory

“Sonofabitch…” he murmured incredulously. “The Dragon Lady said she’s sorry?” He reread the message and drummed his fingers on the pillow. This was big. Ororo was a tenacious person, that much Logan knew, but it was a huge step for her to admit she was wrong about anything, if the way she haggled with him about the rates and regulations was any clue.

He remembered how her arm felt looped through his in the street, how she’d easily kept up with his quick strides. Her light fragrance had been close enough to tickle his nose and catch his attention in the noise and clamor of mid-morning traffic. It felt companionable and right, being casually connected like that, as natural as though they’d always done it.

The memory moved his stylus over the tiny touchscreen.

To: Munroe, Ororo
Subject: Re: how are you?

Hi yourself. It was fine; felt like I was being folded in half by the guy in back of me, but no biggie. Pop’s okay, for now. He paused as he wrote that, not wanting to let on too much. She didn’t need to know how worried and fretful he was. Underwriters could smell fear…

Apology accepted. Thanks. Appreciate it.

Okay. I will. I definitely will.

Logan

He kept it short and sweet, deciding not to write a book, but he burned with curiosity over her message. Was this a white flag? He hit send, figuring it was late enough that she’d simply open it in the morning. He was surprised that the timestamp on hers said it was only ten minutes old.

Ororo was just hitting “File/Exit” when the tiny envelope cursor flickered across her screen. “Oooookaaayyy…?” She hit her inbox folder.

“New message from: Howlett, James”

“Goodness gracious. The man’s an insomniac, or just out of his mind. I wasn’t expecting you to write back yet,” she said aloud, but a smile toyed with her lips. Ororo smoothed a lock of her hair back from her face and tucked it behind her ear as she opened his message.

Apology accepted. Thanks. Appreciate it.

Logan

He skipped his autosignature, which usually said James. It was inconsequential, but it warmed her. Slightly…
Her fingers itched. “What the heck,” she decided. “How…are…YOU…do-ing…” she recited as she hit the keys in a staccato rhythm. “Are YOU all…right…?”

Logan paused in logging off as a new message tiled itself over his existing stack.

Re: Re: how are you?

How are you doing, are you all right? How are you holding up?

“I’m not,” he muttered, but he decided to give her the edited version. He was still surprised she was awake.

Re: Re: how am I? Eh.

Eh. I don’t really know yet how I’m managing, if you want me to be honest. It’s hard. I don’t like watching him be sick. He has been on and off for a while. It’s hard to think about.

Re: Re: Re: Eh? Awwww…

I know how that feels, and I don’t envy you. My own dad’s been a little “off” since my mom passed, and that took a lot out of me. I’m not quite back in the game yet. I miss her. I’ve tried to call my own dad more often, but it just reminds me what a crappy daughter I am that I haven’t visited more often, and now, here I am, out of state.

Logan frowned, then hit reply.

Sorry about your mom. I’m in the same boat. Life isn’t the same without Mom. Parkinson’s. We all just about died when she did.

Maybe he doesn’t think your that crappy of a daughter. Got any PTO? You should visit him. It was the pot calling the kettle black. John wasn’t through lecturing Logan, not by a long shot.

Logan hit send. He felt guilty, wondering if he was keeping her up.

Ororo wondered the same thing, but she pulled the spare throw blanket from her bed and wrapped it around her lap, settling in to her messages again. She went into “File” again and selected New/Conference.

Logan blinked as his screen flashed a window at him asking “Munroe, Ororo wants to chat. Accept this conference invitation?”

Click. Yes. Her user signature appeared in the blank white message in her signature purple.

Munroe: I have a ton of PTO left. I never take a vacation. Mexico was it for me, after three years of not using up any at all.

Howlett: You’re preaching to the choir, kid. Feel like I’m shackled to my desk sometimes, or like my laptop’s hanging from my neck, like a big albatross.

Munroe: Albatross. Yeah. Let’s go with that. I hate that.
Howlett: Me, too.
Munroe: Are you an only child?
Howlett: Nope. Got a brother. John’s older than me. Loves to run my ranch, even though we aren’t kids anymore.
Munroe: Lucky. No sibs for me. Always wanted a kid sister or brother.
Howlett: You didn’t have to share a room with someone who stuff socks in your mouth while you were sleeping every time you snored, or who stuff you into the laundry hamper and piled three phone books on top of it to keep you out of the way when his friends came over.
Munroe: Ouch… poor baby. *chuckle*
Howlett: Brat. :p
Munroe: Okay. I was lucky. So sue me. Lonely, though.

He felt a pang at her admission of getting lonely. She used his pause to type another message.

Munroe: I loved playing with my dolls when I was a kid. A sibling would have been so much better.
Howlett: You don’t seem like the Barbie type.
Munroe: Hey, don’t diss Barbie. In my house, she was a Jane of all trades. Accountant. Astronaut. Doctor. Candy store owner. The Bionic Woman, since I didn’t have one of those dolls.
Howlett: You made Barbie an accountant? :D
Munroe: Yes. :p

Logan guffawed and shook his head. “Man. Wow. Why am I surprised?” He chuckled as he kept texting.

Howlett: Nice.
Munroe: You travel a lot, don’t you?

Logan gave the tiny screen a wry smile.

Howlett: Yup. You?
Munroe: Yup. Yuck. Hate airline seats. It’s like they hate long-legged people. I always get stuck next to the crying baby or in front of the person who hangs on the back of my chair every time they get up. Or next to the one person on the plane who had eggs for breakfast.
Howlett: Nasty.
Munroe: Tell me about it.
Howlett: Or the guy who didn’t wear deodorant. He’s usually also the one who won’t shut up whenever you wanna take a nap.
Munroe: I can never sleep on a plane. Every time I nod off, I wake myself up as soon as my chin hits my chest. The window leaves me with a crick in my neck. I get off the plane looking and feeling like hell.
Howlett: Why do I doubt that?

A tickle of pleasure warmed her belly.

Munroe: Trust me.

*Trust me…* It was such a loaded statement, obscuring his view of her in a murky fog. That was something they didn’t have. Possibly *couldn’t* have.

Munroe: Logan?

Ororo’s smile faded as she waited for her screen to tell her Logan was typing, or for more of his sharp, quick wit to ladder itself down the window. She kneaded the knot from her neck uncomfortably and sighed. She was tired, it was getting late, and her unease grew the longer Logan
paused. Her fragile ego told her that maybe his access was bad in his service area.

Munroe: Logan?

She tried again, but she knew the conversation was over.

Munroe: Good night.

Before he could react, the screen prompt said “Munroe, Ororo has logged off. Exit conference?”

*Click. Yes.*

Logan was left with his inbox folder staring back at him and a sense of having missed an opportunity. It clawed at him as he put his PDA back in its case and got up to turn off the light.

*Ororo was still fuming and puzzling over their chat two days later back in her office as she researched the state regulations for an out-of-network only plan. She sipped her white mocha and did a side-by-side comparison of the plan the client wanted and what could actually be sold. She didn’t look forward to the feedback from regulatory, since getting the plan approved could take months of dialogue and documentation. Her eyes were beginning to swim from looking at two Word screens and oceans of strikethrough text using her “Compare Documents” function. The emails from Selene didn’t help; she kept sending along screenshots of revisions that the customer made when she met with them in-house in bright, obnoxious red. She planted her elbows on her desk and leaned forward, massaging her temples, then dug in her desk drawer for the bottle of extra-strength Tylenol. A light knock on her door interrupted her just as she shook out two tablets.*

“*Yes?”* Scott gently opened her door and smiled.

“*Knock, knock,”* he offered. He raised his brows as the painkiller. “*Bad day already?”* 

“I hate flex plans, did I mention that?”

“*Aw, c’mon, Killer, suck it up,”* he mocked. “*You love these plans. You don’t need food or sleep or fresh air. All you need is your inbox, your account manager’s lovely voice in your ear and some caffeine.*” Ororo gave him a mock glare. “*What?”* he asked innocently.

“You’re way too cheerful.”

“*Thanks! But in the meantime, here’s a piece offering.*” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of Dum-Dums. “*Pour vous,*” he said with a flourish.

“*Brat,*” she muttered, but her smile was back in place. “*You’re forgiven.*”

“*Goodie.*” He sat down at the seat opposite hers without further invitation. “*Wanna call in from the same desk? It helps if we’re looking at the same desktop.*”

“My desk is a mess,” she indicated. He beamed.

“We can use mine. I like working from mine better, anyway.”
“I’ll be over there in a minute, then,” she said as she unwrapped the root beer-flavored lollipop.

“Cool. Don’t bother to print anything, I already have everything pulled from the database, and I have the emails, too.” Ororo waved to him as he left and popped the Tylenol, chasing it down with a sip of coffee. Breakfast of champions.

She took her PDA, day planner, a couple of pens and her coffee with her down the hall to Scott’s office, contentedly sucking on the candy on her way there, not caring how silly she must have looked with the white stick protruding from her mouth. She looked forward to spending the next hour with someone remotely sane. She heard Scott’s voice before she got there and realized he was already on the call, which quickened her steps.

*Shit. Late*… She shouldered open the door and was about to greet him when a familiar pair of dark eyes met hers. Logan froze in the act of opening his briefcase.

Ororo spit the sucker out in surprise, sending it flying, barely avoiding choking on it. “Shit,” Logan hissed. Scott glared at both of them in annoyance as he hit the mute button.

“I just told them you were on your way, Tory. Here, take that chair.” He nodded to the one beside Logan that had already been pulled up to his desk. Ororo wiped a fleck of stray spittle from the corner of her mouth. Logan huffed and his brows drew together.

“Got good distance on that one.”

“What?”

“A-hem.” He indicated her sucker, currently stuck to his briefcase. He grimaced as he peeled it away from the expensive leather. Ororo was mortified and tried to act casual as she closed the gap between them.

“I’ll, er, just be…taking that. Thanks.” She plucked the stick from his grasp and moved to throw it in the trash.

“Selene, Don, I’ve got Logan and Ororo here.” Scott was talking smoothly into the conference phone’s speaker and typing a mile a minute, clicking on attachments and opening folders.

“Good,” Selene confirmed; Ororo could hear the note of irritation in her voice. “I had wondered where you got off to, Tory.”

“Scott’s office was closer,” she shrugged.

“Sure it was,” Logan muttered under his breath. She glared at him, but he wasn’t looking at her. Then he leaned his chair away from hers an inch or so, as though he was afraid she’d spit something else at him.

*Fine. See if I’m ever nice to you again, pal.* His demeanor was at odds with their last two conversations, in person and online. It irked and disconcerted her. Scott gave them both an odd look, but then he continued talking.

“Okay, let’s get back to the client’s expectations regarding that out-of-network plan.”

“It’s on an old shell; I thought we grandfathered that one back in ninety-six,” Ororo pointed out. “Why on earth do they even want it?”

“Bare bones coverage for their new employees who are just past their waiting period,” Logan
shrugged. “It isn’t rocket science. No sense in paying the higher premiums for people who might not be long-term by putting them on the Classic plan.”

“It doesn’t even have the wellness language in it like the newer plans do,” Ororo argued.

“That’s what they want us to add,” Logan pointed out.

“I’m with Jim on this one,” Donald interjected from his end of the line. “What’s to keep us from just inserting the new language?”

“The old language said that coverage was for ‘routine laboratory procedures and diagnostic tests.’ The new language says for ‘medically necessary, routine services.’ They’re legal department could have a field day with that.”

“I don’t see where we’ll have a problem,” Selene cut in. Of course you don’t. You’re an account manager. Ororo suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.

“We’re leaving it subject to interpretation. A member could call our Customer Care desk and scream at us because their foot rub at a health spa was denied by saying it was a routine service.”

“We’d never cover services at a health spa, that isn’t a place of service we even cover,” Donald argued.

“Yes, but that doesn’t stop a business like that from filing a claim, anyway. Anyone can fill out a claim form and mail or fax it in. Anyone can call themselves a doctor and tinker with a few diagnostic codes to make it look like someone came in for a ‘routine service.’”

“We have a list of covered services already in the plan summary,” Selene informed her. “That should cover it.”

“The old booklet doesn’t even reference that table, and it should. That’s why we should build this on the newer shell.”

“That would make sense,” Scott added, “but the client wants what they want. They like the old shell. They said it’s easier to read.” Ororo was beginning to feel outnumbered. She coached herself away from the headache that was brewing in the back of her neck, despite the pills she’d swallowed a while ago. I’m an underwriter. Not a contract writer, she told herself. Let them tinker with it. As long as her rates didn’t change, she was fine with it, but she’d be glad when the plan change was put to bed.

“Speaking of which, Tory, the client was curious as to why their rates aren’t the same on the new policy.”

“The numbers, or the way the rates are described for each tier?” she questioned.

“The language.” Ororo wanted to slap Selene through the phone.

“Ask someone in Contracts,” Ororo snapped, not realizing how harsh her voice sounded until Scott’s eyebrows flew up into his hairline and Logan grunted, leaning back in his seat to stare at her. “I know what I sent the client, so those rates should have been in the policy with no tinkering.”

“The effective dates don’t match.”

“Then again, ask the administrator on the AMT,” she reminded her. “When clerical errors regarding the rates come out of a different department, don’t automatically blame the underwriter.” Scott hit the
mute button briefly.

“Take it easy. No one’s blaming you.”

“Sure they aren’t. I know what rate tiers I put into their spreadsheet, and they signed off on it when they paid their premiums. So that means the error on the policy isn’t my fault, if there even is an error.”

“Sheesh,” Logan muttered. “PMS much?”

“Excuse me?”

Scott made shushing motions at both of them as he took the phone off mute. “Can we refer this to Contracts?”

“Fine with me,” Donald confirmed. “They can wrangle with Regulatory better than we can.”

“That’s why they get paid the big bucks,” Scott remarked easily. Ororo rolled her eyes this time and Logan chuckled under his breath.

The meeting dragged on for another half an hour that Ororo spent gritting her teeth.

“When’s our next meeting scheduled?” Selene inquired.

“Two weeks out. We have a standing reminder on the calendar,” Scott reminded her gently. “The alert will go out on Outlook.”

They rang off the call. Ororo got up and stretched, kneading out a kink in her neck.

“Sore?” Scott asked.

“Been leaning over my PC too long,” she complained. “Here and at home.”

“Take a break,” he suggested. “Logan’s got apples in his cheeks from his time out of the office.” Logan threw a pen at him.

“Ain’t like it was a vacation.”

“Beats being here,” Ororo said sourly.

“What’samatter? Our neck of the woods ain’t good enough for ya?”

“I miss my old digs,” she admitted. “Boston isn’t New York.” She wouldn’t admit the bigger problem, that she missed her friends and her dad, and that she’d felt adrift since she moved. She’s also felt “off” since seeing Vic at the club that night. Still being single while he was moving on with his life was difficult. This odd…non-friendship she had with Logan was difficult.

She was sick of it.

“I just need another vacation,” she mused.

“Yeah?” Logan was curious. “What makes ya think yer allowed ta leave the dungeon, darlin’?”

“All my saved up PTO. I need a break. I feel buried.”

“Pfftt…fiddlin’ with numbers all day is a walk in the park,” Logan scoffed.
“Sure. I don’t get to schmooze the client over hot wings and make promises we can’t keep about how much we expect to charge them for what they’re asking for.”

“Whoa,” Scott muttered. “There’s no need for that, Ororo, take it easy. You guys wanna get lunch?”

“I’m fine, Scott,” she told him. “Have fun.” She sailed out of his office, glad to leave Logan’s smirk behind. She wasn’t expecting to hear heavy footsteps following her back to her door. She entered her office and tossed her notes on the desk.

“Damn. Looks like a tornado hit,” Logan muttered, eyeing her desk. “And people say I’m messy.” Ororo made a show of organizing the piles of paper on her desk into…neater piles.

“That’s nice. Enjoy your lunch.”

“What is it with you today?”

“Why does there have to be anything with me?” She refused to look at him, seating herself back behind her desk and rebooting her computer.

“Sorry. Guess I’m just used to you being uptight, not an uptight groucher,” Logan shrugged. “Someone piss in yer Cheerios?”

“No. But I’ll never want to eat them again, thanks for the mental image.”

Logan grunted and sat opposite her desk without being invited. “Seriously,” he pried, “what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She randomly clicked open folders and her inbox in an attempt to ignore him, but he made it hard. She’d already gotten a faint whiff of his cologne from being close to him in Scott’s office, and having him now in hers was distracting her. Logan looked relatively relaxed in a simple dress shirt and tie, both in light gray, and he’d omitted his usual blazer, giving her an unhindered view of the contours of his body beneath the polished cotton. His cheeks had more color than usual; she wondered if he’d spent a lot of time outdoors when he visited his family.

“It ain’t everyday someone spits candy at me for no good reason,” he pointed out.

“I choked on it. Sorry. Guess I just swallowed wrong.”

“Riiiiight.” She continued her random clicking and typing, opening a new spreadsheet. He folded his arms across his chest. “Why’d ya seek me out and email me, if you’re just gonna give me the cold shoulder now? Is something on your mind?”

“Not much. Nothing remarkable.” Click, click, tap, tap…

“Nothing remarkable. But that ain’t the same as ‘nothing.'”

“No. It is.” Tap, tap, tap…

Her demeanor was so much at odds with her messages from before. What the fuck was up? Logan decided it was time to break the ice, because he was freezing. He doubled back to her door and closed it with a sharp click. That caught her attention, jerking her chin up and stilling her hands over her keys.

“What are you doing?”

“Having a word with you, since there’s something on my mind, Tory.”
“Can’t it wait til after work?”

“I’d rather clear the air between us.”

She sat back and folded her arms. “Professionally, or personally?” Her eyes were defiant.

“Both.” He sat back down and leaned forward with his hands dangling between his knees; the stance looked slightly defeated and weary. “There’s been something bothering me for a while now. Since Mexico.” Ororo stiffened.

“Just our case of mistaken identity?”

“Nah. More than that.” He exhaled a shaky breath and pushed on. “Why didn’t ya tell me goodbye?” She shrugged, and it chafed him.

“What did you expect? A promise to call? A pen pal? ‘Look me up the next time you’re in my state?’ Get real, Logan,” she tsked. “What would have been the point?”

“It would’ve been polite.”

“Trust me, I was doing us both a favor.” She took a sip of her coffee, then made a face; it was stone cold. She chucked the cup into the trash.

“Ya think? Me waking up alone and hungover, wondering if ya were okay was a favor? I was worried about how ya got back to yer hotel, Tory. If ya were gonna make yer flight home okay. It ain’t like I set ya an alarm, gave ya a ride or called ya a cab.”

“I’m from New York. You think I can’t call my own cab?” she snapped. But his words made her feel guilty. Was he really concerned? Did it really matter to him, when she’d just been a one-night stand?

“Is that how it is? I wasn’t worth a goodbye.”

“I didn’t say that.” She didn’t add that she’d been reluctant to leave him and comfortable nook of his warm body and rumpled sheets. “Why are you making a big deal about this? Men love an easy out.”

“All of us?” he shot back, scowling darkly. “That’s nice. Real nice. Do you always make generalizations like that, Tory?”

“I’ve got a lot of empirical evidence,” she sniffed. “You probably do, too. I’m realistic, Logan. I didn’t expect anything else from what we had but a good time. You never expected to see or hear from me again, admit it; that was even before I left.”

“I’m not every other man you’ve ever been with. Are ya listening to yerself?” He laughed harshly. “Hope I wasn’t too far outside yer usual standards, kiddo. Sounds like they’ve all been real stand-up guys.” Ororo tasted acid and felt heat rise up into her cheeks.

“Don’t you talk to me like that,” she spat.

“You started it.”

“I didn’t come into your office to point any fingers. I was going to leave it alone.”

“Yer the queen of just ‘leaving it alone,’ aren’t ya? Yer good at desertin’ guys, aren’t ya? Huh? Do ya love leavin’ ‘em in the cold?”
“It was actually pretty warm that day. You survived,” she smirked, making a dismissive gesture with her hand, but there was something strange in his eyes when he said she’d deserted him. “Just move on to the next girl at the next bar who asks you if this seat’s taken.”

“Because I just do that all the time.” He shook his head. “How’d ya get such a low opinion of me?”

“I don’t have one of you. I don’t have anything to even base it on.”

“So why are ya always so pissed at me?”

“Because you never have anything nice to say!”

“And you do?”

“You always belittle my work and ignore common sense when you kiss clients’ asses, and you act like what I say doesn’t matter! You just do what you want, whenever you want, and to hell with whether it causes anyone any grief, let alone me!” Her voice was angry but hurt, and suddenly the line between “professional issues” and “personal grievances” became very, very blurry. Her voice had risen and was uncharacteristically strident, and Ororo’s cool mask was gone. This was the real woman behind the emails and the conference phone, underneath the slicked-back hair and concealing business suits, the one who plagued his thoughts with questions and what-if’s.

“I’ve gotta go out and sell the company’s image every day to people outside the company. I don’t want to come back to my place of business to people I work with in-house, let alone the people I have any kind of unprofessional relationship with. I don’t want to have to sell myself to you.” Was that vulnerability she heard in his voice?

Did she act like she expected him to sell himself? She dismissed that notion and pressed on.

“You won’t have to,” she blurted out. “In a few months I won’t even be here, I’m heading back to my old branch.” The words hung between them, and Logan leaned back in his seat, unaware until then how much tension had knotted and set his shoulders during their “talk.” She smiled but it didn’t reach her eyes. “We won’t have to worry about our professional relationship growing too ‘unprofessional.’ So there you go. Another easy out.”

“I told ya I ain’t the kinda man who needs one. I don’t just look for an easy escape.”

“Goodie for you.”

“Wish I knew who ya see when ya look at me,” he grumbled as he stood up. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets.

“There are some things that aren’t worth knowing.”

“Like yer real name, or whether ya got back to the states okay, or whether ya’d keep in touch. Sure. None of that’s worth it.”

“You don’t regret it.”

“You’re making me not regret it.” Logan was done. “You’re doing a great job of that. Keep up the good work.” He slammed out of her office this time, and she jumped with the impact, then sighed.

Well. That went well.

Ororo went back to her piles, finally beginning to sort through them and throw out the ones that were
duplicates. She needed something to keep her hands busy.

*

The next day went about the way Ororo expected it. Her emails to Logan were only mass mailings to their management teams, with his name in the Cc field. They avoided each other in the halls and break room, even though it made her feel...deprived, on some level, like a smoker on their first day of going cold turkey. She’d worn a groove to his office, and it was hard to force herself off-track. But she managed.

The next day yielded more of the same. She’d even taken to avoiding contact with Scott, since by extension, he was more Logan’s friend than hers, and she didn’t want to invade his territory. The thing that baffled her the most was, why did she feel like she broke up with the man, when they were never together in the first place? Ororo joined her teleconferences with the resolve that she would be civil, ever businesslike, and stoic. She seldom addressed Logan by name, and even then, it was always by James. His voice on the conferences was friendly with everyone else and emotionless with her; she told herself she was fine with that.

What was a little white lie to herself once in a while?

After a week, the lie became routine.

*

It was killing him to see her in the halls, averting her eyes and skirting around him when they nearly collided, or just plain giving him a wide berth. The urge to stop her and pull her aside was strong and instinctive, but that wasn’t an option. He should’ve known better from the start. From that morning that he found himself in an empty bed that still smelled like her, he should have known.

She was still buttoned up, despite the warmer weather, even though her clothing reminded him less of funeral attire. She gradually replaced her precious black with muted business beige and navy blue, her only concession to spring. His fingers still itched to mess her up, to yank down that ridiculous bun and free that temptingly thick hair, to smudge her lipstick with his kisses, but her bitter words still rang in his ears. He didn’t need that, no matter how strong the attraction. He could cope with the fact that they argued, if the reasons were legitimate. People in relationships argued. He and Jeannie argued. It wasn’t the end of the world.

He saw her a couple of times at the gym and studiously avoided her, lingering in the free weights while she gave the treadmill, pounding it with a fast, heavy pace. Then suddenly she stopped coming; he guessed she adjusted the time of day that she attended so she wouldn’t see him. Who cared if he was being deprived of the only time he saw her sweating and disheveled in clingy Lycra and cotton? Fine. Sure.

Wasn’t it?

*
“All right. Here’s what we’re gonna do.” Scott’s voice was all business now and determined, all cheerfulness gone. “You two are going to have a conference. Just you two.”

Ororo was so deep in thought as she reviewed the employee census of a new software company that her phone startled her. She put it on speaker, and Scott’s cheerful voice filled her office.

“Hey, Sunshine.”

“Hey, Skipper.”

“I hate to pile one more thing on your plate, but I’ve gotta call an emergency meeting. We had a miscommunication with Mutasoft’s installation and effective date. Their members have been getting a lot of denials, and they already paid their premiums.”

“That shouldn’t require anything from me yet, should it? That’s an Implementation Specialist’s issue, or Case Installation.”

“Could you come, anyway?”

Shit. Her sigh was heavy.

“I heard that.”

“You can just feel me bursting with excitement.”

“Your enthusiasm’s contagious and will brighten the room as soon as you step in the door.”

“Your nose is turning brown.”

“See you there.”

“Wait…where?”

“East wing, conference room two.”

“That’s fine.”

Ororo checked her inbox to see if Scott had sent out a meeting announcement that she missed. Sure enough, there it was, but all it said was “Mutasoft AMT” in the Bcc field. That was odd… that didn’t tell her if Selene had the reminder, or if Jeanne-Marie would be taking minutes. Ororo shrugged and picked up her notepad, deciding her Blackberry wasn’t necessary yet. Scott was the client service rep on the account and the best source of information, she’d simply put the bug in his ear to shoot her an email.

She dashed off to the east wing and waved to the janitor as he opened up his cart and took out his cleaning caddy. He set his wet floor sign in front of the men’s room and smiled.
“H’lo, Tory.”

“Hey, Sam. What’s shakin’?”

“Ya look awful nice today, ma’am.” The tall blond gave her an “aw gee, shucks” smile and his ears turned pink. It was such a boyish reaction that she almost chuckled.

“Thank you kindly. Working hard?”

“Hardly workin’.”

“Attaboy. Seen Scott yet?”

“Why?”

“Meeting in room two.”

“Ah didn’t see anything on the whiteboard when Ah went in there a minute ago.”

“Hm…okay. Thanks, Sam.”

“Any time!”

Ororo headed into the room and waited, checking the clock. It was still early enough in the day that it wouldn’t cut into the rest of her schedule, but still…

The phone in the conference room rang, and Ororo picked it up on the second ring.

“Scott?”

“Coming. Just rounding up the rest of the attendees.”

“Just yell ‘Free Starbucks and cookies!’ That’ll bring ‘em running.” Scott chuckled in agreement.

“Sit tight. Better yet…why don’t you hop into the supply closet for me?”

“What do you need?” She put the phone on speaker.

“The projector. I’m bringing the laptop.”

“That’s a big deal for a little meeting.”

“Trust me, we need it.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Be there in a flash.” Ororo made a small noise in her throat. She headed for the walk-in closet and went to flick on the light, but the bulb was dead.

“Shit,” she muttered. “Not cool. She wedged the doorstop under the jamb with her foot, since the room had a tricky lock, and she hadn’t borrowed Sam’s big ring of keys. She heard Scott’s voice in the hallway and Logan’s familiar rumble and made a sour face. “Where the heck is the projector? It’s not in here.” All she saw were stacks of staple boxes, binders, reams of printer paper and toner cartridges. It didn’t look like the projector was even in there. Then it struck her that she remembered Selene telling Jeanne-Marie to pack it up for their training in Hartford.

“Of course it’s not in here,” she murmured. “Hey, Scott…”
“Logan, can you hop in there and grab the other whiteboard? This one’s all blurry, and I won’t have time to get that stinky stuff we use to clean it with.”

“Eh. Sure.”

“Thanks!” Scott sounded too chipper, and Ororo decided she’d give Logan room to move around by getting out of the closet. But it was too late; he was craning his neck over his shoulder as he spoke to Scott as he stepped inside.

“There’s a whiteboard in here…? Uh…”

“I don’t see a whiteboard, Scott!”

“Help him look for it.” Logan was blocking Ororo’s way out, and he stared at her accusingly.

“Havin’ trouble finding something?”

“No trouble at all.”

“Keep looking,” Scott sang, sounding entirely too peppy. Suddenly the doorstop came flying out and bounced off the lower shelf, and Scott let the door fly shut.

“What!”

“SCOTT!” Ororo heard the jingle of keys and one of them being punched into the lock from the outside.

“All right. Here’s what we’re gonna do.” Scott’s voice was all business now and determined, all cheerfulness gone. “You two are going to have a conference. Just you two. No more excuses, no more avoiding each other, no more hostile silences or hair pulling. You’re both adults. You work together, and I realize you have a past together, but you need to get past it and move on, or reassess your relationship, whether it’s personal or not. Here in the office, it’s not. Both of you grow up.” Ororo stood openmouthed and Logan knocked on the door futilely, trying to remain calm.

“Scott…c’mon. This is bullshit. Open up. C’mon!” BANG! BANG! BANG! “SCOTT!”

“This isn’t funny. This isn’t appropriate at all, Scott,” Ororo called out. They were both discomfited by his retreating footsteps. It sounded like he casually tossed the ring of keys in the air as he walked out.

“Hey, Sam…you dropped your keys from your cart, buddy.”

“Aw, man…thanks, pal. Woulda caught hell if I lost those.”

“Sam! SAM!” Ororo called out.

In the hallway, Sam plugged the headphones into his iPod and headed into the men’s with packs of paper towels tucked under his arm.

Ororo leaned back against the rows of shelves and folded her arms, staring down at her feet. Anything not to look at Logan, who was still bracing his hands against the door as though he could push it open. “Fuckin’ cute,” he muttered. Ororo sighed. He faced her and threw up his hands.

“Some meeting, huh?”

“Go ahead; what’s the first item on the agenda?”
“You tell me. Sheesh,” she tsked. “Did you put him up to this?”

“Are ya kiddin’ me? Hell, no. This ain’t the way I plan on having a chat with a woman who hates my guts.”

“Whoa…don’t go there. Who hates who? I don’t know why Scott thinks this is helping matters any, but don’t make this just about me being a bitch.”

“I didn’t say ya were.”

“Good.”

“You just said ya were.”

“What? You!” She made a disgusted sound and turned away from him. “Asshat…” she muttered under her breath.

“Yeah. This is helpful,” he shot back.

“We might be better off at different branches sooner than later, but I accepted this job to stay until January. I got roped into it.”

“Maybe ya wanna take this to Human Resources, then. See if ya can work on a different market.”

“A whole different market? How, pray tell, am I supposed to explain why I need that, let alone actually request it? ‘Teacher, teacher, Logan won’t quit pulling my hair, tell him to get away from me!’” she said in an unnaturally shrill voice. Logan hated it. One of her best qualities was her deep, smooth voice, so there was no way he was going to be stuck in a closet with her when she was making that annoying noise.

“That how ya talked with yer exes?” Ororo grumbled under her breath and sat down on a sealed cardboard box. She looked weary and rubbed her temples. “Whatsamatter?”

“This discussion’s already giving me a headache.”

“Sure. Blame me.”

“No. I blame Scott. This is like something out of a damned sitcom.” Logan snorted. He stood beside her and leaned against the shelf.

“Yeah. Geez…guy must have been pretty pissed if he resorted to this.”

“Ya think?” She chuckled. “He’s always so…perky. This isn’t like him. I didn’t know he had it in him.”

“Scooter’s pretty sharp and doesn’t take a lot of shit, despite the smiley face and Leave it to Beaver act.” Logan looked contemplative. “Kid’s actually been through a lot.”

“I never would have guessed.”

“He’s a trooper. I’ll let him tell ya about it.”

“That’s fine.” She laced her fingers together in thought. “He’s a good friend.”

“Yeah. He always has been to me. He knew my wife, back when…it’s just been a long time.” Ororo froze, and her eyes widened.
“Wife?” Her voice was sharp and accusing. It struck Logan what he’d said and what she no doubt believed, and he hurried to recant.

“No. No, no, no. Not present tense. Knew my wife.”

“What does that even mean? Like, an ex-wife, or wife wife?” Ororo felt her blood pressure skyrocketing, and it was hard to keep anything resembling composure. “Logan…PLEASE tell me you weren’t cheating on her with me.”

“I didn’t…”

“I won’t be any man’s mistress! I’ve been in the position of having the wool pulled over my eyes before!” Ororo’s eyes were snapping, and Logan felt his chest tightening and a pounding in his temples.

“Calm down,” he told her curtly. “I didn’t cheat on you. I ain’t the kinda man to cheat on anyone, alright?” He was up and pacing the tiny room. “I loved Jeannie. I loved her with all my heart, way before I ever met you. Get the idea of me cheating right outta yer pretty head, Ororo.” His expression was dark and brooked no nonsense, promised her no excuses.

“Don’t pull the ‘pretty’ card, buddy. I’m not that shallow. Flattery doesn’t get my mojo running.” Ororo felt herself growing more lathered up, defeating the purpose of Scott’s subterfuge.

“Fine. I’m clutching at straws here. So far, all I’ve seen is that yer stubborn, bossy, love to argue with me, and yer quick to jump to conclusions. Want me to go on? That doesn’t make ‘pretty’ sound so bad, does it? Have ya always been so hard?” His words rankled, making an ugly flush crawl over her skin and stiffen her spine.

“No. My ex leeched all the ‘nice’ out of me, thanks.” That surprised him.

“You were married?”

“Yes. I was.” Her posture was stiff as she stood and took the opposite corner of the closet from him. “He was the kind of man to cheat. More fool me. I don’t have patience for men who act like they want a relationship but who get conveniently distracted. Or make excuses.”

“So ya take that choice outta their hands. Miss One-Night Stand.”

“To hell with you,” she snapped. “No. That was a oneshot deal, pal. I don’t do that. I just…I needed a night for myself. Just one.”

“For what? Why me?”

“Because I saw you sitting there and thought, why not? I wasn’t expecting much but a drink, at first.” Her voice became more plaintive. “I don’t normally do that. That’s not like me. I’m just not much of a dater anymore. You looked like a man who knew how to have a good time. I didn’t plan much beyond that, since the ones who know what they’re doing in bed are the first ones who creep out the door the next day without so much as a goodbye.”

“So ya beat me to it. Hnh…”

“You didn’t cheat on your wife. Good. You get a brownie point, I’ll give you that.”

“Yay, me,” he said gruffly.
“So why did she leave?”

“She drove off one day and didn’t come back.”

“No explanation?”

“No.” He paused, and his voice became eerily calm. “They called me from the hospital to tell me she was brain dead. Her car was totaled. Three-car pileup during rush hour. A teenage girl was coming too fast through an intersection and didn’t stop on time. She rammed Jean past the light into a guy making a left turn.”

She’d put her foot in her mouth again. Ororo was speechless. Logan did the talking for them while Ororo felt herself deflate and lose every ounce of built-up steam.

“If ya wanna make generalizations or think all men are assholes because ya got used or deserted or lied to, that’s yer business, darlin’. That ain’t me. I still don’t know why she left. She didn’t take many of her things. Maybe she just wanted to get away and think. She left without a word. No note. No itinerary.” Ororo had a hard time meeting his gaze, and eventually she stopped trying. She stared at her hands as she picked idly at her thumbnail. “She’d been distant. She wasn’t herself those last few days.”

Ororo remained silent.

*What? No more assumptions? My head’s still here on my shoulders, do ya feel like chewing it off still, or are ya full? Ororo cleared her throat and stood, then walked to the door. She wouldn’t face him as she carefully knocked.*

“Scott,” she said without rancor, “our meeting’s over. We’d like to go back to our work day, now.” She knocked again. She paused a few seconds, then knocked again.

Suddenly she heard a frantic set of footsteps and a jingling of keys, and the doorknob was jiggled from the outside. Relief flooded Ororo’s chest as Sam’s face greeted them, looking completely chagrined.

“Doggone it, m’so sorry. Ah was walkin’ by, and I heard this knock and didn’t know where it was comin’ from. Did ya’ll get locked in by accident? This door’s tricky, it sticks.” Ororo felt Logan’s dark mood from behind her and shivered.

“Accidents happen,” Logan offered easily. Ororo strode quickly for the conference room door.

“Thank you, Sam. No harm done.” She breezed back to her office without looking back.

“Hope Ah didn’t throw a monkey wrench into yer day, man, leavin’ ya’ll that long in there.”

“Nah. It was already a mess,” Logan told him. He clapped him on the back and left the room. When he reached the hall, all he saw was Ororo’s low-heeled brown pumps and a brief swish of her hair retreating around the corner. His fists clenched at his sides.

“Okay, then. That went well.” He shook his head mirthlessly and headed to the break room for some coffee.
Once Ororo was back at her desk, she dove back into her files and worked productively for a half an hour.

Abruptly her fingers stopped typing and trembled slightly over the keys. She clenched them to make them stop, then relaxed them and tried again. Then they shook unimpeded until she snatched them away, then held them in her lap, kneading them. A weariness stole over her that made her hug herself.

Hate herself.

She propped her elbows on her desk to think, leaning her face into her hand and kneading the space above her brows. Her vision blurred slightly over the shame stinging them, and warm drops dampened the day planner calendar of her desk.
Potluck

Chapter Summary

The car chimed each time they passed a floor, and they were grateful that no one else got on before they reached the lobby.

“That was a cute little stunt ya pulled, Summers. Wanna gimme one good reason why I shouldn’t kick yer ass?”

“It’s worth it if I don’t have to watch you two tap-dance around and snipe at each other for five minutes. Did you at least resolve anything?”

“There wasn’t anything ta resolve,” Logan grumbled as he took a sip of his coffee. He grimaced, annoyed that it was too hot when he scalded the roof of his mouth and gums. Damn it.

“Like hell. I’m not the only person in the office with eyes, pal. Don’t you think people will start talking if they notice the hostility between you two, and wonder if there’s drama behind it?”

“Ya act like it’s a friggin’ soap opera. People have lives, Scott. Yer givin’ me an’ Tory too much credit for takin’ up anyone’s time.”

Three days hadn’t sweetened Logan toward his closest friend and colleague, and if anything, Ororo had simply grown more withdrawn around them both. Logan almost regretted it. Almost.

He was too busy feeling grateful, though, that she hadn’t jumped on any opportunities brought on by him “oversharing” his past. There was such a thing as too much information, and Logan crossed that boundary when he told her about Jeannie.

Still…

Her eyes held so much sympathy for him, the same way they had when she gave him a ride to the airport. Had it been any other two people in any other place, with any other history between them, he would have welcomed any small gesture from her, words of comfort or a squeeze of her hand. She seemed to hold herself back from offering either, and Logan didn’t blame her. He’d gone on the attack; it didn’t matter if it had been justified.

Now she wasn’t speaking to him.

Real fuckin’ improvement, bub. Nice job.

It felt odd, and more than a little off. Logan watched her in the conference rooms, hallway and lounge furtively, not wanting her to catch him looking. It was like being at sixth grade recess all over again, only without the hair pulling or barrage of insults across the kickball field. Almost wish I were arguing with her again. The oppressive silence sucked a lot worse.

“You two still need to talk.”

“Like hell.”
“Don’t leave things like this between you.”

“Like what? There ain’t anything else ta discuss.” Logan stirred another packet of sugar into his drink and stirred it impatiently; work coffee sucked, but he didn’t have time before his meeting to run out to Starbucks or Peet’s. “We don’t have anything in common, Summers. She’s too damned uptight, and we got off on the wrong foot ta begin with.”

“She just believes in going a good job. Underwriters are supposed to be a little uptight. When she’s not talking about work, she’s a big softie. You know that.”

“Ya sound like an expert on the subject. You gettin’ cozy with the Dragon Lady?” Logan felt a flash of indignant jealousy when Scott shot him an odd little smirk. He hated it when Scott smirked.

“She’s just a good friend. A very good friend. I thought about taking her to lunch, but she has a conference at two. She said she needed to go over some materials beforehand and didn’t want to spend too much time out of the office.”

“Good friend,” Logan snorted into his cup. It was still too hot; he burned his lips again and hissed.

“Geez,” Scott muttered as he watched his old friend from the other side of his desk. “You two do have a lot in common. You’re both hardheaded and refuse to see what’s right in front of you.”

“There’s nothing ta see.” Logan perused the knick-knacks on Scott’s desk and squeezed a small purple stress ball rhythmically, pretending it was his friend’s head. Scott sighed and went back to his typing until Logan mentioned, “Where’s her conference?”

“Cambridge.”

“She’ll hafta leave at one, then,” Logan mused.

“Probably.”

“Why won’t she have time to eat before then?”

“Because she’s in a meeting with Selene all morning.”

“Damn,” Logan tsked. “Gotta pity her. I’d wanna kill myself if that was my boss.”

“Sometimes I think Ororo keeps something stronger in that bottle of Tylenol she always has in her desk,” Scott agreed.

“Might be easier if she just started huffing office supplies. That whiteboard cleaner’s strong enough to get high off of.”

“How would you know?” Scott teased.

“Ya don’t wanna know.”

“Sure. Now I’ll know what’s really going on when you have your out-of-office wizard turned on in your Outlook.” Logan was still squeezing the stress ball; it was the kind with a face whose features bugged out of its head like you were strangling it. He toyed with the eyes, sadistically poking them back in with his thumb.

“Feel sorry for the poor schmuck that’s gotta deal with that woman if she doesn’t eat,” Logan mused.

“You’re no better,” Scott reminded him. “Godzilla’s got nothing on you until you wave a foot-long
under your nose. And even then, see how much of your hand you come back with.”

“Pfft…” As if on cue, Logan’s stomach growled. Scott gave him a worried look.

“Right. Time to call the National Guard. Tell them to bring a turkey sub.” Before either of them could act on his suggestion, Scott noticed the envelope icon flashing across his screen, prompting him that he had new mail. “Great,” he muttered. “Another potluck.”

“Who’s leaving now?”

“Amelia, over in Eligibility. Maternity leave.”

“Is she coming back?”

“I don’t know. That’s nice, though.”

“Sure,” Logan murmured, distracted by the way the latex of the stress ball stretched thin where it swelled as he squeezed, at how the color seemed to grow more transparent.

“You ever wish you had kids?” Scott prodded.

“Me? Eh…”

“Nah?”

“Eh. Once in a while. I like bein’ an uncle.”

“Never wanted to be a daddy?”

“It just never happened. Didn’t mean I never wanted it to happen. It is what it is. It ain’t the end of the world.”

It hurt a little every time he spent time with Vic and Laura, wondering what children with Jean would have been like. If they would have had her hair and eyes or his laugh and disposition. Logan didn’t often ponder what kind of father he would have made, or even what kind of husband he would have continued to be in the long run. What-if’s exhausted him and made him ache. They didn’t bring her back.

No. What he missed the most was the scent of her hair and how soft her skin felt beneath the covers and the low, husky groans she made whenever he kissed her awake. Their marriage had been young when she was taken from him, short enough that they hadn’t had discussions like birthing methods or preschools, bottle feeding versus nursing, homeschooling or organic foods, how to decorate a nursery or what kind of carseat to buy. Jean and Logan were still a work in progress as a couple in love; being parents could wait. It certainly wasn’t out of the question, no longer a matter of if, but when.

The closest they had come was to watch in silent longing when their friends came over with their children, or when Sara or John brought the kids to see their favorite aunt Jeannie and Uncle Jimmy to dote on them and spoil them rotten. They tiptoed around it whenever they went to Costco and walked past baby crib mattresses on sale or saw racks of Carter’s sleepers with feet in a pastel rainbow of colors. Her automatic “Awww, look” was always greeted with a wistful, helpless shrug; did they know anyone having a baby? No. They just looked like a good deal. That was okay; it was good for future reference. Wasn’t it.

They both had steady jobs and lived in a nice apartment, with the intent to buy a house big enough to
start a small family if they wanted to eventually, but in the meantime just to spread out. A picket fence, two-point-five kids and a dog made perfect sense. They were the right age, it was the right time, and they loved each other. Nothing could be better. Their future never looked brighter.

Yet Jean still left Logan without a word.

“Whaddya wanna bring to the potluck?”

“Huh?” Logan paused mid-squeeze.

“What should we bring? It’s tomorrow. That’s enough time to figure out what to pick up.”

“Eh. Big sandwich,” Logan shrugged. “Or chips an’ dip.”

“Everyone always brings chips and dip,” Scott pointed out. “That, or ten different bags of salad.”

“Order a couple of pizzas,” Logan said absently. “Ain’t that creative, but it beats salad.” Scott nodded.

“Cooking’s out of the question, then.”

“If I hardly ever do more than opening a can of something for myself, Summers, ya can’t imagine me making much more of an effort for twenty other people. I ain’t exactly Emeril.”

“Pizza it is, then.”

“I’ll go in with ya for half.”

*

Ororo escaped back to her desk at a little after eleven, and her stomach told her she’d been in there an hour too long. Selene loved to hear herself talk. Overall, she wasn’t a bad person, but Ororo always had the sense that a little more of her soul was being sucked out of her body every time she came away from those meetings.

Ororo went through her emails and hunted down the attachments she wanted in the database, including the benefit summary of what was sold. Selene was working on closing the deal on two mirror plans that the group wanted that flexed what they already had for their incoming new hires, and that meant Ororo would have a full plate until they were installed in the system and their premium checks had been signed. Ororo couldn’t see or think straight, telling her that it was time to eat. She was ready to kill someone for some chicken salad.

She checked her email and noticed the party invitation for the potluck. Ororo sighed; that meant she’d have to go to the market on her way home. Her refrigerator was appallingly bare, since she’d been putting off going food shopping for a week. She had one expired carton of blueberry yogurt, the last few swallows of orange juice in the pitcher, the heels of a loaf of wheat bread, and one egg left in the crate that gave the illusion of the shelf not being completely empty. Her cupboards weren’t much better; she’d been living on Campbell’s and Pop Secret shamelessly and didn’t have any immediate plans to change her ways. There were too many restaurants in the neighborhood where she worked, and they were far too convenient and cooked a lot better than she did.

Spinach dip and a bread bowl. It was a no-brainer, a staple of every bridal and wedding shower she’d ever been to. She didn’t even know Amelia that well, but there was nothing wrong with having a potluck at work. It was food and an excuse for everyone to get up from their desks for an hour. And this time, it was Ororo’s turn to indulge in all of the usual annoying questions. When’s it
due? What are you having? Is he moving around a lot? Are you having any more? What are you naming the little guy? Are you excited for him to get out of there?

She’d never minded the solicitous hands on her belly or people’s tendency to have one-sided conversations with it; her friends were as excited as she was. From the moment the stick turned blue, Ororo and Vic were all about waiting for Nate. He was going to be long-legged just like both of them, if the way he shoved his feet between her ribs was any indication. Judging by her cravings, Nate was a meat and potatoes man and wasn’t shy about demanding ice cream at inconvenient hours of the night, particularly butter pecan. Ororo told herself that he liked it when she sang to him or rocked him in her glider chair, one of the only comfortable seats in the house once she grew really large and had more stress on her pelvis and lower back.

Victor’s hands were possessive in the dark, easing under hers to steal the feel of her growing abdomen for himself, to enjoy the little ripples and kicks. He often promised the baby a spanking whenever Ororo had bouts of morning sickness or insomnia. “You an’ me are gonna hafta have a talk, bub,” he’d tell Nate jokingly, holding Ororo’s hip in his warm grasp as his breath feathered over her bare belly. “These late nights of yers ain’t workin’ out.”

One of the things that had hurt the most to pack away was the baby album, empty except for the first page. Ororo saved both ultrasound photos, even though they were just black and gray blobs printed with the date and the baby’s size. Stevie had batted it and covered it in pastel blue Thomas the Tank Engine flannel and lovingly painted the wooden letters herself, “Nate’s First Year.” Ororo protectively bundled the book in bubble wrap and set it in a large box, never having the heart to give it back to Stevie or to use it for any other photos. Stevie had been big about it; Ororo could always just take the lettering off. No harm done. It was just glue.

No. It wasn’t.

Before Nate was taken from them, Victor began coming to bed later, with fewer explanations for why. She missed his husky rasp and large, warm hands and his breath at her nape. Their arguments during the day were more frequent and began to rob her of more sleep and of her patience. Some cruel, shrill voice inside her insisted that it was her fault that he was making himself scarce; she was too fat, too needy. The baby was making her too peevish; she wasn’t thinking of her husband enough, only of her baby. Maybe that was the problem; maybe he just needed more attention.

The first time the phone rang and she heard the caller hang up as she said hello, she thought nothing of it. Sure. A wrong number. That had to be it. It didn’t even bother her – much – when Victor began furtively taking his calls into the bedroom when they were in the middle of dinner. Why not tell them he would call back?

After a time, there was always an excuse. All of Ororo’s questions became accusations to Victor’s ears, and every reply became a challenge. She asked him if he wanted to leave, if he was really tired of what they had, when they had so much already, and so much to gain once Nate entered the world. He said he didn’t know. Ororo was devastated. The pieces began to fall into place as Ororo’s world fell apart.

Before Victor could pack so much as one suitcase or box, Ororo noticed that the baby had stopped moving. It wasn’t an abrupt change; the baby was abnormally quiet even after she’d eaten a large, sweet breakfast. He didn’t stir as she worked or after she took her afternoon work. A slow, cold, sinking dread wrapped around her and she called her doctor in a panic.

No heartbeat. The KY jelly chilled her bare stomach as the transducer rolled over the beloved curves, pausing, then moving again. Still no heartbeat. Her eyes pricked with hot, blurry tears that
rolled thickly down her cheeks. He’s not responding. She heard Victor’s exhausted, shuddering sigh and saw him bow his blond head out of the corner of her eye, then tuned him out as a low sob escaped his throat. Ororo felt raw as the attendant left them alone, giving them a moment to process it, knowing they’d need a lifetime to mourn.

Ororo’s definition of hell rewrote itself as Victor carried the bag he packed for her into the hospital. Ororo found herself in the blue cotton telemetry patient gown this time instead of the pink paper exam drape. The looks of sympathy on the nurses’ faces were all wrong; her consciousness screamed that this surreal, tragic mess wasn’t happening, that wasn’t her being rolled slowly, unjarringly in a wheelchair to the delivery suite.

The epidural did nothing to numb her pain; it was almost a joke. The contractions were regular, but there was no telling swoosh of a second heartbeat inside her anymore; the Doppler was eerily silent. The walls of the suite mocked her. Someone had decorated the walls with framed prints of mothers and children, rosy-cheeked and downy haired, dressing in pinks and flowing white.

When it came time to push, she wanted to refuse. He’s not ready to come out yet, it’s too soon...his birthday’s on Valentine’s Day, for fuck’s sake! Why are you making me do this? Victor held her hand in a death grip, willing her strength that he didn’t have, blue eyes swimming with her anguish and channeling her physical pain, too. Her helplessness. Her disappointment and the sense of overwhelming failure. No matter the state of their marriage, whether he was her husband or not days or weeks or months later, he wasn’t going to be a father that night.

She lay in the labor bed, cleaned and stitched, numb and barely responsive as they let her say goodbye to Nate. Tiny, silent and swaddled in a cheerful pink and blue receiving blanket. She needed to touch him, they told her, to tell him goodbye and to make things more real. Nothing would accomplish that. Victor stayed with her on a small, hard cot in the patient room, flipping through the hospital’s limited cable channels until she told him in a low, gravelly voice to please stop. He stroked her hair absently, kissing her shoulder through the homely gown one last time before he retreated from the bed. It was the last time he’d kiss her again.

Ororo snapped out of it and promptly shoved the memories back on the shelf. Enough...enough. All right. I’m all right.

A potluck. Ororo wondered if there was a card to sign.

She was surprised moments later to hear a tentative knock on her door. “Come in?”

“Ororo?” Scott stood at the threshold holding something that brought the scent of cold cuts into her office dangling from a plastic bag. “I hope you’re hungry. I brought you something back from lunch.” Ororo’s face rearranged itself into a smile of gratitude, but not before Scott caught her sad, pensive look. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m good. Thank you so much, Scott, that was thoughtful of you. I’m starved!” she exclaimed. Scott beamed and came forward, setting the Subway bag on her desk.

“There’s baked Lays in there, too. I didn’t know what kind of chips you liked.”

“I appreciate it. I love those. Lunch is a good thing,” she chuckled. “I’ve got another conference today; I was going to just work through.”

“I know. I saw it when I peeked at your Outlook calendar.” Ororo forgot that people could do that,
and she sighed.

“Then you know I’m swamped. I’m burnt out, Scott. Can we go to Mexico again?” His grin was
mischievous, making his face look younger.

“You buy the tickets, I’ll buy the margaritas when we get there.”

“Thanks, pal!”

“That’s what I’m here for. Hey, Ororo…about the other day…I got ahead of myself. That wasn’t
cool. My bad.”

“I guess it’s my bad that you felt you had to take desperate measures, but you were taking your life in
your hands there for a minute, Scott. Logan and I kinda wanted to kill you provided that we didn’t
wring each other’s necks first.”

“Can’t you two bury the hatchet?”

“Again, not a good idea to give us sharp objects. Scott,” she said, holding up a hand briefly when he
looked like he was growing frustrated, “we did talk. It didn’t solve much of anything. We’re two
adults who made a mistake, in hindsight, and we didn’t know we would end up working together.”

“It wasn’t a mistake back when it happened, was it?”

*It was the most fun I’ve ever had. Every moment of it was beautiful.* She mentally shook herself.

“It doesn’t matter. Logan’s not a bad person, Scott, but we rub each other the wrong way. I’m not his
cup of tea.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. You are his cup of tea. You’re bright, funny, beautiful, kind and
straightforward, but at the same time, Ororo, you’re as hardheaded as he is. Locking you guys in the
closet wasn’t the answer. I should’ve just knocked your heads together.”

“His head’s harder than mine and would have done more damage,” she pointed out. She’d warmed
initially beneath his praise until he compared her to Logan.

“Did he tell you that he’s a widow?” Ororo paused in opening the bag of chips. Suddenly she lost
her appetite.

“Yes. He did. I had no idea.”

“He’s a strong man. Jean was a sweetheart. She was the love of his life.”

“I sure as hell can’t live up to that.” Scott frowned.

“No one’s asking you to. Just talk to him. Don’t give up on Logan, Ororo.”

“I’m not. Not professionally. I’ll try harder to get along with him in the office, Scott, but beyond that,
I’m done. I’m sorry if it’s been hard to watch the two of us. You don’t have to babysit us anymore or
play referee.”

Scott held up his hands. “That’s fine. Sorry I got involved.”

“I’m not. You meant well. You were being honest.” She ate a chip, grateful for its salty flavor. “I
hope you being friends with me doesn’t conflict with your friendship with him? Am I imposing?”
She felt a moment of dread that he might say yes.
“Never,” Scott insisted, shaking his head emphatically. “Don’t think that. I’m a big boy. I can hang out with different kids on the playground once in a while.” His smile was warm. Scott got up and rounded her desk and leaned down to give her a brief hug. “I didn’t just do this.”

“Mum’s the word.” He felt solid and smelled nice, and aside from a platonic token of affection, it gave her no sparks; it reaffirmed for her that Scott was safe. Ororo thought nothing of the fact that Scott had left her door ajar, but thankfully, their conversation was low and easygoing, giving any eavesdroppers no real entertainment if they lingered.

Logan stood openmouthed in the hall, silently seething at Ororo and Scott as they embraced. He shook himself and stalked off, wondering if anyone could see the steam rising from his scalp.

Sonofabitch. SonofaFUCKINGbitch… What was THAT?

So that was it? Wait for him and Ororo to duke it out in a supply closet and stop speaking to each other, and then move in on her once he was out of the way? Logan fumed as he logged back on to his email. That was some bullshit…

He calmed down and forced himself to focus on his work. He didn’t realize he still had Scott’s stress ball; he must have walked out of his office with it, distracted. He squeezed it, pretending it was Scott’s fat head.

It ain’t like ya didn’t decide already that things wouldn’t work out. Yer done with Ororo. This is a done deal. Finito. End of story. She wants to play with Scooter, that whoop-de-doo. Logan felt a hot flush creeping over his skin, making his ears tingle. MotherFUCKer. What’s he think he’s playing at? That’s her game? She can just skip away as nice as you please after that mess in the closet?

Logan felt a weird, nagging sense of betrayal. He’d laid himself open and told her things, heard him say things out loud that he hadn’t even told himself yet in his own musings about Jeannie. It felt raw and strange, and he could tell it affected her, maybe even cut her deeply, and he didn’t like the look on her face that combined pity with guilt. Talk about emotional blackmail…

It took all Logan had not to march back into Ororo’s office, give Scott the bum’s rush out of there and hold her captive until he’d had his say.

The opportunity would arrive sooner than he thought.

*  

The gathering in the break room was predictably large; people loved free food, and there were enough people circling the trays and dishes like vultures that it was impossible to distinguish who’d actually brought anything. The card made the rounds for signatures as everyone congratulated the swollen but glowing mother-to-be.

Ororo smiled for her in empathy. “You look uncomfortable.”

“OhmigodIcan’twaittillthiskid’sout.”

“Enjoy the rest while you can. In the meantime, have a cookie.” Ororo lost interest in the conversation as several of Amelia’s immediate coworkers swamped them in a flurry of questions and well wishes. It still occasionally hurt too much. Ororo was grateful that this office didn’t know her past or her pain and there was no reason to bring it up.

Logan skirted the lounge, nursing his third cup of Dr. Pepper and wishing it was beer. He watched
Ororo furtively, avoiding her gaze when she would glance up, and it frustrated him, this cat-and-mouse, this unwilling avoidance and pretending he didn’t want to talk to her. Why the hell couldn’t he talk to her?

She was beautiful in a spring-weight, long, slightly flared, navy blue skirt with a tiny floral print and soft white twinset. Her concession to the warmer weather was a pair of peep-toe pumps, and she’d left her hair hanging in a long French braid down her back, softening her usually harsh look. She was still undecorated, no jewelry or makeup, and Logan finally noticed that she wore no wedding band. Even when she did wear anything like a necklace or occasional bangle, they weren’t gold or silver “souvenirs” of a committed relationship that a husband would give a wife.

Why did she look so sad? Why was she holding herself apart from everyone, particularly the guest of honor? Ororo just picked idly at her plate, nudging the spinach dip she brought back and forth with a wedge of sourdough bread.

Selene came between Logan and his obsession. She sidled to Ororo with a plate that held only low-fat offerings, a couple of turkey rolls and two skewers of fresh fruit. “Stop by my office when you get a chance?”

“Sure.”

“Did you update the logs when you added the spreadsheets to the database?”

“I did that this morning.”

“Could you double-check?” Logan saw her tight, hard smile and momentarily shared Ororo’s desire to give the account manager a swift kick in the shin. He hid his own smirk behind his cup.

“No problem.” Selene swept away and caught up to Donald, who was holding court with Amelia and going on about his grandson’s antics, regaling her of all the fun times she could expect.

The crowd thinned as people began to retreat to their desks. They periodically returned to root through the leftovers, to steal one last brownie or pluck up one last turkey roll. The spinach dip was decimated down to the last few smears in the now stale bread bowl; Ororo was glad she wouldn’t have to take it home.

By four o’clock, she went back to the lounge to grab herself a soda from the vending machine and noticed that the table still had a few things left out. She hated clutter and decided to put away whatever was salvageable and throw out the trash. She bunched up and tossed out an empty Tostitos back and poured out the last few ounces of flat Pepsi from a two-liter bottle, setting it on top of the recycling bin.

Someone was by her elbow, clearing away a couple of paper plates that held only crumbs, folding the plastic wrap over a dish of cream cheese and salsa. Ororo looked up and startled slightly as she noticed Logan casually cleaning up beside her. “Think this can get thrown away?” he asked, nodding to the last of a veggie tray whose cup of dip was empty.

“Someone might eat it. Eh. Nah. Maybe not.” Logan shrugged and dumped the last few celery sticks and radishes into the trash.

“Guess everyone thinks their mother works here,” Logan mused.

“Still beats the smell of burnt coffee or popcorn,” Ororo chimed in easily, trying to keep her end of the conversation light, but it was hard.
“That or people forgetting to take home their Tupperware. I hate it when Sam cleans out the science projects left over. That stink’s enough to wake the dead.”

“Sure,” she agreed. Her mouth went dry. “You didn’t have to help. I just wanted to neaten up.”

“I did too. I hate looking at a mess.” He suppressed a chuckle; Ororo didn’t allow herself to look at him or see his lazy smile. “This is still neater than yer desk.”

“Pfft…” That earned him a narrowing of her eyes over her shoulder.

Her body language was stiff and shared little with him; her voice was tight and Logan still wanted to get a rise out of her, make her scowl at him, fuss at him, laugh at him, anything to break down her civil mask.

His brain and mouth were of different opinions about how to do it sensibly.

“Why the hell were ya hugging Summers?” Her mouth dropped open.

“Wait…what?” Logan wanted to clap his hands over his mouth, but he couldn’t turn back now.

“Is he all of the sudden yer type now?”

“Logan…have you lost your damned mind?”

“Looked like the two of ya were awfully cozy.”

“I’m a little lost here,” she told him, gesturing for effect. “First of all…WHY is it any of your business what I was doing with Scott? Second of all, I wasn’t even DOING anything with Scott. And third…what are you now, a peeping Tom?”

“I don’t know. Here I was wondering why ya seem ta resent me so much sometimes, and maybe our little ‘misunderstanding’ was the problem, but I guess I was wrong.”

“I don’t resent you!” she hissed. “And we don’t have a misunderstanding anymore. We went over that already!” Fires burned in her eyes and Logan noticed a hint of color rising in her cheeks.

“Are ya interested in Scott? Ya’ve always been awfully friendly with the guy.”

“That’s because he’s friendly with me. Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“Can’t blame me when I saw what I saw.”

“Then you were seeing things. Get over yourself. And news flash, Logan, who I hug or not is my business.” Ororo left the lounge, but to her annoyance Logan followed closely on her heels.

“Maybe I just wanted ta know where I stand,” he muttered.

“Wherever you want. It’s not up to me,” she informed him haughtily as she ducked into conference room two to better confront him. “Even if I didn’t like Scott that way, and I’m not saying I do, what’s it to you? You can’t stand me.”

“Yer uppity. Ya drive me friggin’ crazy, if ya wanna know the truth. I’m pissed off that ya make assumptions about me based on the ones ya make about men in general. Don’t blame it all on me because yer a little bitter.

“A little…a little bitter?” Ororo’s jaw worked. “So now I’m ‘bitter’? And I drive YOU crazy? What
would you have said if I’d stayed? What would have kept that from being awkward and unnecessary? And hey, let’s get back to that whole ‘bitter’ thing…” Logan realized he stirred up a hornet’s nest, but he folded his arms across his burly chest and set his jaw at a stubborn angle. “‘Bitter’ is when your ex tries to make it sound like it’s your fault for everything going to shit when he cheats. ‘Bitter’ is how you feel when every time you clean the house, you still find bits and pieces of the crap that you thought you’d never have to see again, like his old razors and commuter cups and three years worth of Hooters’ calendars. ‘Bitter’ is when you realize the best part of you, and the best part of your ex just…died and that you’ll never get it back…” Ororo clapped her hand over her mouth and drew back.

“Wait…Tory…”

“Never mind,” she insisted. “Never mind that. Scratch that.” She put her mask safely back into place and centered herself. Logan felt her close up and wanted to shake her.

“What’d you mean, the best parts of you?”

“I didn’t mean anything. We’ve both got a busy day, I’ll let you get back to your meetings.”

“Screw my meetings,” he grumbled, shaking his head. “Uh-uh.” He looked around the room briefly and shut the conference room door. She looked at him like he grew another head.

“What the hell are you-“

“Time fer a conference,” he told her, grabbing her elbow and steering her toward the supply closet, whose door was ajar. He shoved her ungracefully inside and jerked the door shut behind him with a brisk slam. She whirled on him, blue eyes flashing and indignant.

“Oh, this is just great.”

“What’d you mean, the best part of you, Tory?”

“Just drop it. I never should have even said it that way. It’s nothing.”

“No it’s not. Not to you.” Her back was still up and she folded her arms beneath her breasts, glaring daggers at him.

“He was an asshole. You’re not,” she assured him. “Okay. I’ve said it. Happy?”

“Thrilled.”

“There’s nothing going on between me and Scott.”

“Ya sure are all cotton candy and kittens whenever ya hang out together.”

“Cotton candy and kittens?” Ororo’s brows drew together. “Gads…” Slowly it dawned on her. “You’re jealous.”

He huffed. “No’ m not.”

“You are. You’re jealous.” Her voice was incredulous and tinged with amusement.

“*Pffft..* Yeah. Sure I am.” He finally noticed how she’d nimbly changed the subject from the original issue he wanted to discuss.

“Scott and I are too much alike,” she pointed out.
“So?”

“Just thought I would mention it. You seemed…irked.”

“ ‘Irked,’ I ain’t, Tory.” He’d started calling her that nickname again.

She missed how it sounded coming from his lips, lately.

“Sure. Never mind. You’re fine.”

“I am. It’s yer affair if ya wanna waste time with Summers.”

“Glad you think it’s my affair.” He was losing ground again, even though he was going on the attack. “And it’s my time to waste. Don’t know why you’re worried about it anyw-”

He closed the gap between them and pulled her roughly against him, snapping his arm around her waist, cupping her nape, and tugging her down for a mind-numbing kiss that turned her knees into jelly. A tiny, desperate mew escaped her as he dominated her mouth, letting their breath mingle hotly as intense sensations sizzled along her nerve endings. Her hands trembled as they gripped the collar of his shirt and wove her fingers through his hair.

He felt so solid and hard and delicious against her. She’d craved him so much, his heat and strength and the way his muscles rolled and rippled beneath her caress. It was a sacrilege to cover a body like his up in such staid business clothes, to hide that deep, broad, tanned chest with its fine mat of hair that begged to be stroked, those broad shoulders that were so satisfying to knead and mold in her needy grip. He tasted so right and Ororo shivered in pleasure at the low rumble of contentment he made in his throat. Logan slanted his mouth over hers, urging her to give him entry, and she drowned in the slow, seductive stroke of his tongue. They stumbled back against the shelves, almost knocking over the toner cartridges and boxes of staples.

He cupped her smooth, hot cheeks in his hands and devoured her lips. “Tory,” he murmured. “God, Tory…”

“Mmmmph…” It was all she could manage; her body told her brain to shut up and just enjoy the ride. She felt Logan’s blunt fingernails scrape down her back through her thin sweater, making her shiver, and her leg hooked around his; somehow she’d managed to kick off her pump, and the ball of her foot was stroking the bulge of his calf. Her touch and her kiss were driving him crazy, the smell and taste of her and the feel of her smooth skin. Her lips were wreaking sweet havoc at his ear, suckling his lobe like a piece of hard candy, and his hips bucked against her unevenly. He was hard as a rock, straining beneath his slacks and needing the soft nest of heat between her thighs.

He lapped at her neck, whispering raggedly “I can’t help this. Damn it, I’ve tried…”

“Don’t talk, don’t ruin it,” she pleaded, begging his silence with more kisses and a firm, rough groping of his ass that made him whimper. His hands crept under her sweater hem and feathered over her smooth skin, finding the silky cup of her bra and undercurve of her breast. She moaned at his gentle, teasing caress and arched into his hand. She felt him, that hard, unsatisfied, throbbing bulge of his manhood that flexed and squirmed against her as though it had a life of its own.

A sharp jingling of keys intruded on the haze of lust that clouded their awareness of anything else. “Ah knew Ah heard this thing slam earlier…wondered who left it open in the first place…”

Shit! Their eyes spoke the same sentiment as they sprang apart and straightened their clothes. Ororo turned away and faced the back corner of the closet, pretending to be fascinated by the reams of printer paper and packs of Bics. Logan rubbed his nape and realized belately that his hair was a
wreck.

“Aw, man, Ah did it again,” Sam cried, throwing up his hands. “Hope ya didn’t end up in here fer too long, pal,” he told Logan. He looked at him oddly. “Aw, hey, miz Munroe.”

“Heh. Hi, Sam.” They hurried out past him and dashed for the conference room exit, both out of breath and flushed.

“Where did you park?”

“Third floor of the garage.”

“Follow me home?”

“I can take the train back in the morning.”

“Uh-uh.” Logan was having none of it. He followed Ororo back to her office, where she dashed to her PC and turned it off without logging off, grabbed her purse and dashed back out. They followed the same process as they approached his office. His briefcase came with him and his jacket was looped over his arm. No one thought twice about seeing them hurrying for the elevator; they were both busy people.

The doors shut after them and they fell on each other. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. The car chimed each time they passed a floor, and they were grateful that no one else got on before they reached the lobby. Their kisses were hungry and did too little to quench the fire burning between them.

More groping ensued as they climbed into the car; Logan almost got into a fender bender as her hand dipped between his legs to stroke and coddle his hardness. “Damn it,” he hissed.

“Watch the road,” she husked, leaning over to nip at his neck. He gave her a desperate, tongue-tangling kiss at the next red light.

They reached his apartment and tripped up the steps; Ororo was already wrestling him out of his jacket as he punched the key into the lock. They groaned in relief as the door slammed behind them, and Logan fumbled to lock the deadbolts as their clothes began to hit the floor.

No more desks and conference phones and PCs between them. No more moments stolen behind office doors. No more arguing by the water cooler of coffee pot. This was luscious and vital and familiar, the feel of cool sheets that craved the weight of two bodies, the bounce of the firm mattress as they gave themselves up to what had been building between them for months. Finally she was bare beneath him, whimpering his name, and it sounded so sexy and right when she said it. He loved her voice and soft, full lips, he loved her long spill of thick hair when he tugged her braid and unraveled it, letting it swell to its full volume and tangle around his hands.

Their legs tangled and fingers laced together as they made love. They fitted together easily and relearned each other’s passion and preferences, favorite spots and hot zones.

“Tory,” he grated out, dipping his mouth to lap a sizzling trail down her pulse.

“Logan,” she moaned, “please. Please…” She chanted it as he rutted inside her, craving the way her body cushioned him, how her snug sheath embraced him and fitted him so well. They didn’t hear the low tick of the clock on his nightstand or feel the gradual fade of afternoon into evening as the sun sank in the sky.

They found fulfillment twice before they were finally sated. Ororo lay against him in languorous
satisfaction as he stroked her hair. This time she basked in the heat of his body and stayed snuggled against him under the covers as he began to doze off.

“Tory?”

“Hmm?”

“Stay...” His fingers tightened convulsively around her shoulder, then relaxed as he gave himself up to sleep. Ororo watched the shadows lengthen along the wall and eventually consume the room in darkness. Her eyes drifted shut and she eased herself against him naturally, as though they’d always slept like this. Her last thought was she slipped into sleep was that she wasn’t going anywhere.
Daylight

Chapter Summary

“He didn’t want me.”

“Then he was a fool.”

He woke her with soft kisses and the gradual peel of sheets away from her body, replacing the slight draft with his warmth. She “mmph”-ed her complaints until his fingers found her nipples, gently teasing them until they pebbled. Then her moans underscored his low chuckle.

“Someone doesn’t wanna wake up…uh-uh. No ya don’t, darlin’.”

“Too…early,” she protested sleepily, not letting her eyes crack all the way open. She made out the top of his dark head descending over her warm skin, then arched in response as his mouth engulfed one tingling tip.

“No it ain’t. Ya don’t even wanna know what time it is.”

“What?” That made her eyes snap open, before they fluttered shut again in pleasure. Drat that man and his mouth… Her fingertips trailed lazily up his broad back and tangled in his hair, thick and hopelessly disheveled.

“We slept in.”

“Oh, God,” she groaned, tugging his head back to meet his amused look. Her expression was stricken. “I missed a meeting.”

“Probably missed a couple.” He was nonplussed as he nibbled her palm. “Relax. I called into the office already.” She froze.

“What’d you tell them? What about Selene? Shitshitshit!” She struggled to move out from beneath him and find her clothes, but he looped his arm around her waist and help her captive. She cut her eyes up at him, which only made him laugh harder.

“Relax. Yer sick. Sudden case of whooping cough, measles and gout. Ya got a hold of a bad burrito last night.”

“Please don’t tell me you told Selene that. Oh, God…this looks bad. Very bad. You called her to tell her I’m sick. How does that look?” Logan shrugged, then sighed.

“Quit worryin’ yer pretty head, ‘Ro. I didn’t call Selene. I called Scott.” He rolled to his back and took her with him, plastering her against him and tugging the sheet over her to keep her warm. “What’s the point of havin’ a Client Service rep fer a best friend if he ain’t got yer back?”

“He won’t tell Selene I had gout?” Relief washed over her and he felt the tension leave her body.

“Bingo. Scooter’s good at last-minute excuses and tellin’ people what they wanna hear. Including Cruella DeVille.”
“Ursula,” she corrected him. “She’s more like Ursula. More cunning. Selene actually likes dogs, except they’re the small, ratlike, yappy variety.”

“Sounds scary,” Logan yawned. He kissed her temple and was rewarded by her burrowing snuggle.

“You feel cozy,” she murmured, content.

“Thanks.”

“And sexy,” she added, tracing his collarbones.

“Careful, ‘Ro; ya might give a guy the impression ya don’t wanna get outta bed.”

“Now where did you get that silly idea from?”

“Silly? Hey!” She tweaked his side savagely, and he gave her hip a little spank. “Stop that.”

“You make it too easy.”

“Do not.”

“You’re all yummy and sensitive. It doesn’t take much to push your buttons.” She punctuated her accusation with a nibble along his jawline, and he groaned in approval. “See?” He stared down into her face and smirked.

“Yer a mess.” She rolled her eyes.

“Thanks a lot.”

“I like it. This is how ya should look all the time.”

“What? Naked with a pillow mark on my face and sleep in my eyes?”

“The naked part’s fine. I just mean, unbuttoned. Not so uptight.”

“I’m not uptight!”

“Come again?”

“Hmmph…” He gently ran his fingertip over her pout, then stroked that tempting hair back from her face.

“Ya hold a lot back.”

“So you say.”

“Yer all business. When does Tory ever get ta come out an’ play?”

“When there aren’t numbers to crunch and flights to check into and meetings to dial into…” This time his finger shushed her. He shook his head.

“No talking shop. Not today. This is the unofficial start of yer vacation, ‘Ro.”

“What’s this ‘Ro stuff?”

“It’s yer name.”
“No it’s not.”

“It’s part of it, yer first name,” he explained. “Instead of givin’ me yer middle one when we met, ya could’ve given me Ororo.”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d get to that part,” she pointed out. He drew ticklish lines up and down her arm, circling the crest of her shoulder.

“Ya should’ve given me a chance.”

“Can I have a do-over?”

“As many as ya want,” he husked, and he caught her hand that was roaming over his chest and slid it down toward his throbbing, twitching flesh between his legs.

“That wasn’t what I meant,” she argued, but her voice was full of seductive promise and lacked conviction. He guided her hand over his erection, molding it to him until she adopted the rhythm he craved. Ororo raised up onto her elbow and loomed over him, watching him arch and clench his eyes shut with each stroke and pull of her hand.

“Here’s yer do-over,” he rumbled. “Aw, yeah…” He bucked into her grip as she squeezed, and he felt stiff and hot, his head growing more swollen and flushed. She lovingly stroked away a pearly drop from the silky head with her thumb and bowed her lips to his nipple. Logan tangled his fingers in her hair, one of his favorite addictions, letting waves of it brush and tickle his chest.

“No…here’s my do-over,” she said, letting her words trail over his skin, against his taut pecs and the broad cage of his ribs, meeting the drum of his heartbeat. Her tongue dipped into his navel and made his abdomen jump. “And here…and here…”

“Ororo…”

“Say it again,” she whispered as she lapped at the tip of his sex.

“Nngh! ‘Ro…baby…Ororo!”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She took him inside the lush heat of her mouth, and he was lost. Her name spilled from his lips again and again, in one form or another. She lost count.

Lost count, she chided herself. I’m an underwriter!

He pulled her back up to meet him and rolled Ororo onto her back, intending to finish what she started. “No work today. We’re playin’ hooky.”

“Okay,” she agreed on a moan as he entered her in one neat, hard thrust.

By the time he’d brought her to completion, the sun shifted another five degrees across the sky.

* 

They ate breakfast for lunch, sharing one plate of scrambled eggs that had “everything but the kitchen sink” thrown into them as they lazed on the couch. Ororo snuggled under the blanket as she sprawled across his lap. Logan channel-surfed with the remote, earning him a low snort.

“What?”

“None of it’ll look any better if you flip so fast through it that you can’t even tell what’s on.”
“There’s nothin’ on,” he insisted.

“You can’t tell!”

“Sure I can.” He flipped the channels at an infuriating pace, just fast enough for her not to be able to protest when something looked familiar, but slow enough for her eyes to track the image and recognize what she was looking at.

“Don’t make me take that away from you.”

“Not on yer best day, Sunshine.”

“Hmmph.” She pouted at him, then savagely bit into the wedge of strawberry-smeared toast he offered her. Logan grinned, wiping away a fleck of it from the corner of her mouth and sucking it off his thumb. “Quit playing with your food.” He feinted, evading her attempt to take another bite, then poked it against the corner of her mouth again.

“Oops.”

“Logan!”

“Lemme get that…” This time he took a more direct approach, lapping it straight from her lips, and she moaned into his kiss. She stared up at him in a mixture of aggravation and amusement.

“Go ahead. Watch ESPN if you want. Or something with titties and explosions. Doesn’t matter to me.” She settled herself more comfortably, huddling into his borrowed flannel shirt. It felt so soft against her bare skin, like a security blanket, and Ororo felt like she could doze off again.

“I get to watch titties?” He sounded incredulous. “Man, I’m lucky.”

“Typical.” Logan felt affection tug at him as he stared down at her, looking completely at home against him.

“Ro?”

“Hm?”

“Yer beautiful.”

“Flatterer.”

“Ya are.”

“Thank you,” she yawned. “So’re you.”

“Pffft…”

“You are,” she argued dreamily. “Didn’…wanna…admit…” Her voice drifted off, and Logan turned down the sound on the set until it was almost on mute. He studied her silently, taking in minute details that he never had time to enjoy. She liked sleeping on her side, with her arms crossed over her chest. She was just old enough to have the beginnings of laugh lines, when she actually laughed. He wanted to hear her do it more often.

Their time in bed gave him the chance to study her body in the warm pool of sunlight that settled over them when he first woke up. Her belly intrigued him, taut for the most part, but with the tiniest hint of softness, yielding to the slight depression of his fingertips. The skin just below her navel was
slightly ruched, seeming tattooed with a deeper brown, jagged mark whose origin he could only guess. It wasn’t a scar.

The sides of her breasts had tiny, transparent stretch marks that he traced with reverent lips before she fully woke. He loved their weight and fullness and how perfectly they filled his hands.

Logan sighed, finally deciding on *Pardon the Interruption* as he finished the last crust of toast. Part of him felt guilty at urging Ororo into such a lazy day, but she felt so good sprawled across his lap.

* 

“Ya don’t hafta do that.”

“You cooked.” Ororo plunged the empty, oily plate into a sinkful of soapy water.

“Yer my guest.”

“I’m not a slob.”

“Yer desk says different.”

“I hate paperwork,” she admitted. “I’m hopeless at filing, except for my stuff at home.” Logan embraced her from behind.

“No paperwork today.”

“Did you have anything else you had to do?”

“You.”

“Besides me.” His arms tightened around her waist.

“Anything ya want.”

“Talk.”

“Darn,” he grumbled. “Sure I can’t talk ya back into bed?”

“You know I’ve been holding this in. I know you have been, too.”

“Whaddya have on yer mind?”

“Twenty questions. Me first.”

“Shoot.”

“Were you a little relieved when I left that day?”

“Define ‘relieved.’”

“We didn’t have to do that awkward little dance that people do first thing on the morning after.”

“Then no. I wasn’t. I wasn’t even thinkin’ that far ahead. I just wanted ta know what ya liked for breakfast.” He nuzzled her as she set a clean glass in the rack. “It coulda been like this.”

“It could’ve,” she admitted. “Sorry.”
“S’okay.”

“Your turn.”

“Ya said something that won’t quit nagging me.”

“Shoot.”

“The best part of you. Ya said ya lost it.” She stiffened, then carefully disengaged herself from his arms. “Ro?”

“You don’t want to know about that.”

“Not if ya don’t wanna tell me,” he complied, “but I wish ya would, darlin’.” He felt her close up and cursed his own mouth. The air between them fogged up and thickened, and he watched her deflate, hugging herself.

“Logan…I…”

“It’s all right. I’m sorry. Ya don’t hafta explain. I can give ya another turn.”

“No,” she protested, and her voice was husky and thick, slightly garbled as she spoke around her fingers. He knew she was trying without success to hold back the words, trying to contain something she’d locked up too long.

“Ororo…it’s all right.” He gently took her shoulders and tried to turn her around to face him, but she fought him. He settled for stroking her back.

“It’s not your fault. It’s not anybody’s fault,” she told him shakily. “It’s no one’s fault,” she repeated, as though she was trying to convince herself. She felt him embrace her again, and her arms covered his locked around her waist. She stroked his knuckles and gathered her thoughts.

“We were going to name him Nate. He was due on Valentine’s Day. It wasn’t my favorite holiday before we were expecting him. I hated it in high school. And…I don’t like it now anymore, either. We were so excited. So excited.” Dread crept over him as she continued to speak. “He was going to be beautiful. Our Nathan. I had his room all ready. Car seat picked out. I already sent out the thank-you cards from the baby shower.” Logan mouthed the word “shit” and closed his eyes, wincing. She just continued to stroke his knuckles, and he felt a warm tear drip onto his skin. “Vic didn’t want me anymore. I knew that. But he wanted Nate. We both did. That was the only good thing about staying together.”

“No. You were the good thing, ‘Ro. He was going to be beautiful, because you’re beautiful. Everything about you.” She took no comfort in his words.

“He didn’t want me.”

“Then he was a fool.”

“There was something wrong with me. He got tired of me. I wanted too much from him.”

“There wasn’t anything wrong with you.”

“Yes, there was.”

“His cheating was the only thing wrong. That wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t, darlin’.” He needed to see her face, to look into those limpid blue eyes and see that she was hearing him, feeling what he had to
say. He guided her to a chair, where she tried to sit with her back to him. Logan knelt in front of her and took her hands, squeezing them to get her attention. She shook her head and stroked his hair.

“I’m okay.”

“Okay.” He insinuated himself between her knees and wiped away her tears, cradling her face. “I’m here.”

“It still hurts.” He nodded, and more tears slicked his palm. She closed watery eyes and bowed her lips into his hand.

“It’s here,” he repeated, and she finally gave in, wrapping her arms around him so tightly he feared they’d snap off.

*

Logan couldn’t remember the last time a one-night encounter lasted twenty-four hours.

Ororo ran his errands with him. They enjoyed the fresh air and took a stroll through Quincy Market, sharing a Greek spinach pastry and watching jugglers outside in the court. They skipped the rest of their twenty questions game and just talked, and talked, and talked, filling in the gaps left by their arguments and workplace banter. They briefly checked their emails and made one or two return phone calls but skipped the teleconference requests. It felt too good to be lazy, and it was completely out of character for both of them.

Ororo told him she envied him having a full-sized tub in his apartment. He ignored her protests as he brought back the bottle of dishsoap and began to fill it with water just shy of being too hot. Minutes later they eased into the tub and let the heat engulf them, lapping at their lax bodies. They listened to each other’s breathing and the sound of the thick suds disintegrating a little at a time.

“I’m not that uptight,” she murmured.

“Nah,” he agreed.

“You’re not a jerk.”

“True.”

“I like you.”

“I like you, too.”

“Good.”

“Ororo?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s…never mind.” She tilted her head back from where she lounged against his shoulder and frowned at him.

“What?”

“It’s okay.” He eased her head back and kissed her temple. “It was nothin’ important.”
* 

I don’t just like you. That’s a big flamin’ lie, darlin’. I love you so damned much it hurts.
“It’s true. It’s like watching two kids in class throwing spitballs at each other and sending I-hate-you notes back and forth.”

“Hold the elevator!” Ororo darted past Yukio’s desk and waved at her with her coffee cup.

“Missed you yesterday.”

“Feeling better,” she promised, which was just enough truth for her. The elevator doors closed on Ororo’s knowing smile and twinkling eyes. Yukio’s narrowed thoughtfully.

“I wanna hear that story,” she muttered aloud. “I bet it’s a doozy.”

Ororo floated to her office in a happy fog, smiling at coworkers she usually ignored in the hall. She hummed to herself during her usual ritual of hanging up her spring-weight trench coat and purse and booting up her PC. She grinned at the flashing light on her voice mail.

“It was killing you, wasn’t it?” she asked the phone, knowing every message was from Selene. She settled into her email first and turned on her iPod, flicking on the speakers on the loading dock. Her stomach was full of warm little tickles and her body, her whole essence felt charged and alive.

Logan. He was the remedy to problems she didn’t even know she’d had.

He drove her home so they could each get ready for work without any obstacles the next day, and obviously, to avoid the inevitable raised eyebrows if they came walking in to the office together. Or from the parking garage, she mused. That would have set lips flapping.

In the meantime, though, anyone could guess she’d hooked up by the sappy grin she couldn’t wipe off her face for most of the morning. *Stop smiling like that,* she told herself, but that naughty voice that convinced her to hit Logan’s snooze alarm for another quickie before they left argued back *I don’t feel like it.*

She felt…yummy.

She drifted into the break room for a refill on her coffee and lingered over it, savoring the smell of the cheap brew and taking her time stirring in the tubs of creamer. The swirls were pretty, she pondered; they billowed. Yes, they billowed, if she had to describe it.

“Why’re you grinning into your coffee?”

“No’m not.”

“Yeah. You are.” Scott ducked his face into the carafe and sniffed it suspiciously. “Doesn’t smell like anyone spiked it. You hiding a stash at your desk?”

“Nooooo,” she purred. “Same old coffee. Same old, same ol’.”
“Uh-huh.” He sighed, then shook his head. “I held off the angry mob at the meetings yesterday.” That sobered her quickly.

“Were they angry?”

“Surprised. Slightly irritated. Grumbling about rescheduling two weeks out.”

“Shit. That blows their May renewal.”

“No. The benefit summaries are already out on the database. Tentative and subject to change. That’s where you come in to send them a rate sheet.”

“Will do.” Scott gave her a slow once-over. His lips twitched.

“What’s with the red?”

“I like red.”

“It’s just…wow.”

“It’s just a dress,” she argued.

“Yeah, but…wow. Red.” He wolf-whistled and she flushed, giddy again.

“Stop.”

“Hey, can’t blame a guy for appreciating.”

He hadn’t been the only one. Several mouths dropped open in the corridor and the ladies’ room as she strolled by in a flash of long legs and flared red skirts. Sam nearly had whiplash giving her a double take and accidentally aimed the hose of disinfectant out of the bucket, soaking the supply closet floor.

“I felt like a little color.”

“Nice change.”

“It’s not that much of a stretch,” she lied, but her mirror told her a different story. She’d brushed her hair and began pulling it back, then changed her mind, running her hands through it. The waves were still soft and slightly tousled from blowing it dry. She tossed the hair pins back onto the vanity and flicked her hair out, letting it fall down around her shoulders. It felt good against her neck. She wasn’t in the mood to contain it.

“I take it you’re feeling better.”

“Oh. Sure. Much.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Thanks for, um…”

“Yeah. No biggie.”

“Ororo?”

“Yes, Scott?”
“Is everything okay now?”

“Yes. Everything’s okay, Scott.” She gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze on her way out.

“No more emergency conferences, right?”

“Not on my agenda,” she called back as she sailed out of the lounge.

“Let me know if I have to take minutes. Or referee.”

* Selene didn’t read her the riot act.

She railed.

“That meeting was important! You didn’t even call us to let us know you wouldn’t be there!”

“I’m sorry,” Ororo said weakly, squirming in her seat and suddenly feeling naked.

“I had to make excuses to the client. You need to call them and let them know when to expect the rates.”

“I’ll cc you when I send them.”

“Make your apology convincing.”

“I was out sick,” Ororo argued. “That’s a pretty compelling apology.”

“It’s embarrassing when we can’t follow through on a sale,” Selene reminded her, as though she hadn’t spoken. She continued typing almost by rote. Each click felt like a lash with a wet noodle while Selene kept twisting Ororo’s screws. “We have an image to protect, so that means we can’t miss meetings.” She acted like Ororo made her miss the meeting, too. Ororo bit her tongue.

Then Selene finally really looked her over. “That’s what you wore to work today?”

“It struck my fancy.”

“Suit up in something less frivolous when we meet with the client in two weeks. We’re flying out.”

“That’s short notice,” Ororo protested. Heat rushed up her spine.

“We’re doing them a favor. It’ll be good to meet with them on their own turf.”

“You really need me to go with you?”

“Why? Do you have a conflicting project? You shouldn’t. I checked your Outlook.” Ororo quietly seethed. Nice. The heifer was all up in her business…

“No. I’ll work around it.”

“No. You’ll focus on it like your life depended on it,” Selene corrected her. Her dark eyes were hard, holding an expression she reserved for Skeevy Nate in Eligibility who always made changes in the group’s member population without telling anyone. “I brought you with me into this region’s market because I knew you were up to the challenge, Ororo.”

“And I appreciate that.”
“I feel like your attitude lately is lacking.” Ororo bristled.

“I disagree, Selene.”

“You’ve seemed distracted in the meetings. You have to send things out twice when there are errors in the narrative.”

“There aren’t errors in the rates themselves.”

“But sloppy emails can be confusing.”

“They’re hardly sloppy.” Ororo fumed, resisting the urge to jump over Selene’s desk and throttle her. “And if I have to resend something, it’s usually due to changes that were made after I was tagged for the client’s management team, whether it was a change in the sale itself or the population. It doesn’t help when I’m the last to know valuable information.”

“You shouldn’t be the last to know. You get the information at the same time I do. Do you clean out your emails?” Ororo felt frustration twisting her gut and pushing its way onto her tongue.


Ororo was having a hard time reading her. On the one hand, she was her old demanding self, but Selene seemed more harried, and there was a look of exhaustion around her eyes.

“I only clean them out once I know action items from them are complete. I read anything flagged the same day I receive it, and I’m not spending unusual amounts of time away from my desk. I’m where I say I’m going to be everyday. Excuse me if my being out sick was an inconvenience.”

“I work sick all the time,” Selene challenged with a shrug.

*Goodie for you. ‘I’m not made of steel.’*

“You have to be in this business and in your role.”

Ororo had it. She stood, almost satisfied with Selene’s frown.

“We’re not through talking.”

“Do you have anything specific for me to take care of aside from contacting the client?” Ororo pointed out. “I need to go over my emails, I know I have a pile of them, and Scott can fill me in on the meeting’s highlights.”

“Yes, he can.” Selene sighed. “I’m not even sure of how to react to you and your behavior today, Ororo.” Ororo felt as though she’d been slapped.

“My behavior isn’t any different than that of anyone else when their character and efforts are being attacked. All you’ve done is take me to task and pretty much insult me since I stepped into your office.”

“I haven’t attacked you! I’ve just pointed out that you don’t seem as interested in your work as you used to be.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s the impression you’ve given me, and you’ll end up giving it to everyone else if you don’t adjust your attitude.”
“Duly noted. I’m going back to my desk.”

“That’s hardly an adjustment.”

“There’s no need. I’m going to Human Resources.” Ororo made up her mind in an instant. “I’m going to file a complaint against you for harassment.” Selene’s mouth dropped open, and Ororo spun on her heel. “Have a good morning, Selene.”

Adrenaline pulsed through her veins and quickened her heartbeat. If Ororo didn’t have indigestion before, she definitely needed a bottle of Mylanta now. She practically stomped back to her desk, feeling rage bubble out of her and wishing she had stayed to vent some more to get the rest of it out of her system.

The worst part was, she realized as she sat down to her Outlook and her fingers sailed over the keys, was that wasn’t Selene right? Was she as focused as she needed to be on her work?

The last few meetings she’d participated in were a hot mess. She was distracted, and on a couple of occasions, Logan provided the distraction. But, she reasoned, he didn’t have anyone breathing down his neck about his “attitude.” It was all on her. It wasn’t fair.

Her personal life was no one’s business, and even if she hadn’t said as much, Ororo got the weird vibe that Selene was keeping tabs on her. What was ironic was that Selene herself wasn’t any better. She wasn’t hiding anything; her involvement with Donald Pierce was common knowledge and fodder for the water cooler. If she called Ororo out on “unprofessional behavior” because of her personal relationship, it was the pot calling the kettle black.

“Take that,” Ororo muttered under her breath. She was just tired. Enough, already.

The worst part was the death of her good mood. She wished she had Logan’s ear to bend, but her best bet was to focus on the matter at hand. Her note to the Human Resources inbox was succinct and to the point, detailing Selene’s words almost verbatim, emphasizing the term “sloppy.” She cited other instances that came to mind, particularly Selene’s mercenary control of Ororo’s schedule to suit herself, whether it was for meetings or other aspects of her projects that often led to her working late. She left out that she wouldn’t have even come to the Boston site if not for having her arm twisted in the guise of “having a new opportunity and broadening her horizons.”

A guilty little voice inside her nagged that her change of location hadn’t been the worst thing…not really. Boston was slowly growing on her, but she missed her friends and her father. But she’d never come out and say that moving north had been her own idea.

She was just about to hit ‘send’ on her message when her instant messaging popped onscreen.

YukioHarada: Got time for a coffee?

Ororo sighed, then nodded to herself.

OroroMunroe: Yup. Be there in a sec. Just wrapping something up.

YukioHarada: Such as?

OroroMunroe: Just a noose around my freakin’ neck…

YukioHarada: Ouch. Don’t even joke about that shit. C’mon. Coffee time. I can stand a little bitching.
Bless her heart. It was nice to have at least one female in the office to vent to in lieu of Anna Marie or Ali or Monica and Stevie. Ororo grabbed her mug, not caring that it was still half-full, and she hustled out, leaving the message where it was but opening up her screensaver with her password. There. She hoped she didn’t run into “Ursula” on her way to the lounge.

Yukio was already pouring herself a fresh cup.

“Top me off,” she sighed.

“Dragon Lady giving you a hard time?”

“I might have just cut off my own head. I threatened to turn her in to HR.”

“Ouch…damn. Feeling your oats today?”

“No. Just feeling fed up.”

“You sure were in a good mood before.”

“That’ll teach me to look like I have a life.”

“I know, but still…you were glowing.” A reluctant smile toyed with the corners of Ororo’s mouth. “C’mon, spill.”

“I had a good day. So sue me.”

“You were out sick.”

“After a fashion.”

“You played hooky.”

“Don’t broadcast it.”

“No. I knew it. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. Bad girl. You didn’t bring me with you.”

“Next time.”

“You promise?”

“With sugar on top?”

“Male?”

“Maybe.”

“Anyone local?”

“Ladies don’t tell.”

“So that’s a yes.” This time Ororo didn’t restrain her grin.

“Don’t broadcast it. But I had a great day.”

“Was it long overdue?”

“Yukio, you have no idea.”
“Sure I do. I have a Match membership I’m gonna let expire in a few days. We’re talking ‘water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.’”

“That bad?”

“Worse.”

“Seriously?”

“The last one rattled off a mile-long laundry list in what he’s looking for in a committed relationship, then told me he had to go, his mom wanted her turn on her PC.”

“Yeah. No.”

“You feel my pain.”

“Sounds like a story that needs something stronger than coffee.”

“Seven more hours til happy hour. That’s six and a half hours too many.” She nudged Ororo playfully. “So it was good?”

“It was wonderful.” Ororo re-sugared her coffee and stirred it absently. “It was just…nice. I feel more complete.”


“It’s just…I don’t want anyone to pinch me.”

“Me either. Hate to see you two go back to scowling at each other on your way into the elevator.”

“Yukio!”

“It’s true. It’s like watching two kids in class throwing spitballs at each other and sending I-hate-you notes back and forth.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“It was worse. Mostly because you two are adults.”

“He started it,” Ororo mock-whined.

“Likely story.” Suddenly Yukio sobered, and Ororo turned to follow the path of her eyes.

Speak of the handsome devil…

Ororo tried but failed to hide her knowing smile as Logan approached, and he was having just as hard a time processing her appearance.

“Wow,” he muttered, eyeballing her like a dog salivating over a fresh steak.

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

“I’m outty.” Yukio waved as she took off, and neither of them spared her more than a glance.

“Hi,” Ororo repeated, suddenly feeling shy. A warm flush coursed over her, making her skin prickle.
“We covered that already.”

“I like the part where we said ‘Good morning’ better.”

“Stop that,” he chided her, but his lips twitched as he filled his coffee cup. “Glad ya made it in. My butt was draggin’ on my way in.”

“Awwww.” She didn’t sound sympathetic.

“Didn’t sleep much,” he murmured. “Don’t know why.”

“Fancy that. Might want to try a cup of warm milk next time. Or a bedtime story.”

“Gonna pass on the milk. That other thing sounds good, though.” Ororo cleared her throat. “That’s some dress.”

“This old thing?”

“Ain’t yer typical uniform.” His eyes were smoldering. Ororo wondered if the supply closet in the conference room was unlocked.

“I wasn’t feeling typical today.” They both straightened up and moved slightly apart when two of the young men from the mail room entered and made a beeline for the vending machine. Okay. This is awkward. Ororo was at a temporary loss. Fessing up to Yukio was one thing, but they had to be professional with everyone else in the office.

Which was hard when her first instinct was to twine her fingers through his and nuzzle his neck, to close in on the scent of his cologne. Sneaking off to his office was out of the question, and they didn’t have any “conveniently” scheduled meetings.

Logan wasn’t having any easier a time of it, staring at her. His fingers itched to stroke that uncontained, wanton hair, and it was all he could do not to abscond with her to a broom closet and mess her up some more.

It was just hard. Her body craved the feel of his, and his voice stroked her nerve endings. Damn it.

He took a different tack and talked shop.

“Got a client go-see. I hafta fly out on Thursday.”

“Where to?”

“Oldsmar.”

“All the way down there? What are they buying?”

“Three mirror plans and dental.”

“Nice.”

“Will be if they sign on it.”

“Hope they don’t flex it to death.”

“Won’t hurt us if they do. It’ll put more change in our pocket in the long run.” Ororo sighed.
“As long as they know that.”

“Of course they know that. It ain’t rocket science,” Logan argued, cocking a brow. Ororo bristled.

“I know that, but make sure they know what we can and can’t sell them. Don’t promise them miracles.”

“Ororo, I’m a broker, and they’re a multimillion-dollar sneaker company. Think I can offer ‘em a miracle or two.”

“Check the mandates.”

“Already did,” he said impatiently, and suddenly neither of them were smiling, flirting or otherwise. “I know how to prepare for a sale!”

“I’m not saying you can’t. I just hope there aren’t any complications…”

“Ain’t gonna be any on my end.” His tone implied that there could never be on his end.

She stood her ground. “I guess what I’m saying is that you shouldn’t make other departments or team members work that much harder to implement what you sell.”

“Bullshit,” he snapped. “That’s bullshit. It’s called job security, darlin’. You get paid good money to implement whatever me or any other broker or account manager sells for this company!”

“I also lose sleep reworking the rates every time we massage our standard plans to give them a deal.”

“It’s called being flexible!” He threw up his hands. “Try it sometime!”

“Oh, no, you didn’t,” she snarled. “You’re calling ME inflexible?”

“Yes! No!”

“You said yes first.” She turned on her heel, suddenly finished with the conversation. She wanted to drink her coffee while she was still in her right mind, not dump it over his head.

*

Before Ororo could cross the t’s and dot the I’s on her letter to Human Resources, she saw an urgent, red-flagged message from Selene in her inbox.

Subject: I think we need to have a discussion

Ororo snorted, then clicked Open.

I hope you won’t make a hasty decision following our talk this afternoon. I would hate to see this escalated to another department if we can resolve this offline.

“I bet you would,” Ororo muttered under her breath, still fuming over not just one, but two arguments that day, and it wasn’t even fucking noon. Her nerves were still raw and she was vibrating with stress, but she controlled the urge to hit “Send” on her letter, instead saving it as a draft. She minimized that message and instead finished reading Selene’s.

I know my style of management may seem...less than accommodating. I love my job, and I feel strongly about doing it right, and about the image we present to our clients. I don’t have a lot of patience for members of my team who don’t feel the same way I do. I’ve worked with you for some
That being said, I think you might have been right before, and that my decision to move you along to this branch to continue our work with the company’s northeastern market was presumptuous. I apologize for that; I thought I was offering you a better opportunity for growth.

Ororo’s heart hammered and she broke into a cold sweat.

Was the heifer trying to fire her?

Aw, hell, no!

Ororo’s fingers trembled as she went to the printer icon and clicked on it. Hard copies had saved her with Selene before. She went back to her original message to HR and added to it, copying and pasting in Selene’s note with more of her own narrative. *Now it appears my status with the company is being threatened, as well. I am not comfortable with my current place in this office, under my current supervision.*

She printed the whole thing and placed the hard copy into a manila folder, placing it into her own personal file in her desk. There. Let Selene tell her again that she didn’t manage her emails properly…

What shook Ororo up the most was that for a moment, she read the subject line in Selene’s message and thought that maybe she’d softened a bit and decided to be human.

“Never in a million fucking years,” she muttered under her breath. She blew a lock of her hair back from her face. It was beginning to bother her. She rummaged through her pocketbook, fuming, until she found her small brush and a large plastic hair clip. She yanked the brush through her thick waves and bunched them up into a Spartan knot, clipping all of it back except one of two tendrils that hung down the back of her neck. There. That helped.

The rest of the day trudged on at a snail’s pace. Ororo just wanted to go home, kick something, and consume a pint of chocolate ice cream for dinner. Or do anything else that would make this day seem like it never happened.
“Ice cream for dinner is a clear sign of Mr. Wonderful turning into a pumpkin at midnight. Spill. Got a guy acting like a fuckwit?”

“Hey…Scott?”

“Hm? Excuse me…?” He looked up in surprise from his screen as a feminine, familiar voice drifted around the corner of his door. He smiled easily up into Madelyne’s green eyes and nodded for her to come in. “What’s up, Maddie? What can I do for you?”

“Not much. I just happened to be headed down the hall to the elevator, and I noticed your door was still open.”

“My door’s always open,” he quipped.

“I know. Burning the midnight oil again,” she accused as she leaned back against the edge of his desk, crossing her lithe legs at the ankles. Scott admired how she looked just short of staring. She was stunning in a viridian green dress and strappy black heels. Madelyne wore her long red hair attractively cut in soft layers that reached just past her shoulders and framed her face. Her look aimed for “office elegance” instead of “sexpot.”

“Nothing new. I almost hate off-season renewals.”

“They don’t hate you. Money in your pocket,” she reminded him. “So what’s the deal? Why’re you here so late? It’s a ghost town out here,” she told him, motioning out his door into the hall. Scott sighed, sitting back and rubbing his eyes.

“I know. It’s no big deal. I don’t have anything I have to rush home for.”

“Nothing at all? Nobody at all?” she fished casually. She reached up and toyed with her fine gold necklace and set her briefcase down on the floor. If Scott was confused that she looked like she was abandoning her plans to leave, he said nothing. He leaned back in his seat and shrugged.

“Sit down. Take a load off, Maddie.”

“Works for me.” She took the rolling chair that was in front of his desk and moved it to the side instead, giving herself a better vantage point to peek at what he was working on. “Those don’t look like renewal quotes, Scott.”

“Sure they are,” he lied.

“Only if ESPN’s one of our new clients. And if they want the Celtics game score written into their policy,” she said demurely.

“Hey, I tried,” he said. “That’ll be enough out of you.”

“Bad Scott.”
“Nonsense. I’m a Boy Scout.”

“So was my kid brother. He was a little hellspawn.”

“Damn. My cover’s blown.”

“You couldn’t have been too bad as a kid.” Madelyne grinned at him openly this time. “Do you take more after your mom or your dad?” Scott’s smile faltered.

“My pop, I guess.” Scott went back to his typing in his second program window, making a corrections to a memo. Madelyne looked concerned.

“Bad subject? I’m sorry.”

“No…no, that’s okay. It’s hard, sometimes. He’s gone. It’s only been a few years. I’m officially an orphan.”

“Oh, Scott…God, I’m an idiot. I totally put my foot in my mouth. Next time I look like I’m going to ask a question, just hand me a bottle of ketchup.” Scott smiled again, shaking his head.

“Goober.” Madelyne threw a paper clip at him.

“I just didn’t mean to bring up something that would make you sad.”

“I don’t mind talking about him,” Scott told her easily. “That’s him.” He nodded to a framed photo next to his document easel. Madelyne automatically picked it up and looked between them for a resemblance.

“Same eyes. I love his smile, it’s definitely the same as yours. Is that your brother?” she asked, pointing to another collage frame of four candid shots.

“Yup. Alex. He’s still a pain in the butt. But I get to be the favorite uncle.”

“Nieces or nephews?”

“One niece,” he said, pointing her out in the frame.

“Gorgeous.”

“Yup. I’m not biased, or anything.”

“Of course not.” She handed him back his frame and sighed. “Go home. Work on that tomorrow.”

“Do you have to catch a train home?”

“Nah. I drove. I know the train’s cheaper than gas, but I just don’t trust them at night.”

“Can’t blame you,” he admitted. “No big deal to me, since I’m a guy…” Scott let what he was going to say falter, not knowing if he’d sound patronizing.

“No, trust me, I don’t take chances. If someone came at me for my purse, the most I’d come up with to do is hit them with my shoe. I’m hopeless.”

“Are you kidding? Not with those shoes. Those could put someone’s eye out.” Scott made the mistake of letting his eyes drift down to her stilettos and couldn’t stop staring at her legs, a perfect distraction in sheer hose, one of which was swinging back forth where she crossed them.
“Scott?”

“Hm?”

“Uh, you’re mouth’s…open,” she pointed out.

“Huh?”

She cleared her throat and smiled sheepishly. “I’ll get going. I just wanted to stop by, I hardly ever get to see you lately.”

“Different accounts. Meetings. Flying a lot.”


“You fly?” Her smile was bashful this time.

“I love it. I’ve had my license for about a year now.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Just another hobby.” The question of whether or not he’d ever consider flying with her lingered on her tongue, but she swallowed it back down. A voice in the back of her head chided her, reminding her not to move too fast. Madelyne inwardly shuddered when she remembered her disastrous date with Logan, knowing she’d poured it on too thick. The memory of the pink fuzzy handcuffs made her cringe. Did he really assume she was that easy? Just because she’d been bold enough to ask him out?

Still, if she had to admit it to herself, she had been a little forward. Madelyne could blame it at least a little on the holiday. There was something about Valentine’s Day that made her feel a little needy, maybe even want a little extra attention. Red roses made her wistful. She felt her biological clock ticking, but her brain cells had to win out over her ovaries.

Madelyne knew herself pretty well. There was too broad a margin for error, and it was too easy to mess things up with Scott if she tried to move too fast.

So she squelched the urge to cajole him and sighed. “I can see your busy, Scott.” She rose from her seat and discreetly wiped her palms on her skirt when she realized that they’d begun to sweat.

“You don’t have to run off,” Scott protested. “Look…give me a minute or two. Relax.”

“You don’t have to rush, take your time.”

“I will, but sit! Don’t make me feel guilty!” he nagged, but he grinned, showing off his dimples. Delighted, she sat back down. “I don’t want you walking out to your car alone.”

“You took the train?”

“Yup.”

“Forget that. I'll drive you home.”

“It could be out of your way, Maddie?”

The man was gorgeous, sweet, bright, and gave her the whim-whams.
“It’s not out of my way. But hurry up and log off, already!”

*

Halfway through the pint, Ororo realized it wasn’t helping. She recapped the melting tub of rocky road with the sticky lid and put it away just as the phone rang.

“H’lo?” Her voice was slightly muffled as she picked at a stray bit of nut caught in her teeth. Ali’s chuckle greeted her effort.

“What’re you snackin’ on?”

“Ice cream.”

“For dinner?”

“It’s medicinal. Leave me alone,” she grumbled.

“What’d he do?”

“Who?”

“Ice cream for dinner is a clear sign of Mr. Wonderful turning into a pumpkin at midnight. Spill. Got a guy acting like a fuckwit?”

“No,” she claimed. “Not really. He’s just working my last nerve, Al, and it’s stretching it to call him ‘my guy.’”

“Don’t listen ta her, Ali, she’s nuts over him,” Anna argued, and Ororo realized she’d been put on speaker. “Man’s fine, too.”

“How did YOU meet him?”

“Caught him at the gym. He’s got lotsa nice muscles, and a nice butt ta boot.”

“That’s not cool,” Ali tsked. “Two of you have been holding out on me. I’m supposed to be first in line for the good dirt.”

“I’m special,” Anna sniffed. Ororo rolled her eyes and snorted on her end of the line.

“Trifling heifers. Both of you,” Ali stated flatly. “Anyway, dust off your dancing shoes. Next Saturday, I’m gonna be at the club again with Neil, Lila and the rest of the band.”

“I could use a night out,” Ororo sighed, neglecting to add While I can still afford it. She wasn’t looking forward to the response from HR and dealing with Selene again. “I might drive down.”

“Yay!” Ali crowed.

“Bring somethin’ nice t’wear. We’re steppin’ out,” Anna told her. “How ‘bout that little red number?” Ororo shuddered.

“Nah. No red.”

“Why not?”
“I get in trouble when I wear it. I’m not jinxing myself.” Ororo lounged indolently in her navy blue pajama bottoms printed with clouds and lightning bolts. Her hair was still pulled back in its ponytail from earlier, but she’d loosened it, letting sloppy tendrils fall around her face in disarray. It felt good to relax in her toe socks and be a total grub. She wiggled her toes, enjoying the rainbow-colored knit.

“It’s your color,” Ali told her. “Your signature color. Don’t come out looking like the love child of an undertaker and the Unabomber.” This time Ororo snorted in earnest.

“Thanks, pal.”

“Saturday at seven. Drive down early. Plan to stay all weekend.”

“Why?”

“I have a barbecue to go to. I want you to come with me.” Ororo smelled a rat.

“No fix-up.”

“Ororo,” she whined.

“No fix-up. Do you hear me? None. En. Oh. NO.”

“Party pooper.” She tried a different tack. “Anna’s coming.”

“Goodie for you,” she said sourly as she carried the phone with her back into the kitchen and tucked the pint back into the freezer. “I’m not up for a cookout. Pencil me in for the bars.”

“Fine,” Anna sighed.

“You’re missing out.” Ororo wasn’t convinced. She was enjoying the warmer weather, but she wasn’t in the mood to talk politely with strangers over ribs and Kool-Aid.

“All right,” Ororo sighed. “Why so grumpy?”

“Work sucks,” she said. “In a nutshell.”

“What are you gonna do about it?” Anna plied.

“That’s up in the air. I might have to move on to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

Ororo braced herself. “Go back to New York.”

Ali whooped. “Shit! REALLY? ‘Ro, it’d be so great if you came back!”

“We miss ya, shoog,” Anna chimed in. “Why? Boston losin’ its gloss?”

“I have nothing here. Their market is pretty much the same, but I need to work with a different account manager.” She didn’t add Because the one I have now has gone psycho."

“Nothin’ worse than a bad boss,” Anna agreed.

“So you’ve had it, huh?” Ali confirmed.

Ororo sighed. “Yeah. I have.”
“You sound sad. Don’t fret. You’ll make the right decision. You know we’re in your corner.”

“So what about Logan?” Anna pressed.

“What about him?” she asked defensively, but she felt an ugly chill in her gut. Were they technically a couple?

They drove each other nuts. Sex wouldn’t change that… even really, really phenomenal, brain-scrambling sex. Guilt nagged at her. All right, he’d grown on her. He made her laugh. He hadn’t taken off running at the sound of her awful singing. He was cuddly. Scratch that. Logan was delicious. Still…

What was she thinking? In the grand scheme of things, weren’t they just reopening a one-night stand? It wouldn’t matter. Ororo could work anywhere with the profession she chose, but it was a question now of where she wanted to live. It wasn’t up to Selene anymore, and it shouldn’t have been in the first place.

Ororo jerked at the sound of Ali’s voice. “Ororo? What’s up? You still there?” She shook herself and snapped to attention. “So you’re coming, right?”

“Yup.”

“To the barbecue?”

“No!”

“I’ve gotta keep trying, right? At least you kinda have a man.” Ororo snorted again.

“You’ll meet someone.”

“Pfft…”

“Awww…c’mon. The one you should wake up and smell the coffee for is Cain.”


“Damn. Spit-take with Pepsi. Nice one, ‘Ro, but don’t kill her.” Ororo could hear Anna slapping her back over the speaker.

“He’s nice. He’d do anything for you. He hangs on your every word. He does that puppy dog thing whenever you come around.” Ali blew out an exasperated breath.

“He’s just too…too…” Ororo pictured Ali gesticulating and making her I can’t put my finger on it face. “You know what I’m getting at here. Cain’s just too ‘Cain.’ Yeah. That’s the problem.”

“Excuses.”

“So what’s yours, then? Logan’s not Vic. Does he seem like the cheating type?”

“How should I know?” Ororo sighed. A brief scowl pulled at her face. The possibility soured her. Ororo remembered Logan at the OptforWellth lunch with Madelyne Pryor grinning up in his face. Oh, how she longed to spill something down her dress.

Ororo wondered if Madelyne had the chance to make time with him before they’d rediscovered each other face-to-face. Madelyne was an attractive woman. Ororo couldn’t blame him for giving her his attention, but her feminine ego was slightly hurt that…what? Well, that he didn’t… pine over her. It
was a stupid expectation, and she felt silly, but that was it in a nutshell. Ororo didn’t want to want him if she couldn’t have him. Yet Ororo wanted Logan to want her. Badly. Insecurities and all.

What was she thinking? Where did that come from? Wasn’t she leaving?

Or was she? Could she? Ororo felt uneasy about her decision. What did it boil down to? Simple.

She wanted to stay, only if he wanted her to stay, or if something happened to sweeten the pot between them.

Giving him up would send them back to square one. They’d go back to being two people who had a one-night stand and then lost touch, and lost each other. Ororo hated standing on such tenuous ground. She almost hated that she could be falling for him even more.

They could fuck it up.

Logan spent the next few days fuming after their blow-up. Why was she so damned stubborn? And why did he end up being the bad guy?

She had the right to be upset about Selene’s drama and the threat she posed to her job, but Ororo didn’t have to turn around and take it out on him. He was minding his own business and trying to be sympathetic, and look what it got him. She was back to treating him like something she’d stepped in while she was wearing her best pair of pumps.

A voice nagged Logan that maybe it was his fault, in the long run. He’d pushed the envelope. He shat where he ate. Work relationships never worked, period. Logan wished he could wave his wand, sprinkle them both with pixie dust, and they would automatically go back to being two people who just had a one-night stand. Two strangers who lost track of each other and then moved on.

What did she want? Logan had dealt with women and their mood swings before, and he remembered Jeannie when she came home from a bad day, but Ororo confused the hell out of him. One the one hand, the look on her face screamed that he was roadkill; on the other hand, there was just that “thing” in her voice that women always tossed in there that said “Kiss it where it hurts, and make it better.”

Half the problem was the work they each did. It was like fighting on opposite sides of the border. He cared about the sale itself, and she cared about the dollars it took to make it happen on both ends. It was hard. Logan enjoyed his job well enough, and it certainly worked out for him; he had a sweet retirement portfolio and great benefits, had a nest egg saved for a down payment on a house in Cambridge, and he’d made a lot of great contacts in the event that he wanted to ever hang his own shingle. But it was hard. The business travel was killing him. Logan heard the airline safety guidelines and the instructions on how the seat cushion doubled as a flotation device in his sleep. He hated catching cabs to the airport at the crack of dawn and punching his info into kiosks, standing in line, and paying eight dollars for a Cinnabon and bad coffee.

Still, he was good at it. Logan was honest about the product he sold, but he was still enthusiastic about it. Clients loved his easygoing manner and his tendency to avoid double talk, or to couch the limitations of a stingy health plan in fancy terms. So when Ororo attacked him, he took offense. She might as well have called him a flim-flam man and then kicked him in the balls.

She’d made herself scarce, too. She took her meetings from her own phone and was getting her
lunch out of the office instead of going to the break room. He dropped her an email with “Can we talk?” in the subject line. No reply. He even got the notification that she’d opened it on his Outlook. That pissed him off. So the ball was in her court. If she wanted to play nice, they’d play nice.

But in the meantime…yeah. Logan missed Ororo.

*

Ororo’s stomach felt like someone made macramé out of it. Selene had been strangely quiet since she sent out her appeal to the HR office. She’d treated her with icy silence when they passed each other in the hall or the rest rooms. No love lost. Ororo wasn’t going to tip-toe around her any more than she had to; it had been part of her job description for too long.

She received an email back, saying that they’d opened up a review ticket and were investigating her complaints. That didn’t make her feel any better. Ororo wanted to throw up her hands and cry out, “Can’t we all just GET ALONG???” A statement of how appeals were handled was attached as a memo, as well as a contact list of personnel who reviewed them. Ororo felt her stomach roil more, now that her actions had a concrete effect, and that someone on the other end of her email knew how pissed she was.

So that was it. Ororo had thrown down the gauntlet, but that didn’t make her feel any happier. The rest of her workday was just a tense, hot mess. She practically sprinted to the elevator in her heels after she clocked out. She didn’t want to come back in on Monday. It felt like walking the green mile.

But in the meantime, there was partying that needed to be done, and Ororo was just the woman for that job. She packed her duffle with three changes of clothes, including a “little black dress” that had less fabric than a tea towel. She packed impractical shoes and chunky jewelry and obscene amounts of makeup, her remaining half a bottle of Lulu, pajamas, a doo rag to wrap her hair, and a few Ryan Reynolds DVDs to watch while they were hungover the next day.

She was just zipping it shut when her phone rang. Ororo muttered to herself and padded into the kitchen to answer it, not caring how bitchy her voice sounded.

“Yes?” She almost said “WHAT!”

“So that’s how underwriters answer the phone these days, huh? Just wanted t’holler atcha,” her father told her. He sounded amused, and Ororo felt silly.

“Hey, Pop.”

“Thought someone held you hostage. I haven’t heard from you in ages, baby girl. How’re things?”

“Fine.” Man, was that a lie.

“Fine?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. I bet. Listen, I was wondering when you’d be home. I’m gonna FedEx some things to you in the next day or two.”

“Like what?” Ororo leaned her shoulder against the fridge and crossed one ankle over the other,
“Don’t sound so excited about it,” her father teased. “Just a few things of your mother’s.”

“Oh.” She paused. “That’s nice.”

“Why? Don’t have any room?”

“No. I can make room.”

“There are just a few things I think you’d like to have. She kept a little scrapbook.” Ororo brightened.

“You’re sure you don’t want it?”

“I think you should have it. For safekeeping.” That really made her frown.

“Keep it safe from what?”

“Don’t worry about it. I want you to have it. There are also a few more of her things, a bracelet I found, a couple of blankets she knitted a long time ago.” Ororo was touched.

“I loved her knitting.”

“I know.” She heard her father smile and pictured it in her head.

“I was also wondering when you were gonna be in town again.”

“I’ll be in the same state again this weekend. But I’m going to Anna’s to hear Ali sing.”

“That’s nice. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I won’t get arrested.”

“Close enough.”

“What are you up to today, Pop?”

“Nothin’ new. Watched that Death At a Funeral movie. I rented that and some other mess with that Rock guy, whatshisname.”

“Dwayne Johnson.”

“Yeah. Him. It was okay. The one where he’s a football player.” Ororo chuckled.

“That one was cute.”

“It was too sugary for me.”

“You’re a man,” she pointed out.

“Maybe that’s the problem.”

“Yup.”

Ororo sighed.
“What’s wrong, baby?”

“What?”

“You sound down.”

“Stuff at work.”

“They messin’ with you?”

“Not so much ‘they’ as one person is. My boss drives me nuts.”

“She triflin’?”

“DEFINITELY.”

“You’ve got a decent job, though, don’t you, more or less?” Ororo shrugged.

“I dunno,” she mumbled.

“Tory…” he nagged. “C’mon, now. It’s a job.”

“I know, I know…” she rolled her eyes and kicked the fridge.

“What’s she doing to lean on your nerve?”

“If you go into her office with your lip poking out, looking like you’re not in the mood to take any of her mess, then that’s attitude. You’ve got to watch that. You let too much show on your face when someone’s messing with you, Tory.” Ororo felt herself pout, then checked it.

“But she IS messing with me.”

“She’s still the woman in charge.”

“She’s a mess.”

“Sounds like it.”

“She pressures me into moving out here in the first place, and now, she’s acting like she did me a favor, and like I’M not worth the effort she took to drag me to Boston. She said I’m distracted and unprofessional.”

“Are you focused on what you’re doing, Tory?”

“Of course! Pop, I live, eat, breathe, and sleep that job! And I don’t sleep much!”

“So sleep.” Ororo let out an exasperated breath. “That’ll make a job harder to deal with, if you don’t get your rest.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“You know. You always tell me you know when you disagree with me. In one ear, out the other; that’s what I get when I try to tell my child anything. Can’t tell ya nothin’.” She chuckled, picturing her dad rolling his eyes at her. “Hardheaded lil’ kid…”
“Where did I get that from?”

“Hmmph…”

“So anyway, I was looking into visiting soon, anyway.”

“You are? Sounds good. When are you thinking?”

“Sometime in the next couple of weeks. I need to scout around a little, and I’ll stay with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Scout around? For what?”

“Apartments.” She steeled herself for his reaction.

“Why?”

“I’m thinking about moving back to New York.”

“No!” he snapped. Ororo jerked back, confused.

“What? Why?”

“Don’t run away. Boston’s just as big and interesting a city as New York, with just as much action, just as many movers and shakers, and you didn’t give it a chance.”

“But, Pop…”

“C’mon now. Don’t let this woman chase you out of the office. Stand your ground. Take what she said to you with a grain of salt. She’s your boss, but she’s ‘not the boss of you.’ Understand?”

“Uh…no?”

“Don’t let her win. Go in there with your boots on and let her know that you’re doing your work. Make sure you’re documenting EVERYTHING that she’s said to you, any time that you feel she treated you unfairly. You’re not a wallflower or a door mat. Shoot, you’ve been sticking up for yourself since you were five.”

“I’m just tired of it all, Pop.”

“You don’t have to be. Instead of complaining about it, fix it.”

“I know.”

“Right. Time to zip my lip. The ‘I know’ and that tone of voice always means I should forget about it.”

“No. It just means ‘I know.’ You’re right. It’s all just a mess.” She changed tacks. “I’ll quit bellyaching. I’ll call you when I get in.”

“Sounds good.” His voice brightened. “Let me know what you wanna eat when you get here, and I’ll go get something.”

“We’ll just go out to dinner when I get there,” she suggested.

“Fair enough.”
“Good talking to you, Pop.”

“Hold up, hold up…are you planning on seeing somebody while you’re up here?”

Ororo made a face. “No. Why?”

“Don’t wanna impose if you already have plans with any male friends.”

“Nope. Just gonna make a date with my pop.”

“Don’t butter me up. You seein’ anyone?”

Ororo hedged. Fuck. What could she even tell him without sounding like she had her hand in the cookie jar? Oh, Logan? He’s just my man toy. She ran through her options in her mind and all of them sucked.

“Well…wellllllllll…”

“That sounds like a ‘Maybe I am.’”

“Wellllllllll…” Ororo tried not to grin.

“What’s he like?”

“Decent. Nothing serious.”

“I don’t want Mr. Nothing Serious to be the father of my grandchildren unless he’s got his butt together. Don’t fall for the okey-doke. You’re too old to be puttin’ up with any man’s mess. Your mama had me trained,” he boasted.

“You never gave Mama any mess.”

“TRAINED!” he boomed. Ororo cracked up.

“He’s nice enough. I like him. He makes me laugh and he has a job.”

“Okay. We can work with that. Still doesn’t mean I won’t be at that front door with my shotgun when he rolls up. I’ll give him a running start if I think he’s treating you right, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Make it a five-minute head start, at least.”

“Three if I’m in a good mood.” Then he thought of something else. “What’s this man of yours think about you moving?”

“I haven’t talked with him about it yet.”

“So he may never even end up on my doorstep.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You aren’t disagreeing with me.”

There was never any point in arguing with Pop.
Ororo felt that same heady excitement as she got ready in Anna Marie’s bathroom, which was formerly hers. They’d always gotten ready together whenever they had a girl’s night out, and she’d missed those sessions so much. Anna Marie added another six months to the lease once Ororo’s original one expired, and she was enjoying the apartment well enough, but she offered Ororo the chance to room with her if she had to move back until they both found better separate arrangements. It was a touchy subject between them when it came to Logan.

“Call him. Talk to him, sugah,” she nagged as Ororo made faces at herself while applying her makeup.

“There’s nothing to say right now that wouldn’t end up sounding weird.”

“Sayin’ yer sorry don’t sound all that weird t’me.”

“Why should I say I’m sorry first?”

“It’s called bein’ big about it. Ya shouldn’t have gone off on him like that.”

“He’s part of the problem I have with Selene and other people that I work with on every sale.”

“He ain’t ‘Selene and other people.’ He’s a nice guy, Tory.”

“And that’s another thing…he calls me Ororo now.”

“So? Ain’t like that’s a bad thing.”

“He always liked Tory before.”

“That’s ‘cuz it’s easier ta yell that out when yer gettin’ yer freak on,” Anna accused. Ororo spun on her, appalled, and threw her mascara wand at her as Anna Marie hugged herself, running her hands over her body emphatically. “Oh, Tory, TORY! Call me Daddy, Tory! Take it all, Tory! You like it! YOU LIKE IT! UNNGGH!”

“Must…kill…”

The phone rang, sparing Anna Marie’s life for another day. She snickered and ran to answer it, evading the tube of lipstick Ororo threw at her retreating ass. She squealed when she came back into the room with the handset. “Al’s on her way over!”

“Yay,” Ororo muttered as she finished putting on her earrings. She brushed back her hair from her brow and pulled the front of it back, letting the rest cascade down her back. She was in her little black number and it made her feel pretty. She smoothed lotion over her long legs, pleased that they were smooth enough to skip pantyhose and just wear her mule sandals.

“We’re stoppin’ at Monet and Everett’s, too, to check out the new baby before it’s her bedtime.”

“Ooo!” Ororo clapped. “Yay. I was hoping we’d see them this weekend.”

“Lil’ crumb snatcher’s gettin’ big, too. Looks like Monet’s been feedin’ her steak.”

“Aww.” Ororo felt wistful, but she nudged the feelings aside and zipped up her makeup bag.
She pondered her situation with Logan while she flipped channels, waiting for Ali to arrive. What they had was a fling. There was no other way to describe it. Maybe they were making things harder than they needed to be, or at any rate, she was. She was contemplating a move, they both traveled often enough with work to make it difficult to have a lot of time together, and all things considered, they were always pissed at each other. Ororo had been lucky that she grew up in a loving household. Her parents argued, but it was usually over predictable things that were resolved by the time her mother fixed their nightly bowl of popcorn and turned on “Happy Days” or “Hill Street Blues.” Her parents often said they loved each other, and Ororo remembered the gagging noises she used to make when they would kiss each other in front of her, but the memory warmed her now. They knew how it was supposed to be done. After they’d set that kind of example for her, Ororo didn’t want to settle for dysfunctional bullshit.

So that was it. A fling. Plain and simple. Something that had a beginning, middle and end that she didn’t have to fool herself into thinking was happily ever after. Logan was nothing like her father, that was for sure, and she wasn’t her mother by a longshot.

Anna heard Ali’s footsteps outside the door before she knocked, and she yanked it open to her friend’s happy squeal. They gave each other a rocking, stomping hug before both of them attacked Ororo. “ACK!” They grabbed her and jumped up and down. “I’m so happy we’re finally going out! You BITCH! Why’d you stay away so long?” Ali enveloped Ororo in a hug that almost hurt.


“Me too.”

“Enough of that Lifetime movie crap. Let’s go! Time’s a wastin’, and there’s a blue Cadillac margarita with mah name on it.”

* 

The visit with Monet went as Ororo would have predicted. Ororo draped her shoulder with the “urp cloth” that Monet offered her and held the baby, rocking her and gently patting her back.

“Ooh, someone smells sweet,” Ororo crooned. Therese gurgled and smacked her lips, teething her little gums against Ororo’s neck. “She weighs a ton!”

“I know,” Monet beamed. “She’s already regained her birth weight, and she slept four hours last night.” The proud mother had circles under her eyes and she was still wearing her maternity jeans, but she looked so happy that Ororo wished she were in her place. “I’m glad I took another two months of leave. I hate being away from her.”

“She still nursing?”

“Hell, yes. The kid gets that appetite honest from her papa.”

“Bless her heart.” Therese fidgeted and crammed her fingers into her mouth, indicating she was hungry. “She’s fussing. Want her back?”

“Here.” Monet offered her a binkie. “Give her a minute. I need to get myself a quick snack, and then I’ll feed her.” The baby took the binkie as a peace offering, chewing it noisily while Ororo cradled her, rhythmically patting her diapered bottom.

“You don’t like babies or anything,” Ali mused, chuckling.

“You hear your auntie Al talking smack about your auntie ‘Ro?” Ororo sniffed. “Don’t trust that
“crazy lady over there.”
“Every auntie this child’s got on her mama’s side’s crazy, that ain’t nothin’ new,” Anna argued.
“Hmmph.” Monet came out of the kitchen with a small plate of Triscuits.
“Want any?”
“Nah. We’re gonna take off and have something at the club. Wish you were coming.”
“I need sleep more than a white Russian right now. But remember me when she starts teething.” Therese waited until her mother managed to get one cracker into her mouth before she squalled around the binkie and spit it out.
“On that note,” Ororo decided, waiting for Monet to sit down before she handed her back the baby and the cloth, “we’ll take off, sweetie.” She kissed mother and daughter on the cheek and the three friends let themselves out.
“Where’s Everett?”
“Hiding at his brother’s, watching the Eagles game.”
“Nice.” They climbed into Ali’s car and headed to the club, managing to park in the crowded back lot just as someone pulled out of the space. Before they even stood in the line, Guido hailed them over and let them inside the rope. He beckoned to the cashier to stamp their hands. Ali hugged the enormous bouncer eagerly.
“What’s up, Mr. Clean?” She rubbed the top of his shining, bald head. He snickered and smacked her butt.
“Bout time you dragged your skinny ass in here, Beverly Sills. Get settled in and get a drink now before we run out of the good stuff. There’s a shot special.”
“Meh.”
“Mike’s Hard Lemonade?”
“Nah. Lemony anything makes me phlegmy. I’ll get my drink on after my set.”
“Say hi to Cain. He’s been watching the door all night for ya.” As if on cue, the huge bartender caught her eye from the counter and nodded, grinning. She smiled and waved, keeping her eyes on Cain but talking out of the side of her mouth to Guido.
“Don’t encourage him, damn it. It’ll give him the wrong idea.”
“Bullshit. You’re the one with the wrong idea, blowin’ the guy off.”
“He’s. Not. My. Type.”
“Ain’t got enough felonies or baby mommas lurkin’ in his closet, huh?”
“Hush up, you.” Ali smiled extra widely for Cain and was subtle about stepping on Guido’s foot as Cain turned away to fill some mugs at the tap.
“C’mon,” Anna nagged. She dragged her toward the table that Ororo snagged, planting herself on the stool to save it. Just as Anna went to join her, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She met Lila’s mock
glare and emphatic tap of her watch.

“Do you KNOW what time it is?”

“It’s all good,” Ali told her cheerfully.

“All good she says…oy.” Lila slapped her forehead. “Must…stop…fist of death…”

“Where’s Neil?”

“He just finished the sound check a few minutes ago. Might’ve been nice if you were here.”

“I had to rally the troops. You remember Tory and Anna?”

“Your better halves. Hi.” She shook their hands and whistled. “Do your mothers know you’re out dressed like that?”

“Out past curfew, too,” Anna chimed in.

“Stick around long enough and I’ll give you a spanking.” Lila didn’t make her preferences a secret, and they were diverse. She winked one kohl-lined eye at her and smiled with plum-stained lips. Ali snorted.

“Don’t come on to my friends.”

“There ain’t no rings on their fingers,” Lila shrugged, but she wrapped her arm around Ali’s neck in a semblance of a headlock. “You know you’re my one and only, anyway, snookums.”

“Nice try.”

“Well, I have to try,” she shrugged, kissing Ali’s cheek and smacking her ass, taking a page from Guido’s book. “Get ready. Then get your ass up there.”

Ororo and Anna ordered their drinks, which Cain said were on the house, and they made the rounds on the dance floor while Ali chatted with Lila and Neil. The DJ mixed his last set with nineties oldies and house music that Ororo was grateful for; she could only have so much Gaga shoved down her throat. It felt nice to cut loose, but she was lonely amidst the crowd. It was the kind of night that would have been nice with Logan at her elbow, sharing tequila and limes with her, feeding each other soft tacos and watching the sunset. The memory made her ache.

Men stared approvingly at the short black dress and the assets it revealed, its halter cut showing off her shoulders and toned back. The flirty black sandals took her legs from sexy to criminal, forcing every male eye in the bar, and even a few female ones, to glance up, up, and up. A young man with spiky hair asked her to dance, and she declined politely, even though he was relatively cute. It wasn’t like she would be cheating even if she’d accepted…would it? But when Ororo mulled it over, if it were Logan in the bar, and if another woman flirted with him, staring at his ass, bought him a drink, then she’d want to tear her ass up.

It felt good to go out and still feel desirable and attractive, especially in the wake of her divorce. If Victor didn’t want her, then no one else would, either, an ugly thought that nagged her for months. It took a lot of soul-searching to believe in herself again, and Ororo didn’t want to settle for being a wallflower.

“Does your pop know you’re out in public half-nekkid like this?” a familiar voice accused behind her. Ororo grinned and spun on Monica and her fiancee, Luke, thrilled to see them. She hugged each
of them tightly and stood back, admiring how nice they looked.

“Someone’s glowing.”

“We’re in a good place right now, sister. Guess who saw the little strip turn blue?” Ororo clapped her hands over her mouth, then removed them to applaud.

“Shut. UP!”

“You’re going to be an auntie again,” Monica chuckled. Ororo reached over and punched Luke’s shoulder.

“Look at you! Not the least bit sorry, are you?” Luke laughed and rubbed his superficial injury.

“Ow… Nope.”

“You’re the first one we’ve told,” Monica confessed. “We’ll get a special delivery right around Valentine’s Day.”

“Wow. That’s…wow.” Tears sparked at the back of Ororo’s eyes, but she shook it off. She hugged Monica again and said, “I’m so thrilled. This is a happy time.” She eyed Monica’s glass that she’d set on the table. “That better be a damned 7-Up.”

“You know it!”

Monica made the rounds, and Ali and Anna took turns squealing over the news, followed by much hopping down and floods of questions. The night had a happy glow that it lacked before, even though Ororo grew wistful as it passed.

*

Ali and Lila rounded up their night with a long set that had the crowd on their feet. By the time she finished, she was glistening with sweat and dying of thirst.

“Bottled water,” she croaked at Cain when she made her way to the bar. He eyed her sweat-slick skin and the way her damp, strawberry blonde hair clung to her neck. Ali wore black like Ororo did, but she chose a flirty handkerchief top that left her back bare, and a pair of low-rise, boy-cut jeans that she’d “tattooed” with different patterns using a Sharpie pen. He enjoyed her untamed, wanton look as she leaned over the bar, handing him her five and reaching for the drink and her change. She grinned up at him. “How you holding up?”

“The natives’re gettin’ restless,” he muttered.

“Man up, pal.”

“How long are you guys staying?”

“We’re closin’ the bar, bud! Ororo’s only in town for the weekend, even though we’re trying to convince her to make it permanent. Give her the puppy dog eyes and tell her why she has to stay.”

“I ain’t good at puppy dog eyes,” he argued as he filled a pitcher with Heineken.

Ororo wanted to argue with him. He always gave Ali that exact look, and it drifted over his face now. She wanted to pity him, but it was up to him to step up and get her attention.
But Ali got her second wind once she hydrated herself, and she was off. She dragged her friends onto the dance floor, and they stayed there through several sets. Ali was in rare form. She flirted incessantly, much to Ororo and Anna’s amusement. Occasionally Lila followed her lead, and they resorted to their old routine of dancing with each other somewhat provocatively, just for the attention.

“Girl’s a mess,” Monica tsked.

“Yep,” Anna agreed as she sipped her rum and Coke. “Gonna be hatin’ life in the morning.”

“We’re gonna get going,” Monica piped up. “My feet hurt and I’m tired out.”

“Get used to it,” Ororo reminded her gently. She kissed her cheek, pleased that she’d had the chance to catch up.

“Don’t overdo it,” Monica cautioned. They left just as the last few stragglers made their way in for the night.

The girls stayed til last call, and they filed out into the lot after a last trip to the rest room.

“Let’s get a taco,” Anna suggested. “And Ah’ve gotta sit down again. Mah dogs are barkin’.”

“Shit! I left my purse inside,” Ali claimed. She started back toward the door. Ororo tsked.

“Don’t take too long!”

“It’s got all my shit,” Ali told her helplessly, throwing up her hands. Her face beseeched them to be patient. “I’ll just be a sec.” She tottered back in, buzz still intact. Ororo and Anna sighed, shaking their heads.

“She’s killin’ me.”

“Tell me about it. Better yet, don’t.”

Ali sweet-talked Guido into letting her back inside. “Ya know I don’t give anyone special treatment, right?”

“Who said I’m just anyone?” she pouted.

“Make it quick.”

“Pushover,” she teased. Ali made a quick pass of the pool room and stage. No joy. She checked the coat check desk and came up pouting. “Where is it?” she hissed under her breath.

“Whatsamatter?”

“I can’t find my purse.”

“Where did ya leave it?”

“I’d have it if I knew that.” Cain set down the glass he was drying and came out from around the bar, still wearing his short apron. He was sweating and there were dark triangles in amusing places on his dark tee. His face was flushed and his eyes looked tired. “When’re you getting outta here, big guy?”

“When they let me. Gotta reconcile my drawer, put everything away and clean up.”

“Lackey.”
“Brat.”

“I’ve gotta pee.”

“Al, we’ve gotta close up!” Guido kicked out two more stragglers who were having their last smoke on the patio. One of them whistled at her, but she ignored them. Not finding her purse put a dent in her sense of humor.

“Gimme a minute.” She headed back to the johns and ran into the first stall to relieve herself. The bathroom floor was scattered with bits of torn paper towel and damp toilet paper squares that landed in the backplash, plastering it to the tile. “Ew.” Ali didn’t want to know the horrors the floor had seen or imagine what she was stepping in.

“Cain?” Put this on your cleaning list,” she slurred while she washed her hands. She didn’t hear him answer her, which perturbed her. Ali exited the bathroom and decided to head for the patio. On her way out, she bypassed Guido, ducking past him while he spoke with the DJ. Ali reached the outdoor smoking area and searched around for her purse, cursing that the overhead lights had been turned off, leaving only the dim glow of the street lamps that shone from the back end of the parking lot. The patio was shadowy when it was poorly lit, and Ali shivered.

“Damn,” a voice murmured, scaring her out of her skin, “lookin’ good, mami.” Ali spun on its owner, hand planting itself against her chest.

“Shit! Don’t do that! It’s not nice to sneak up on people,” she scolded. The man smirked, enjoying her discomfiture. Her annoyance lifted a little when she noticed that he was striking, dark-eyed, dark-haired, and a tall, lean drink of water. Her pulse raced with the way he stared at her, but she was still on edge at being surprised.

“What’samatter? Lost somebody?”

“Lost something,” she clarified. “My bag.”

“Need help looking for it?”

“It’d be nice if someone offered.” Her voice was disdainful; she figured Cain would have made more of an effort, but he disappeared. She knew he had work to do, but he would have better luck hustling her out of the bar for the night if he’d help her find what she came back for in the first place. She mentally rolled her eyes. Men…

“I can help you find what you’re looking for,” the stranger suggested. He gestured for her to walk ahead of him, and she smiled pleasantly as she continued to scan the seats around the patio and the outside bar.

She never expected his rough hands at her back, shoving her. “What the f- LET GO OF ME!” His fingers snapped around her wrist, spiking her adrenaline, and her muscles tensed. Her buzz evaporated in an instant, but she was still off-balance, and he quickly took advantage of it.

“Saw you dancin’ out there. All freaky an’ shit.”

“LET GO!” Her cry was hoarse and desperate. She struck him, which amused him at first.

“Like it rough, mami? We can play rough!”

“I’m not playing with you, you freak!”
“You can be my freak…” He was barging into her space, pushing up against her, and she smelled vodka and Red Bull on his breath. Her heart hammered, and his hands began to hurt, chafing her skin where he continued to grab her arm. He shoved her toward a partition with even worse visibility than the rest of the smoking area, and she continued to hiss out warnings and call out for help.

“CAIN! CAAAIIIN!” she screeched, forcing out the first name that came to mind. Guido worked security at the door, but she figured if he hadn’t heard her, he might be at the front door.

“CAAIN!” she half-sobbed. Her admirer sneered, then slapped her with his open hand, making her reel. Her lip quivered and she fought to get away from him, raking his forearm with her long nails, kicking out at his ankles with her high-heeled sandal, but she accidentally kicked it off.

The back door burst open and Cain barreled out of it like a locomotive, nostrils flaring and eyes wild.

“AL?”

“CAIN, GET HIM OFF ME!”

“No you didn’t! The hell you did!” Cain barked, rushing at the man who was still trying to hold her down. When he realized Cain was serious, he loosened his grip, then straightened up.

“The fuck, man? She’s a tease!”

“NO, SHE AIN’T!” Cain roared. His voice boomed over the thin strains of music still playing in the bar’s kitchen, drifting outside, and Ali realized that was why he hadn’t heard her before. “GUIDO! GET THE FUCK OUT HERE!”

Guido ran outside, no less lathered than his friend, and his eyes narrowed behind his thick glasses.

“What’s goin’ on out here?”

“This asshole put his hands on Allison.”

“I didn’t…want him to,” she sobbed.

“Sshh,” Cain ordered, stepping between Ali and her attacker, shoving her protectively behind him. He jacked the man up by his shoulder, driving him back against the partition. He shouted in his face directly. “She’s smaller than you, ya fuck! That make ya feel like a big man? I’m a big fuckin’ man myself! Wanna step ta ME?”

“Shit!” he yelped, holding up his hands. Cain rammed him back against the wall.

“How’s that feel?” Cain mastered the urge to drive his fist through his face. “Sneakin’ up on a woman,” he sneered. “Pussy.” He shoved him away, then sent him flying with a kick to his ass. The man stumbled and fell, nearly faceplanting in the gravel. Guido looked just as pissed.

“Hope you like goin’ ta court, buddy,” he told him, offering a false, tight smile as he lifted him up by the arm and dragged him back inside. “Trespassin’ on public property after hours, creatin’ a disturbance, harrassin’ the patrons…” he ticked off the list, his voice growing lower the farther away he got. Ali dissolved into gulping, angry sobs.

“All I did was come out for my purse,” she insisted, limping over to her abandoned shoe. She sat on a nearby bench and shoved her foot into it, then winced.

“What’s amatter, Al?”

“I twisted my ankle. He shoved me.”
Cain hovered over her protectively, stooping down to look it over. His touch was gentle as he lifted her foot to look it over. “Can ya move it?”

“Yeah, but it hurts like a bitch.”

“Sorry, kiddo.”

“Why? You didn’t do it,” she said bitterly.

“You okay?”

“No. He scared the crap out of me.”

“I know.”

“I’m still scared,” she cried, lips quivering. He took her hand in his large one and lightly squeezed it. His brown eyes were full of concern and sympathy, and being near him made her feel safe.

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere, kiddo.”

“Good.”

Cain let her hang onto him while she hobbled back toward the entrance, but her hisses of pain and impaired walk made him scoop her up gruffly instead, carrying her as though she weighed nothing. Cain brought her to the stage and sat her down, and Guido led a hysterical Ororo and Anna inside, letting them rush over to her.

“What the fuck happened out there? Ali, are ya all right?” Anna demanded.

“We heard you scream,” Ororo told her, sitting down next to her and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “You’re cold.”

“I was hot a little while ago, until I was out there long enough to stop sweating.” Her palms were icy, too, from her fright, something she didn’t want to admit to her friends. Cain had disappeared briefly, but he re-emerged from the kitchen with a makeshift ice pack that he made by filling a Ziploc bag. He brought over a chair and gingerly propped her foot up on it, then laid the bag over her now swelling ankle. “Bastard made me break a nail.”

“It could’ve been worse,” Anna scolded. “What were ya doin’ out there alone?”

“It’s my fault,” Cain told them, looking ashamed. “I shoulda done a last sweep out back. And yer gonna hate me, but guess where I found yer purse?”

“Where?”

“Back by the time clock. I found it when I went to open the safe. Lila must’ve left it back there for ya so no one’d mess with it.”

“Great,” she groused, sniffling. She knew her eye makeup probably looked like hell.

“That’s what I wuz doin’ before I heard ya yell,” Cain explained contritely. He still held her hand, and he was stroking it with his thumb. Ororo suppressed a smile when she saw Ali curl his hand in hers more tightly in response. “When I heard ya, I came runnin’. My heart about fuckin’ stopped.” Okay, Ororo thought, perhaps he wasn’t the most poetic guy on the planet, but he meant well.

“Thanks for coming.” Gratitude filled her voice, and her blue eyes glistened with more tears. Cain
looked shaken.

“I’d never let anything happen to you.” His voice was husky and gruff, as though he couldn’t handle the thought of her getting hurt.

Cain walked them back out to Anna’s car. Ali held back a moment while Ororo and Ali climbed in. “Go ahead and warm it up,” she told them. “Give me a minute.”

“Might as well,” Anna sighed, but she understood and waved her on. Ororo’s lips curled as she fiddled with Anna’s CD deck.

Ali moved away from the car a few paces, still slightly wobbly. Her ankle throbbed.

“Get off yer feet when ya get home,” Cain nagged. “Go straight ta bed. If ya need a ride to the doctor or a prompt care clinic in the mornin’, gimme a call, awright?”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. Her eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed, and her mascara was smudged, but he reached up and tucked a stray lock of her hair behind her ear where it tried to stick to her remaining lipstick.

Ali felt a frisson of warm calm fill her, but she asked him nervously, “I look like hell, don’t I?”

“Nah,” he lied, reaching up to wipe away a tear track from the corner of her eye. She leaned into his touch. His smile was boyish, coaxing one from her.

He wasn’t expecting her hug or the strength with which she clung to him. She smelled good; the scent of her shampoo and light, flowery perfume wafted up to him, teasing his senses, and she felt soft and pliant against him. Cain flushed, feeling heat rise up into his face; even his ears felt hot.

“Liar,” she scolded into his chest. His palm stroked her back, which was temptingly, dangerously bare and silky smooth. He cleared his throat and backed away, releasing her before he began to want what he knew he couldn’t have.

“G’wan, Al. G’night.”

“Night.” She was strangely flushed, too, and she ducked quickly into the car. He watched them drive off, not leaving the lot until they were all the way out of sight. He waved at them, not realizing that Ali shared the same random thought that ran through his mind.

What the heck just happened here?
Chapter Summary

Games. Ugly, dirty games.

Author’s Note: I know where this story is supposed to go, but I just can’t push myself to finish it. I’ve been away from writing for a bit in favor of listening to my art muses instead. Feel free to check out my DeviantArt portfolio, which is chock-full of Ororo sketches and paintings.

I’ve spoken with a few of you about this story. I tried to keep the feedback in mind as I came up with this, but it’s been hard to put words to screen. I hope it’s enjoyable, or at least relatable.

Ororo couldn’t put her finger on why she felt so much like crap. She could mark it up to the aggravations of moving. She sat back on her haunches and mopped the sweat from her cheeks after tearing off another brown strip of heavy duty tape. Her apartment was still a mess of unassembled boxes and newspaper-wrapped knickknacks, and the task in front of her seemed monumental. It was always difficult making a big change.

This one felt like it was swallowing her up.

Anna was a better friend than Ororo felt she deserved. She agreed to let Ororo stay with her for a few weeks in her old apartment once she took over the lease, renewing it in her own name. Ororo already paid for a storage space for two months to buy herself some time to find a place back in New York that wouldn’t charge her more than a deposit, first month, last month, an arm and a leg, and her future firstborn.

She felt wistful yet resigned now as she made her trip to work. Her feet had worn a groove in the pavement from riding the same bus or red line, stopping at the same Greek café for spanakopita, and getting her nails filled at the salon on the corner. She’d miss the playbills and posters for upcoming shows plastered around scaffolds and theaters and the smell of Chinese food wafting through vents as she walked past Andy’s Joke Shop. There would be no more window shopping at Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market on her lunch breaks or strolling past Boston Harbor on sunny, windy days.

Boston was never truly home, but it grew on her, having its own flavors, personality and history. Some of the cosmetic similarities were still there; people didn’t make eye contact in the street, everyone walked fast, and women wore their purses under their coats. The odors of the subway tunnels still mingled with the aromas of vendor stand hot dogs and bus exhaust, and the noise from the street warred with the cacophony of voices in her head screaming that she was making a grave mistake.

She still avoided Logan, and that dratted man was heeding her unspoken wishes too well, giving her space she didn’t want. Her body craved the feel of him and the low, soothing rumble of his voice. Her blue eyes searched him out wherever she went, darting toward random short, broad silhouettes and dark profiles in the street; it was instinctive and automatic. She paused in tearing off a sheet of bubble wrap, feeling mentally and physically exhausted.
“Why am I doing this?” she muttered. “Why?” The packing material had no answers for her. She tossed it aside and rose stiffly, kneading her neck. She felt cramped and knotted up and craved a glass of iced tea. Her body’s internal clock also told her that it was dinner time even before she glanced out the window, noticing how far west the sun shifted across the sky. Long shadows darkened the pavement, and her Saturday suddenly became too short.

*He could call. His fingers weren’t broken.* There was that wheedling voice again. Ororo filled a plastic pink tumbler with coarse ice chips, listening to her freezer rattle as she leaned her palm against the lever on the door. She wouldn’t miss her crappy appliances, but with her luck, her next apartment’s would be just as bad, and her current rent would afford her a place with the square footage of a shoebox. Moving back to her old office and her old position came with a pay cut, something she knew Selene gloated over when she sent the memo to her Outlook distribution list on the day before. The posting and transfer request for Ororo’s job went online the same morning, making the last traces of Ororo’s regret evaporate. It was definitely time for a change of scenery. Goodbye, OptforWellth, Cambridge site. She was done.

She pulled some chicken legs out of the freezer and had them sizzling in the frying pan within minutes, but her stomach lurched slightly at the sight of the pink meat.

*Weird.*

Getting sick was the last thing Ororo could afford. She rummaged in her cupboards for some Airborne and collapsed onto her sofa shortly, tea in hand, where she clicked the remote to a *Firefly* rerun marathon.

*What the hell was wrong with that woman?* Logan slammed his wrapped fist into the heavy bag, feeling slightly satisfied at the clink and squeal of the chains suspending it from the ceiling. She was doing it again.

Tory was deserting him, without giving him any notice or even discussing it with him. She’d yanked the rug out from under him. *Again.* It made no sense. Logan reran the events in his mind like a timeout replay.

He unlocked his office door and set his briefcase on his desk. Hung up his charcoal gray blazer. Checked his phone messages. Stepped out to get some coffee and refilled the empty pot. Stopped by Scott’s desk and made him pay up on the bet they made on the outcome of the Paquiao fight. It was an unremarkable day.

Except that he couldn’t stop thinking about her. There was still a trace of her scent in his bed linens. He buried his nose in the pillows, wishing he could stay wrapped in her essence. He still heard her husky chuckle in his ear and felt her caress, and it drove him nuts. She seldom left her office; Logan chanced asking Yukio if she noticed Ororo leaving the building for lunch and received a shrug for his troubles. His feet always paused in her corridor, but he always turned away. It was too tempting to invade her space.

He booted up his Outlook and sorted his inbox according to sender. All of Selene’s messages were red-flagged, which didn’t surprise him.

He choked on his second gulp of coffee when he saw “Underwriter leaving AMT” in the subject line. “Damn it.” Logan opened it and felt his gut sink. This was it, that “off” feeling he’d had all week. It had culminated in this, dashing him in the face. Logan never wanted to wake up to this kind of rejection before they even got off the ground.
It’s with regret that I announce that the Cambridge site’s senior underwriter, Ororo Munroe, is now transferring to the New York office in her former capacity. I’ve enjoyed having her on my account management team, and we’ve shared a successful working relationship. Her last day is on June fifteenth. Please join me in congratulating her on her new opportunity. Logan ignored the rest of the message and the remaining nonsense about how her replacement was pending.

It took him a few minutes to digest the news and make sure he’d read it correctly. Logan reeled and sat back in his seat, shaking his head. “I can’t fucking believe this,” he muttered. “It’s like that?” He closed his eyes and felt gravity seize him for a moment, tightening his chest. She’s leaving.

That left him here, slugging it out at the gym in some attempt to sort out his head. Logan didn’t feel like chasing her or calling out the dogs. The ball needed to stay in her court. He was tired of wondering what he did wrong. He uppercut the bag again and breathed in the scent of his own sweat.

The hell with it. Logan called bullshit. When was she going to tell him? Where did his opinion figure into all this? Better yet, where did she get the balls to leave him again without so much as a by-your-leave?

That was it. She was leaving him again. That was what rubbed him raw and left his heart feeling like someone scraped it out of his chest. Didn’t she feel what he felt? Didn’t she know how he felt? Did she give a damn? Logan knew he didn’t imagine her passion and how hard it rocked him from the moment they’d crossed paths again at the conference. Those weeks between their first encounter at the beach and that boring meeting fell away in an instant. The noise around them faded away and he drowned in her blue eyes, hearing nothing but her voice, remembering how husky and rich it sounded in the dark.

Logan growled and sent the chains squealing again, feeling his muscles burn with the impact. “Why?” he muttered. BANG. WHAM. BANG. The bag didn’t answer him.

Being polite and giving her room wasn’t helping him any, was it? Logan was resigned. It was time to quit waiting for an invitation and just barge his way in.

* 

“Do ya want me to come up and help ya pack?” Ororo toyed with the phone cord, untwisting the knotted, stiff coil idly.

“No. I’m fine. I got rid of a lot of stuff in my last move. I don’t have too much besides my furniture.”

“That’s a relief, at least.”


“Guess it’s time ta come back then, baby girl. Speakin’ of which… how does short, dark an’ handsome feel about all this?”

“Please, Anna. I don’t know. I didn’t run it by him for permission.”

“Maybe that wouldn’t have been a bad idea, Tory. Dointcha think he might feel a little hurt?”

“It wasn’t like that between us.” Ororo felt a pang of guilt at the lie. What was it like between like
them, really? How was Tory supposed to measure what they had?

“Ah call bullshit. The heck it wasn’t, Tory. Anyone could take one look at ya an’ tell you have it bad for that man. Bad. Ah’lm talkin’ full-on doodlin’ his name in yer notebook with little hearts, watchin’ him walk out of a room, droppin’ his name into random conversation, bad.”

“I don’t need this right now, Anna.”

“Yeah, ya do. Better ya listen t’me bitch now and actually take somethin’ useful from it, then come cryin’ back t’me that ya made a mistake after you’ve crossed the state line and unpacked yer boxes. It’s not too late to change yer mind, Tory.”

“I just can’t, Anna. I can’t just go back and beg for my job back. Everything’s already arranged.”

“So unarrange it. Rearrange it. Nothin’s set in stone, yet.”

“I already terminated my lease. They prorated me the last week’s rent.”

“Sheesh… sometimes, yer too damn efficient and organized, Tory.”

“I don’t like wasting time.” Ororo sighed and sat back on her kitchen stool. “Anna?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it still okay with you that I’m staying with you? This isn’t just about me and Logan, is it?”

“Girl, Ah already said it was fine. C’m on back. Only thing I’m sacrificin’ at my end is a little closet space. It’d be nice not ta hafta go to the movies alone fer a change. Ali misses ya, she said ta tell ya ‘What’s up?’ the next time Ah heard from ya. Said she wants ya t’come ta her housewarming.”

“Housewarming? Why? She moved?”

“Girl, she moved in with Cain.”

“The fuck…?” Ororo grinned and moved to her dinette’s chair for a better listen. “Say it isn’t so!”

“Ah’d be lyin’,” Anna chuckled, tsking. “They shacked up. Only took a month.”

“I can’t believe it. I just can’t.”

“Ah’m kinda happy for her,” Anna mused.

“I’m happy. I’m just… wow. I can’t believe it. Ali and Cain. They have nothing in common.”

“Shoot, that doesn’t matter, nowadays. He holds doors, pulls out her chair, rubs her feet and cooks dinner. Boy’s gainfully employed and doesn’t have a criminal record, and he worships the ground she walks on. Figure if he can put up with her PMS and drama, he’s gotta be Mr. Right.”

“Okay. There’s that. And the teddy bear collection.”

“And the pink bathroom.”

“And the shoe collection.” Which took up two closets.

“She stopped talking shit about Arthur, too.” Ororo’s jaw dropped.

“It’s a miracle.”
“It’s true love.”

“Thank the good Lord.”

“All right. What time do I hafta expect ya?” Ororo sighed again, then swallowed back a sour little taste in her mouth.

“Late, I guess. Depends on traffic. I told the movers to come at eight. Depends on where they manage to park.”

“How far have ya gotten with yer packin’?”

“I have just enough clean clothes left out and my perishable food still in the fridge. Most of my pictures are already off the walls.”

“Sounds dismal.”

“Moving sucks.”

“Yeah. Well, kiddo, I miss ya. Don’t think I don’t wanna have ya back here. Ah miss mah homegirl. Just seemed like Boston was gonna work out. Ah still think ya need ta rethink things with Logan. He seems like a good man, unless ya left out pertinent details, Tory, but it just seems like ya care about him.”

“It’s not worth it to ponder that now, when I already made up my mind.”

“Yer always allowed ta change yer mind. Right. Ah’ll shut mah yap. Love you, girl.”

“Love you, too, Anna.”

“See ya in two weeks.”

*

“Yeah,” Logan barked at the sound of a rap on his office door.

“That how you greet company?”

“Yer not company. Yer just here ta put more work on my desk,” Logan reminded Scott as he sauntered into his office, hands stuffed into his dress slacks’ pockets.

“What? Maybe I just wanna see what time my bro’s closing up shop for lunch. You wound me!”

“I haven’t even checked my inbox yet, but I’ve had the little alert envelope flyin’ across my screen all morning, Summers. I know half that shit’s from you.”

“Well… so what if it is,” Scott admitted, smirking. “C’mon. Open it later.”

“What’d ya send me?”

“Nothing interesting, except for the AMT attachments for the Westchester County implementation. You’re the one who sold ‘em the six preferred plans, buddy.”

“If I already made the sale, why do I need the attachments?” Logan’s brows knitted together. Scott
“I dunno. Maybe because they sent along some new hire demographics that they didn’t show us before you met with them.”

“Shit.” Logan felt the headache creeping up the back of his skull, threatening to ruin the rest of his afternoon. “What kind of demographics are we talkin,’ here?”

“Cobra retirees and more preexisting conditions than you can shake a stick at. It shouldn’t change much. They just want some language written into their policy riders.”

“Run it by Legal,” Logan growled.

“They bought preferred plans. Legal won’t wanna review it.”

“They’ll have to, depending on where they want the language in the shell. They aren’t self-funded.” Logan leaned back in his chair and cracked his knuckles. “Better yet, kick it back to Selene. She’s the account manager.”

“She kicked it back to you.” Logan threw up his hands.

“Battle ax.”

“Soon to be Mrs. Battle Ax. Did you hear the news? Pierce popped the question.” Logan rocked back in his chair.

“Yer shittin’ me.”

“Nope.” Scott shook his head.

“Talk about Hitler and Eva Braun.”

“What? They seem happy together.”

“They’re just… smarmy. Pierce has something stuck up his ass, and ya need a tractor ta pull a needle outta hers.”


“Hope their wedding registry includes a tractor.” Scott snorted.

“Don’t leave that image in my head. I have to meet with her about our next trip.”

“Nevada?”

“Yup. Gotta meet the group’s benefits coordinator and work with the Vegas Client Services team to go over their state mandates.”

“Don’t lose too much money playing the slots at the airport.”

“I could never get into gambling. Betting on a fight is one thing, but at least I can take a crack at which guy has the best chance of getting the knockout. Everything else is a waste. I’d rather spend my money on drinks at a good sports bar or pay for it on Pay-per-View.”

“Ya live a safe life, Summers.”
“At least I’ll live long enough to regret it.” Scott sighed. “C’mon. Clock out. Where do you want to eat?”

“Eh. I dunno… nah. I’m good. I’ll work through.”

“You’re flaking on me?” Scott threw up his hands and shook his head. Logan’s stomach agreed with Scott, snarling up at him for a pastrami on marbled rye. “Take a break. It’ll all still be here when you get back.”

“See all these?” Logan gestured to his stacked inboxes. He’d given up on trying to organize any of it; binder clips, sticky notes and red post-it arrows that said “Sign HERE” mocked him. “These are going to start having babies any minute. My email’s about to blow up, and the tech support guys keep naggin’ me that I’m hogging up all the bandwidth on the server.”

“So quit hoarding old emails.”

“Every time I delete one, I need it the next day. I don’t like to throw anything out.”

“You’re your own worst enemy, man.”

“G’wan. I’m good.” Logan waved him off as Scott started backing toward the door, tapping his watch.

“Last chance.”

“Tomorrow.”

“All right.” Scott turned to leave, then doubled back at the doorway. “Logan.” He looked over his shoulder into the hall, then lowered his voice. “Have you talked to Tory?” Logan blanched. He punctuated his long-suffering sigh by flicking his pen across his desk.

“Talk to Tory about what?”

“The fact that she’s putting a handful of states between you right when things were getting interesting?”

“Interesting,’ he says. Shit.” Logan groaned and rubbed his face. “It’s bullshit. What the hell am I even gonna say to her? She’s an adult, Summers. It ain’t like she has to ask my permission to leave.”

“Nope. Sure would be nice if she mapped out her exit strategy with you a little, though.”

“Exit strategy. Nah.” Logan leaned back in his chair and folded his burly arms across his chest. “Don’t even go there, Summers.”

“People keep in touch when they relocate.”

“I don’t want a pen pal.”

“You do want her.”

“I don’t want to waste my time. Life’s short.”

“And it’s lonely. And you don’t meet a woman like Ororo Munroe every day. Logan, she’s good for you.”

“Sure. Sure, she is.” Logan shoved himself back from his desk and tucked his hands behind his head.
“Scott, from the moment we met, that woman’s turned my life friggin’ upside down. She blows hot and cold. She’s anal and a control freak. She’s… friggin’ bossy. And here’s the thing, Scott, she’s already walked out on me once. She just tiptoed out the door. No business card, no instant messenger handle… nothing.”

“Maybe she thought she was doing you a favor the first time around. And it doesn’t matter. We were leaving Mexico, anyway.”

“It’s just bad form!”

“Men do it all the time.”

“Not this man. Don’t give me that shit. A favor. That wasn’t any damned favor, Summers. You don’t show a man the night of his life, and… mark him, practically, like she did me, and then just tiptoe out the door.”

“You snore. I doubt she had to tiptoe all that quietly,” Scott scoffed.

“Fuck off.”

“What did you expect back then, Logan? If she had stayed, it wouldn’t have made a difference. She still would have potentially been a ‘pen pal.’”

“This is different. Scott, she’s under my skin. It would’ve been better if I’d never met her.” Scott frowned and shook his head. “It was easier when I couldn’t put a job title to her face. She was just a name in my inbox. There wasn’t all this drama.”

“Bullshit.”

“You don’t… you don’t do what she did, and then just walk away. Twice.”

“What did she do?” Logan leaned forward in his chair and sighed, giving Scott a hard look.

“She owned me from the word go.”

* Logan came home from work in a black mood. He kicked his door shut behind him and slapped his sack of take-out onto the counter, glad to have the rest of the world out of his face for the next ten hours. He despised working so late that he didn’t have enough time to unwind and empty his thoughts before crawling into bed, setting the alarm, and doing it all again. He was the same hamster running around in the same wheel…

Logan crammed an egg roll into his mouth, tearing off half of it as he checked his messages. His stomach graduated from growling to snarling and pacing its cage; Logan cavalierly ignored it and tackled his inboxes, wrangling with the regulatory staff and legal department for the better part of the afternoon. Logan heard their suggestions with a jaundiced ear; it all sounded like nagging after a while, and like they were telling him how to do his job.

It would’ve been better if I’d never met her. His own words echoed in his head.

She was leaving again. Logan knew the drill from being alone too long; that keen of a loss was raw, but familiar. He dug in the bag for the tiny packets of soy sauce and tore one open with this teeth while his machine told him he had three new messages.
“…received at three-fourteen… PM…” Logan wondered who was calling him at that hour of the day; all of his friends knew what times he worked, and they could reach him on his cell.

“Logan, it’s Gayle. Hey. Just wanted to see how you were doing. The kids asked about Uncle Logan again, and I figured they were right, that I might as well touch base.” There was a slight pause. Her voice sounded sheepish. “We miss you. Guess I was just wondering how you’ve been doing, like with your personal life. I know you’re a workaholic.”

“Pfffttt… yeah. TODAY,” Logan told the machine. He anointed the rest of the egg roll with the sauce, practically coloring the filling black.

“I know it might be hard for you since you lost Jean to even think about meeting someone new. I guess… I just hope you’re not holed up in your apartment. Don’t spend too much time alone. And the thing is… Logan, if you could come out to see us this weekend, I’m having a little get-together at the house, and I have this friend who would love to meet you—“

“Nooooooooo,” Logan protested as he punched the fast forward button. “Sorry, Gayle.” His life was complicated enough, and Logan loathed blind dates. There was a reason why they were “blind.” With everything that was going on in his life – and what was wrong with it – Logan didn’t have the patience to make small talk over salad and tiramisu.

Logan and Ororo had never done the “small talk” dance, with all the awkward silences and safe topics. They clicked. The chemistry was instant, and her heat consumed him. She knew him, how he liked to be kissed, or where on his body her touch would most drive him wild. They could enjoy companionable silences, speaking with looks, able to read each other’s eyes… souls.

BEEP…

“It’s Scott. Hey, I know I already talked to you earlier, but I wanted to leave you a message, more to remind myself. My kid brother Alex is planning a camping trip next month when it warms up a little. Let me know if you’re interested.”

“I’m game,” Logan muttered. He could stand the change of scenery, if anything. Logan hit delete and opened up his carton of beef lo mein.

BEEP…

“Jimmy, it’s John. Just wanted to tell you you’re an uncle again. Eight pounds, ten ounces, and the kid’s a redhead. We named him Jamie. We can already tell he’s going to be trouble.” Logan grinned. “Let me know when you can come out. We’re leaving the hospital tomorrow.”

“Jamie!” He chuckled. Bastard. Sure, name the kid after him and blame Logan when he turned out to be a little terror. John always loved blaming Logan for everything, after all. It still gave him a warm glow. Another little nephew to spoil was good news, something Logan needed.

He grew wistful. It was so damned hard, every time he visited his kid brother, when Logan would see his kids and wonder what having them with Jeannie would have been like. Once in a while, Laura would look up at him, feeling his stare, and the puzzled, bashful smile and mischievous look in her eyes would pull at him, tightening his throat. Gailyn and Joey had the same effect on him, and Logan felt like a heel for not visiting more often. It hurt so much, still so badly after all this time. Jean still haunted him, left him aching and bleeding from an unstitched wound. Logan’s view of the horizon disappeared behind a black fog. The future of his life with her, of the family they would have had lost its focus, forever blurred and unreadable. The dream still yet breathed, but its pulse was faint, barely a murmur. In sleep, he still reached for her, still heard a feminine voice teasing him, but
the reality enveloped him brusquely, coldly at daybreak when he rolled over and felt the empty pillow beside him.

Ororo lent that faint pulse new breath. The clouds obscuring his vision of the future parted slightly, and the sunlight teased him but threatened to disappear every time he dared to hope... Logan didn’t want sun-kissed, constantly shifting clouds. He wanted to step fully into the light, hand in hand with his own ever after. Ororo’s fleeting scent in his pillows belonged there, but it was fading too quickly. She was leaving before they could explore what they had, leaving him with too many questions and what-ifs.

Logan resisted the urge to open his work laptop, deciding on leisure instead of after hours catch-up on his inbox. A cold Molson called to him, and he propped his stocking feet on the coffee table as he read his mail and that day’s Globe. His solitude felt too quiet; he remedied it with his iPhone, plugging it into his speaker dock. Oldies rock filled his apartment as he tidied his kitchen. Mundane chores took their turn nagging him one at a time. Logan bagged up trash, collected his discarded clothing where it lay in corners or draped over furniture, emptied the kitchen sink and dishwasher and threw out old junk mail. He mused that his home couldn’t be considered anything more than a bachelor pad. Despite framed family photos occupying side tables and his corridor walls, the homey touches just weren’t there. Logan couldn’t think straight amidst the clutter, and his fingers itched to tackle bigger tasks.

He confronted his closets next, rearranging the racks, bringing forward his short-sleeved polos and guayaberas. He reconsidered them a moment, then moved them back, pushing away the memory of salty air and balmy heat, and long, slender fingers unbuttoning his collar. Logan extracted his sweaters, contemplating whether it was warm enough to pack them away in the lidded Rubbermaid boxes Jean had bought for that purpose; nothing worse than getting another month of rain once he had his coat dry cleaned.

He went through his shoes, arranging them back into pairs, deciding to discard a pair of flip-flops that had seen better days, when he noticed the large cardboard box. He peered inside the top flap and hesitantly pulled it into direct light. He sighed at the familiar contents and torn remnants of packing tape. Jean’s things, the box that Gayle mailed him. That familiar darkness welcomed him back, enveloping him as he slowly began to empty it, reverently setting each item on the floor. It still hurt, a stinging cut rather than a gaping wound. The novels, dog-eared to her favorite parts. Three pristine skeins of yarn, still neatly speared with her blue crochet hooks. Issues of Redbook, Women’s Health and Marie Claire, stamped with her name and address, mocking him that she still lived there. Her favorite, comfy chenille slippers; he stroked them wistfully. The travel case of makeup that she didn’t really need. Logan emptied it completely, noticing the faint scent of Chanel, unburying treasures he’d forgotten about. Jean’s wedding set was already tucked in a metal storage box under his dresser where it wouldn’t haunt him. He contemplated the perfume, at a loss; he could send it back to Gayle, if she was interested in it. He lifted out two filmy scarves that he vaguely remembered Jean wearing, wondering why Gayle hadn’t kept those, too.

A small, flat object unwound itself from the sapphire blue scarf and hit the floor. Logan frowned at the small, sealed, lumpy white envelope. His own name peered back up at him, scrawled in Jeannie’s handwriting. He turned it over and tore open the flap, and his fingers found the small, white plastic stick, one end capped with a clear protector. The blood drained from his face as he saw the two fine blue lines in the tiny window.

He dropped it. His world spun as disbelief clogged his throat. Logan shuddered and rocked back onto his ass, and his shaking hand reached up to cradle his too-heavy head.

He couldn’t stop the hot, futile tears when they came. Months tumbled over like falling cards,
burying him with grief that was too fresh. Jean’s words came back to him, a too-brief encounter at the breakfast table the day before she left.

What would you think about starting a family?

It’s on my to-do list.

What if we moved it to the top of the list?

He’d shrugged over the edge of his coffee cup, making too-short work of his scrambled eggs.

We’ll see, baby.

His graveside sobs echoed forward in time, burning their way up from his throat in the silence of his room. Her scent was gone. Her laughter was gone. All that remained of her were photos, barely tangible reminders of her, and the contents of that box.

*

There it was again… Ororo exhaled through her nose, long and slow, but nothing was helping that weird little bubble of nausea that plagued her since she woke up. “Ugh,” she muttered, wondering why she needed this new problem, perched atop the mountain she already had. She took a cautious sip of her herbal tea infused with ginger, hoping it would calm her gut. Dry toast for breakfast was as big a risk as she was willing to take, and she brought her bottle of Tums tablets to work with her, munching a couple while she teleconferenced with the Phoenix office, placing her phone on mute.

“…that should wrap up the implementation of the new flex plan in the western market. I’m pretty excited to introduce it to the white space states once the shells are approved. See what you’re missing out on, Ororo?” Ororo shook herself from her daydreams and turned her speaker back on.

“Pardon? Oh. Sure. All the fun’s passing me by. All the more for you, Donald.” She heard his snarky smile as he spoke.

“We know where you live,” he teased. “Might send a few implementation packages back to New York with you to price out in case you get bored.” She heard Selene’s hollow laughter in the background, and her stomach roiled again.

“Don’t want you getting bored,” Scott chimed in dryly. Him, Ororo would miss.

“I’m shopping on Amazon as we speak.” Scott chortled, but Donald and Selene’s laughter sounded more strained. Good. Bite me. “What time is the meeting over again?”

“We will miss you,” Donald offered.

“We will miss you,” Donald offered.

“It’s been a pleasure working with you, sir.”

“All packed?”

“Still need a few more boxes. I’m almost ready to go. It’ll be hard to leave Boston.”

“Will it?”

Ororo rubbed her temples and restrained herself from sighing out loud. His voice sounded coarse and gruff; she’d nearly forgotten that Logan was on the call.

“It’s always difficult to say goodbye and start a new chapter,” she offered blandly.
“Guess it depends on what you thought you missed when you wrote the last one, Tory.” Ororo blanched. Damn it, there was her pet name. He always had to bait her when they weren’t alone.

The mere thought of being alone with him again made her hunt for her running shoes. She couldn’t do it, she just couldn’t…

…go one more minute of this damn meeting with her stomach acting so disagreeable. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she told them, voice husky and uneven as she excused herself. She hit the mute button on her phone and darted out of her office. Her heart fluttered and she broke out in a cold sweat, dodging two guys from accounting and the third floor receptionist as she beelined to the rest room.

A quick scan of the four stalls found feet in only one of them, to her relief. She hoped it wasn’t anyone she knew as she angled her way into the second one and kicked the door shut behind her. She braced her hands on the seat, paused a moment, and retched violently into the bowl, no doubt everything she’d eaten for the past twelve hours. Ororo sank to her knees and reached for a handful of toilet paper, swabbing at her clammy forehead. A few moments later, her stomach decided she wasn’t finished, and she jerked back up for a second round.

When her head stopped spinning, she flushed and hobbled to the sink, no easy feat on stiletto pumps. Her reflection wasn’t her friend. Her skin had a slight green cast to it and her eyes were watery and red-rimmed. “What is wrong with me?” she muttered aloud. The occupied stall swung open after a second flush, and Ororo remembered she wasn’t alone.

“You okay, Ro-Chan?” Ororo splashed a little cool water on her face as Yukio approached. She handed Ororo a handful of the coarse recycled paper towels in an attempt to help. “You look rough, sweetie, and that didn’t sound too good. You headed home?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Hope it’s not a bug.”

“It’s just my stomach. Might just be stress belly. I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“Stress makes you puke? Isn’t changing jobs supposed to fix that? I swear, Ro-Chan, I thought for a moment you might be preggers. My cousin used to just barf her guts up like that when she found out she had a baby on the way.” Ororo paled. “Better get an EPT,” she suggested.

“Shit…” Yukio’s eyes widened.

“What? I was joking. Ohmigod. Shoot. Are you pregnant?”

“Shit.”

“You said that already.”

“Oh, God, Yukio. Oh, God. This is just… oh, God.” Mind-numbing shock and bewilderment rooted her to the spot, and her skin broke out in a clammy flush. Pregnant. Yukio took her hand and squeezed it, giving her a calm look and pragmatic nod.

“Right. Let me go get the EPT. I have an extra one in my bag. Just had a close call this month. We won’t talk about it,” she decided as Ororo gave her a side-eye and some neck sass. “Seriously. We won’t talk about it.”

“Giiirrrrll…”
“I’ll be back in a second.”

“Just bring it to my office. I’m not doing it now.”

“Don’t leave me in suspense!” Yukio swatted her.

“Don’t smack someone who just threw up. I might not be finished.”

“Nah. You’re finished. Trust me. There’s nothing left in that stomach of yours. That was foul. Go. Fix yourself up. Put your makeup on. I’ll bring up the stick in a few minutes.”

“I’ve got to finish my conference call.”

“That’s rough.” Yukio gave her shoulder a squeeze before they separated. Ororo tried to walk more sedately toward her office than she’d left it. She dove into her purse as the meeting wrapped up, digging for breath mints and makeup.

“…think we lost Ororo,” Scott hedged. “I’ll make sure to include her in the minutes.”

“I’m here, Scott,” she chimed in as she found her Bare Escentuals compact and brush. She took a pitifully shallow sip of tea and popped in a breath mint, feeling slightly more human. “Go ahead and send them to me, that’s fine. Was there anything else? Is the group adding any more lives or a retiree tier?”

“We already covered that,” Selene mentioned on a sigh. “Retirees over sixty-five with COBRA. It’s in the policy language already.”

“I’ll price it out. Effective in July, correct?”

“Correct.” Ororo squelched another bubble of nausea. She damn well wouldn’t miss her snippy, tight-assed boss.

“Works for me.”

“Logan, I’m sending you the updated shell in a minute, so you’ll have it in case they want to add on that plan.” There was a pregnant pause on the line. “Logan? Yo?” Scott’s voice sounded bewildered and amused. Ororo frowned as she dusted a little powder over her pallid cheeks. “Is he still on the call?”

“I think we can wrap it up,” Donald announced cheerfully. “Strong work. Have a great weekend, everyone!”

“You too,” Ororo replied politely. She hung up the call and turned off her speaker, sighing in relief. If she never had to participate in another phone conference, it would be too soon. She turned away and continued fixing her makeup; behind her, the door clicked and swished open. She smiled and blurted out, “Oh, thank God, Yukio. You came here just in time, did you bring—“

“Did I bring what?” Logan grumbled. Ororo fumbled with her lipstick, scrambling not to drop it, but it hit the floor anyway. She whirled in her wheeled chair, and there he was, staring her down. Her adrenaline spiked and her fingers suddenly felt ice-cold.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” she told him.

“Oh. Great. Am I intruding, darlin’?” His expression was bland, but his eyes bore into hers, searching for her secrets.
“Uh… no. Not… really.”

“This a bad time?” He wandered into the room anyway, and leaned against the edge of her desk, folding his burly arms across his chest. Ororo’s mouth went dry.

Damn him for looking so good, and for making him miss him so much with one look. He smelled the way she remembered – and the way she liked – and he skipped his blazer, settling for a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her fingers itched to loosen his silk tie and to stroke him, but she straightened up, crossing her leg neatly and keeping her hands folded in her lap.

She exhaled through her nose. “No. It’s fine. What’s on your mind?”

“I was gonna ask you, Tory.” She didn’t correct him, even though it was tempting. Letting him get too close wasn’t a good idea when she was planning to leave, but it was so damned hard. The closer he came, the stronger the current between them came, drawing her in.

“Nothing much. Nothing new.”

“Ya know I hate this, right?”

“Do you?” she asked casually, nodding slightly and giving him a brief shrug. He smirked and shook his head, and he ducked his face for a moment. He scrubbed at his nape before he stared at her again.

“That’s it? We weren’t gonna talk about this?”

“I didn’t know how much of a discussion we needed to have. I’m moving out of the state. I don’t know how much notice I should have given you, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Us. Our situation. This.”

“Our situation. Ah. That’s what we’re calling it.” Ororo winced. “Can’t even call it a fling? At least that makes it sound fun.”

“Sorry. That sounded bad.”

“It sounded shitty,” he corrected her. “Tory…”

“It’s hard when you call me that,” she told him. “It’s almost too personal.”

“We got past the whole ‘too personal’ thing a while ago, I thought, when ya came to my place. Ya didn’t mind a little familiarity then.” Her cheeks warmed with the memory of how his skin felt against hers, tangled in his smooth sheets.

“I’m not sure where it fits in now. I’m moving, Logan.”

“I know that. I just don’t know why.”

“Boston might not be the right fit.”

“Ya haven’t given it much of a chance.”

“Its winters are too cold.”

“And you’re going back to New York. Try again.”
“I haven’t made that many friends here.”

“Scooter. Yukio. Me. And, hmmm… me. And me. Don’t forget about me.”

“You count once.” Her lips twitched.

“That’s where you come in, darlin’. Do I count at all?” Her shoulders slumped and her brows drew together. She was weakening, and his eyes were probing her, making it harder for her to make excuses.

“We had a little fun.” They had a lot of fun. “We get in trouble whenever we try to mix that with business.”

“Who said we were mixing it with business?”

“Things always have a way of getting a little carried away whenever you visit me in my office,” she pointed out. “That gets in the way of work a little, don’t you think?”

“We get work done,” Logan said slyly. A wolfish smirk curled his lips, and his eyes began undressing her. Ororo felt dangerous tingles run up and down her nerve endings, and the room suddenly felt too hot.

“Things haven’t been the same since I came here, Logan. It’s not you.” His eyes narrowed tellingly.

“Don’t say it’s you, either.”

“I’m not. But it is. I’m different. I used to be able to handle the hustle and ballbreaking stress of this job just fine before in my old office. I’m floundering in this one. Selene sees it, and that’s why she’d treating me differently than she did before.”

“Selene’s a battle ax,” Logan pointed out. “There are other account managers ya can work under at this site. Why didn’t ya look for other positions here?”

“Underwriters don’t just get up and quit everyday.”

“That’s how ya got here, if memory serves, Tory.” He took up all of her space, coming all the way around to her side of the desk, forcing her to look up at him. She could feel the heat radiating from him, and damn him, smell his cologne and natural, masculine tang of his skin.

“I already took the offer.”

“So it’s set in stone, then.”

“That’s how it works.”

“That’s not how we work.” Ororo saw something red from the corner of her eye, and she glanced quickly at her doorway, seeing Yukio arriving with the EPT. Ororo’s eyes widened in panic. Yukio, to her credit, froze, mouthed Oh, shit! and backed away from the door, darting back down the hall before Logan noticed anything was amiss. “You okay?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Ya seem a little off, darlin’.”

“Logan… sorry. I’m just tired. I’m stressed. And y’know, Logan… I just don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know how to describe where we’re at. If it were you, and you’d gotten an offer, a great
offer at another site, would we be having this discussion?"

“You tell me. Truth, darlin’, if ya wanna know, is I’d have known where I stood if ya came to my
office in that scenario and wanted to know how we would make this work. I’d been flattered as
hell. I’d know ya cared. Ororo’s eyes flitted away guiltily. “I’d want ya to be honest with me and tell
me how you felt.”

“If you were the one leaving, and if I said I didn’t want you to go, would you still go?” She wanted
to turn away, knew the question was cowardly, but she stared him down.

“I’m not the one leaving.”

“Doesn’t matter. Answer the question.” She folded her arms and raised her brows. “You can’t expect
one thing from me and then not let me expect the same thing from you.”

“If it were me, Tory, I couldn’t leave you.”

The air between them was charged with tension. Ororo opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t.
She shook her head, but he nodded.

“It’s not up to me to change your mind.”

“But you could. You could, Tory, because ya’ve got that hold on me, and I’d want to know how we
could make things work.”

“Is… is that what you’re asking me, James?” Her voice was quiet and slightly unsteady.

“Ya really wanna know what I’m asking you, Tory?” His eyes had a dangerous glint, and he
straightened up from her desk, turning on his heel. Ororo panicked, thinking he was leaving her, but
he briskly shut her door, just shy of slamming it, and she heard the lock click with a little dip in the
pit of her stomach. Oh, boy.

She stood, even though her knees felt slightly weak. “Think about how this will look,” she urged
him.

“It’ll look like we’re having a meeting. We have meetings,” he reminded her. She swallowed
roughly. He eliminated the space between them and pulled her to him; his large hands felt warm and
strong, and his arm was wrapped snugly around her waist. It was so tempting to just envelop him
fully and give in to the need to touch him. She ducked her face away and her hand settled over his
wrist firmly with the intent to free herself, but she felt his gentle fingers caress her cheek. She leaned
into his touch instinctively. “I’m asking you if you think what we have is worth staying for, Ororo
Munroe.”

“It’s not that easy, not as easy as you’re trying to make it sound.”

“It’s only hard because you’re makin’ it hard, sweetheart.” She felt the faint sting of tears threatening
to undo her, but she shut her eyes and shook her head, turning from him. “I want ya to quit running
away from me. I want ya to take a look at what we have between us and tell me it isn’t right, that we
aren’t great together before ya leave me.”

“I’ve never run away from you!”

“Like hell. I could smell yer perfume in my sheets when I woke up in that hotel room, alone.”

“What would you have done? Gotten my number? Skype? Email? Added me to your Facebook? I
never thought we would see each other again, Logan, and it was so hard to be with you like that, and to want you so much. You felt too good and too right, and I was never going to see you! You were just a memory of something amazing that I could never have, and I couldn’t stay and try to make excuses or promises to you. I’d only just met you. I didn’t expect you to be Prince Charming after one night. Having continental breakfast together or driving each other to the airport wouldn’t have made one bit of difference. It would have hurt even more.”

“It would’ve made all the difference in the world, darlin’! Ya wanted a clean break? Would’ve made all the difference in the world if you just said which company ya worked for, and we could have picked up where we left off.”

“You don’t know that.” His hand caressed the dip of her lower back, and she toyed with his tie. Keeping her hands off of him was proving impossible. He was touchable, and infuriating.

“I would have looked for you. I wanted to see you. You marked me, darlin’.”

“I was just a one-night stand. That’s all I would’ve been to you.”

“Never.” He shook his head solemnly and kissed her cheek, a sweet brush of his lips that made her shiver. She laid her fingers over his mouth to stop him from continuing; her control hung on by a thread. “I’m not him. I’m not your ex. I won’t waste your time, I’ll never take ya for granted, and I won’t break your heart if ya let me in.”

“I know you won’t.”

“Then stay.” There it was, that word again, which recalled his embrace and a lazy morning of getting to know him over old movies and omelettes. Logan stroked her hair, held back in its tidy French braid. He longed to mess her up, which was nothing new. She looked buttoned up and uncomfortable, but her blue eyes evoked the memory of white beach sand and brilliant sunsets. Ororo had been his escape and his refuge, and she was planning to run away from him.

Her words dashed his hopes. “I can’t.”

“Ya mean you won’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I ain’t got time for sorry, Ororo.” He released her, and her body cried out in protest, wanting his warmth and strength back. He turned his back on her, and she felt resigned when the door closed after him.

That was that.

It was a relief. It was done. And it felt all wrong.

*

That afternoon found her floundering through the rest of the day, and her stomach wasn’t any more cooperative after a meager lunch. By three, she was half-running to the rest room for round three, dodging two clerks and one intern to get to the third stall.

“That didn’t sound good,” one of them remarked from the sink.

“That’s rough.”
Ororo ignored them. Dizzying waves of nausea found her hugging the bowl; she leaned her forehead against her hand, catching her breath. After what felt like a minute, something slid into the stall under the door. She peered down at a small brown paper bag.

“Use it now,” Yukio called to her from outside the door. “Put your mind to rest, kiddo.” Ororo sighed. It had been a lousy day, and it wasn’t getting any better.

Five minutes later, she left the stall and set the bag down on the counter as she washed up and rinsed out her mouth. Yukio watched her with sober, expectant brown eyes.

“What’d it say?” Ororo glanced at her hollowly and passed her the bag, hand shaking. Her friend took out the little white tester stick and read the window. One faint blue line was slowly darkening beside the other solid one in the pane. Yukio’s eyes widened.

“Oh, shit.”
Baggage

Chapter Summary

Heh, heh, heh…

Drama? Yes, please.

“Damn, girl, you’ve got a ton of shit packed up in this tiny space,” Anna griped, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. She fanned herself, flapping out the collar of her baggy tee. “We’re not even half done!”

“I made a Goodwill run the other day,” Ororo argued as she rolled a wine glass up in a piece of bubble wrap. “There’s less stuff here than there was before.”

“That sounds like a tall tale. There ain’t more stuff anywhere than there is here right now, girl.” Anna waved futilely toward the sea of boxes flooding Ororo’s living room. “This is gonna take all day.”

“Ali and Cain are coming,” Ororo told her placatingly. “More hands will help.”

“Good, because I ain’t haulin’ that couch downstairs.”

“Cain can practically handle that himself.”

“I would’ve helped ya hire a mover.”

“You’ve done enough subletting my place for me these past few months, Anna.”

“Your plants have missed ya. I ain’t got a brown thumb, ‘Roro, but they haven’t been as happy with ya out of town. That spider fern of yours is droopy.”

“Aw. Poor babies.” Ororo felt wistful as she scanned her apartment. She’d attempted to make it comfy, but it was never home. Not really. There was nothing keeping her there. She wouldn’t miss the noisy garbage disposal or the weird brown rust water stains around her bathroom ceiling. She wouldn’t miss her proximity to the subway tunnels and the noisy commuter traffic, because she’d be taking it with her, damn the luck. Ororo spoke to a property company about one of the few units she could afford in a crumbling old brownstone, mere blocks from Central Park.

This place lacked warmth. She seldom entertained there. She hadn’t built her family there. Her dreams didn’t live within these walls, and her future had itchy feet. She couldn’t see herself staying for so little…

She’d packed up her photo albums already, including Nate’s baby album. She felt a bubble of regret over the trip she’d made to the Fed Ex store a few days ago to mail Monet the box of maternity clothes; it was like Murphy’s law. The morning sickness was off the hook. Ororo could seldomly hold anything down. One wrong smell, and she threw up. Watching someone eat something her stomach didn’t agree with, and she threw up. Taking the stairs too fast made her throw up. The shaky rumble of the subway made her throw up. Remembering her last encounter with Logan and the disappointment and anger in his eyes made her queasy and depressed.
Every breath she took held his scent. She heard the low rasp of his voice in her ear when she succumbed to sleep and first woke, hating to deal with the day without him. Her body remembered the snug cradle of his arms and welcoming heat. She didn’t feel whole.

She called her OB/GYN, Dr. Reyes, and set up a checkup, wincing when her receptionist asked her how Victor was doing. It had been so long since she’d even gone for so much as an exam. Ororo couldn’t stand the office with its cheery art prints of women holding babies, much like the neonatal ward of the hospital. It evoked too many memories, so many of them bitter. Her arms only held her child once, and they’d stayed empty far too long.

She didn’t want to hope too fast or hard, but the little spark occupying her abdomen wouldn’t be ignored, nor, to her dismay, would it be unloved. She wanted it more than air, more than her life, and it scared her to feel that strongly so soon. She’d gazed down at her belly, running a cautious hand over it. “Why now?” she asked it, then sighed. “Why him?” Some low, matter-of-fact voice inside of her demanded, “Why not him?” She ran down a mental list of why not’s.

They drove each other nuts. He was stubborn. He loved to argue with her. He jumped to conclusions. He was possessive. He had no sense of decorum when it came to public places, including a weird fixation with pulling her into closets… or his office… or her office, for that matter. He was a loose cannon. She’d never be able to fit into the mold his wife had been cast from, and Ororo sure as hell didn’t want to try. He was just so… demanding, and constantly up in her grill…

And attentive. Tender. Funny. Outrageous. Outspoken. Rugged. Masculine. Comfortable. Yummy. Wait… those weren’t faults. She was supposed to be summing up his faults. What the heck was wrong with her? She bickered with that voice throughout the day as she packed. That voice needed a swift smack…

She finished packing the rest of her clothing into her black leather suitcase set and wheeled the luggage into the living room with the rest of the boxes. Anna was in the kitchen, packing up her nonperishable foods and marking them with a Sharpie. “Call up Cain and tell ‘im to bring some coffee. Tell him I want an iced vanilla latte with whip.”

“You didn’t have any before you came over? I’m sorry, girl. I’d have kept my coffee pot out if I’d known.”

“We’ll blame it on pregnancy brain,” Anna assured her, elbowing her. Ororo sighed heavily and threw up her hands, shaking her head. “Aw, ‘Ro. We’ll figure this out.” She hugged her, and Ororo clung to her, wishing she had the answers.

“This is nuts. This is a mess.”

“You could stick it out.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Tory, yer makin’ it harder than it needs ta be.” Anna pulled back and rubbed her arms soothingly. “This ain’t high school. Yer a grown woman, upwardly mobile, able to pay the bills and make up her own mind. It ain’t like the old days, where yer parents would’ve packed up yer bags and sent ya off ta live with a relative for a few months. Y’all had a little ‘oopsie.’ And yer not alone unless ya insist on being alone. Ya gotta tell him. Don’t keep that man in the dark.”

“Even if he wants me, what if he doesn’t want this?” Her hand cradled her belly protectively. “I want this.”
“He might, too.”

“Anna… I don’t know. If I tell him about this baby… it could drive him further away. Or, things could go the other direction altogether.”

“Meaning?” Anna folded her arms and raised her brow. Ororo hated that look, because she usually caved when Anna turned up the volume on it.

“I’d hate it if he decided he only wanted to stay with me because of the baby.”

“Oh, girl, c’mon! Seriously? Nuh-uh. No. That ain’t gonna wash.” Anna grabbed a dish towel from the counter and snapped her with it.

“Ow! Bitch! Ow!” She zapped her with the towel again, and Ororo protectively covered her hind quarters. “That didn’t tickle!”

“Ah can’t believe the bullshit I’m hearin’ outta you. Baby doll. Has he said he loves you?”

“Not in so many words.”

“What? What does that even mean? Not in so many words… was he using the queen’s English? Mime? American Sign Language? I hate it when people use that phrase. Just get to the point, Tory. Has he said he loves you.”

“Not really.” Ororo didn’t feel like describing what made it a “gray area” to her oldest friend.

“Did ya pull petals off of daisies to decide?”

“No. Get out of here with that shit. Here. Pack. Take this.” She shoved the tape roll at her and stalked off, but Anna Marie followed her.

“Some men aren’t that verbal. They’re more demonstrative.”

“He says what’s on his mind just fine. Anna, you don’t get it. He just… he kept pushing my argument back at me. I asked him if he would move away in the situation I’m in, and if my saying anything would make a difference in his decision. All he said was ‘It’s not me doing the leaving.’ That’s such bull.”

“Was that all he said?”

“No, but…” Ororo hedged. She turned away and folded her arms around her belly.

“No, but what?”

“It doesn’t matter what else he said.” Because she’d already decided it didn’t matter.

Even if it did. Somewhat.

A lot.

More than anything in the world.

Her palms felt cold and clammy, and panic seized her chest. “Anna, do me a favor and get me some water. I feel sick.”

“Comin’ up. Siddown, woman.” Anna backed off, and Ororo took a moment to hyperventilate,
breathing into her hands. “Moving day’s a big day. Ya need to take a breather.” She came back with
the water and sank down beside her on the couch. Ororo took a cautious gulp of the water and
deepened her breaths while Anna rubbed her back.

* 

“You realize she’s gonna kill me, right?”

“Tell Maddie breakfast is on me the next time you both come to New York. I’ll make it up to her for
commandeering your brunch plans.”

“I’m talking about Ororo. She’ll skin me alive.”

“You offered her help. So we’re gonna go give her some help.” Logan tugged a beat-up black Body
Armour tee shirt on over his head and shoved his feet into his sneakers. Scott tsked as he took a sip
of his bottle of green tea.

“Should you be dragging me into the middle of this?”

“You volunteered. There ain’t no dragging involved.”

“She told me she could manage. I told her that I’d check with her landlord for a few days to see if
she got any mail.”

“Then ya know where we’re going. Let’s go help her move.” Logan turned the lock on his front
door with a noisy click. Scott muttered curses under his breath as they left on their errand, hating his
own part in it.

He still wanted to knock their heads together. If Scott didn’t feel like he was doing it for their own
good, he’d be ensconced at a patio table, deep in Maddie’s green eyes and a plate of bacon and eggs.
Scott hated helping people move.

* 

Ali and Cain arrived with a Starbucks drink carrier loaded up with white cups. Ali handed Ororo the
Tazo iced tea and gave her a brief hug. “Baby doesn’t like coffee.”

“She sure doesn’t,” Ororo agreed gratefully, taking a teeny sip. “It’s good.”

“Good. Take a load off. What else needs packing?”

“I already did the knick-knacks. Anna did the kitchen.”

“The junk drawer, too?”

“Ooh. No. Forgot that.”

“Cain, pack up the junk drawer. I’ll go do the bathroom.”

“Yup. That needs doing next.” Ororo headed toward her bedroom and scanned it. It already looked
barren; the covers were stripped from the bed and packed up, and all of the little photos she’d had
tucked into the slats of the mirror frame were put away. Her jewelry box and makeup kit weren’t
overflowing across the vanity, and her bookcase was empty. Any sign that a person lived there was
nearly gone.

Her father expected her to show up at the house the next morning, once she unloaded her big furniture at the storage unit. She needed to see his face, and she craved the sight and feel of home, even if it had been a dog’s age since she lived with her parents. Ororo craved those comforts and that familiarity, something that felt stable and predictable. She needed a break from drama, the daily grapevine of her office – the New York site had its own grapevine – and being too far away from her friends.

After a brief tea break, Ororo fell back into her packing efforts, rounding up odds and ends from drawers and cabinets, tearing off garbage bags from a roll and doing general cleanup. She ran a descaling cycle on her dishwasher and sprayed Easy-Off inside the lukewarm oven. Anna swatted her again.

“Give me that. And take those off.” She nodded to Ororo’s yellow latex cleaning gloves. “You’re in no condition to mess with that stuff. Go. Do something non-toxic.”

“You don’t have to clean my oven.”

“No. I’m protecting my future niece-slash-nephew from Mommy the Clean Freak. Go siddown.”

“I’m fine!”

“You know better than to argue with her by now, Tory.” Ali handed her the half-finished plastic cup of tea. The ice cubes were half-melted and it sweated moisture from sitting so long untouched. “Have some more.”

“Oh. Hey.” She backed out of the way, then ducked back inside the front hall. “Ororo, were you expecting company?”

“We’re not company. We’re the hired help,” Ororo heard Scott say amicably. Her pulse skipped.

“We’re not company? ‘We’ who?” she demanded as she rushed out of the kitchen. Ali grinned, turning her back on her Scott, and to Ororo’s shock, Logan. They’re hot! Ali mouthed. Ororo flushed.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Saw the big guy taking the recliner. Let’s get started on the rest of the big stuff,” Logan told her gruffly.
“I told you we could manage, Scott. You guys didn’t have to do this.” Ororo was pissed that Logan was ignoring her in lieu of a proper greeting, and she could feel his tension, a remnant from the other day. She felt rows of prickles raising up along her back. He and Scott both wore grubs, well broken-in jeans and tees, looking ready to help with the move.

“We needed to do this,” Scott corrected her as he automatically took the opposite end of the couch on Logan’s nod.

“Three,” Logan grunted, and they lifted it neatly and headed down the hallway.

“Um… okay.”

“Damn, Tory. Are all the men you work with that fine?” Anna whistled under her breath. Ororo smacked her arm.

“Quit it.”

“Scott single?”

“Last I checked, no.”

“Damn it.”

“This feels weird, now. Like, an ‘I shouldn’t be helping you pack your shit’ kind of weird. He seems pissed.” Ali stared at her. “You look pissed, too.”

“I’m fine,” Ororo said through her teeth.

“Right. She’s fine.” Ali and Anna glanced at each other and nodded. Pissed.

Yup.

Ororo tried to busy herself in the bathroom, emptying the last of the trash and cleaning the fixtures. In what seemed like no time, her loveseat, dining set, coffee table and end tables disappeared out the door. When she finished hitting the grout with a scrub brush and bleach, the largest of the boxes were gone, too. “Wow. That went fast.”

“These boys get it done,” Ali told her cheerfully. “Might have to pay them in beer.”

“No time for it. I have to get the moving truck back by tomorrow.”

“We can stop for lunch.”

“My stomach begs to differ. We can’t spend too much time dinking around. I’ll hook up with you and Cain once I get settled in, Al.”

“Hope that invite to hook up includes me and Maddie,” Scott cut in. “And this guy, if you don’t mind staring at that mug for too long.” Logan was stonefaced as he headed to her bedroom and waited by the end of the dresser.

“Hurry yer ass up, Summers.”

“I’m being summoned…”

“I appreciate it.”
“Know you do, Tory.” It surprised her to hear Scott using the nickname. He winked at her, and she smiled weakly. He knew how awkward it was for her, but they had to keep a civil front. Logan hadn’t looked her fully in the eye since they’d gotten there. The elephant in the room was trying not to stumble over her moving boxes. Ororo’s world felt like it was crashing down.

Logan was cool and efficient, and if she didn’t know better, she’d think he was rushing her ass out the door. It chafed. She made a point of moving out of his way quickly when he and Scott took her furniture toward the door, but it was difficult with so many bodies occupying her space. It was inevitable that they would begin to trip over each other, and every time they did, she felt flushed and felt brief, terse excuses escaping her lips.

* 

Logan wanted to shake her. Worse, he wanted to throw Scott and the rest of her friends out, lock the door, and take Ororo back to her bedroom for a long talking-to, at the risk of yanking off her clothes and taking her until they couldn’t walk. Some impulsive voice in his head reasoned that the bed wasn’t packed into the truck yet, and that it wasn’t undoable. He smacked that voice upside the head and went back to the kitchen. “Got everything packed in here?” Ali nodded at him good naturedly. “I made a Starbucks run earlier. You want me to pick you up anything?”

“Nah. We’re good.”

“We never met. I’m Alison.”

“Guessed by the hair.” Ali had colored her hair a deep, raspberry pink on a whim a couple of weeks ago. Ororo mentioned it while they were still on speaking terms.

“This is Cain.”

“Please ta meetcha,” he offered, and his handshake was crushing and beefy. Logan nodded to him with respect. The man was clearly besotted with Alison. She leaned back into his bulk, practically settling into him like a fur coat. Cain nuzzled the top of her head, burying his lips in those garish pink waves, and she slow-blinked in contentment.

“Scott,” his partner in crime offered, grappling with Cain a moment and nodding hellos to the girls. Logan pitied Anna Marie, who was drooling over him. As Scott bent over to grab another box, she raised her brows approvingly. Logan elbowed her briefly. Taken, he mouthed. She rolled her eyes.

“Ah can wish, can’t Ah?” she muttered under her breath. Logan shrugged and smirked. She waited for him to head toward the door with his cargo before asking openly, “She hot?”

“Smoking.”

“Shit,” she huffed with a stomp of her foot. Ali snickered. Then Anna elbowed him back.

“Are you fine with this?”

“Have I got a choice?” he deadpanned, but his humor faded to a whimper.

“Um. Yeah.”

“Don’t seem like it.”

“Squeaky wheel, shoog. Squeaky wheel.” Logan huffed, turning his back on her reasoning, and he
reached for another box, but Cain stopped him.

“We’ve got the rest. You guys rock out loud. Thanks for pitching in.”

“Cain, let’s make a lunch run. I’m in the mood for Quizno’s. Anna, come with.”

“Ah could eat.” She cupped her hand around her mouth. “Tory, ya want anything?”

“I’m fine!” Ororo’s voice sounded annoyed and put-upon. “I’m not hungry. You guys go ahead.”

“Hungry?” Scott asked.

“Nah.” Logan held up his hand, shooing him off.

“I’ll be back, then. I’m grabbing a snack, and I want to call up Maddie while I’m on this side of town.” Logan felt a brief flash of guilt at taking his friend away from his date.

“G’wan.”

“Back in a few.”

“See ya, shoog!” Anna Marie called out. “Don’t work too hard.”

“Not in her condition,” Cain muttered as they headed out the door, too quickly for Ali to shush him. Her blue eyes widened in alarm, but she recovered in a flash, waving a hasty goodbye.

“What?” Logan murmured, struck dumb with confusion. The door clicked shut, and he heard several pairs of feet thudding down the stairs. “What?” he repeated. Logan scrubbed his palm over his face, feeling himself break out in a cold, clammy flush. “Tory?” he called out as he wandered back from her living room. He shoved the bathroom door open, finding her ass-up and bent over the edge of the toilet base, scrubbing the tile and porcelain. “Tory?” he demanded. “What condition?”

“What?” She peered up at him, blowing tendrils of her hair out of her eyes where they had fallen loose from her braid. She glared up at him over her shoulder at his perturbed look, and Ororo settled back on her haunches, wiping her forehead with her arm.

“What’s this condition they just said you were in?”

“Condition? What about my condition?”

“Apparently you’re in one,” Logan snapped as he leaned against the door frame, folding beefy arms over chest. “What’s that about?” The color drained from her face, and Ororo sagged, resting her weight on one hip against the cold floor tile. She shook her head.

“Shit,” she muttered. “This wasn’t how I wanted to broach the subject.”

“Ya look like hell,” he muttered, and he was there that quickly, kneeling by her side, taking the scrub brush away and chucking it into the tub. He rubbed her back, and she fought the urge to lean into him. “What subject?”

“Logan.” Her blue eyes pinned him levelly. She opened her mouth, then closed it again before she turned from him. Ororo sighed.

“Darlin’?”

“Logan, I’m... pregnant.”
Every sound around them faded to nothing, and the oxygen in the room seemed to evaporate. Logan felt his heart beat stutter and a strange pounding begin in his ears. He saw her throat work, swallowing around whatever else she had to possibly tell him. She looked up at him again, and her eyes… they didn’t lie.

“Yer what?”

“Pregnant, Logan.” She emphasized that word, annoying him that she thought he needed it spelled out.

“Pregnant, Tory.”

“And?” She met his gaze directly this time, unflinching. His hand left her back, and for an instant, she felt terrified. She stopped herself from reaching for him, though.

“When… the fuck were you gonna tell me this news?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“Are ya sure now?” Logan covered his mouth for a moment, then met her eyes. His face held a wild look that frightened her a little. “Were ya waiting for dramatic effect? Am I the last one ta know? Because that sure as hell sounded like it out there when the big guy spilled the beans.”

“Shit.” Ororo closed her eyes futilely. “Logan…”

“Don’t ‘Logan’ me,” he croaked. “Tell me ya weren’t just gonna put a half a dozen states between us before you told me I made ya pregnant.”

“Okay.” She shrugged. “Thanks. Thanks for that. At last you said you made me pregnant.” The roaring in his ears grew louder, and his heart was pounding so hard that he had to sit down. He chose the edge of the tub, elbows propped against his knees.

“Don’t talk like that. Don’t make it sound like that, damn you. Damn you, Tory. Why. Why. Am I that much of an asshole that you had to hold it in?”

“No. That’s not it. I already made up my mind—”

“Then UNMAKE IT!” Logan shouted, slamming his fist against the tub tile. Ororo jumped, then glared at him.

“Don’t,” she hissed. His jaw worked, and she reached for him, but he flinched back.

“You know how it sounded, but ya said it, anyway. I knocked you up, Tory. And now, this is what I get. You leaving me. Not telling me.”

“Would it have made a difference?” she shot back, checking the tears that were trying to work themselves into her eyes. Her voice remained steady. “You were okay with me leaving when you woke up this morning—“

“The hell I was,” Logan told her, cutting her off.

“Sure looked like it. You and Scott beat feet with my dinette set a little while ago.”

“Bullshit. I was… I was helping out.” Logan shook his head, and he smirked, but the expression didn’t reach his eyes. “Yer killing me. Tory… God. Let’s rewind back to me telling you that I could never leave you. Tory.” Logan’s hands spread themselves as if he were searching for his point, then
dropped. “Get back on yer lease. Get yer job back at this site.” Ororo stared at him, eyes full of blue fire.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes. Excuse you. You’re pregnant with my baby. You seem to think you’re leaving town with our baby inside you, and that won’t fly.”

“I won’t just be your ‘baby momma,’” she snapped.

“I didn’t tell ya to. That ain’t what I had in mind.” He pointed at her, and his eyes narrowed, piercing her soul. “You know it. That ain’t how I’m made. I would never treat ya like that, or how Vic treated you. Don’t mix me up with that bastard, Ororo Munroe.” She shook her head and opened her mouth, looking loaded for bear, but he shook his finger. “I’m. Not. Like. Vic. Understand me when I say I would never do what he did. I’m not that kind of man. I’m not that low. And I’m damned offended that you’d lump me in with the one who broke yer damned heart.”

“He wanted Nate.” Her voice was razor sharp. “He didn’t want me. Do you know how that felt? Do you?” She rose shakily, and he jumped up, closing the space between them, but she shook off his concerned hands. “No,” she hissed. “You don’t. You loved Jean. She loved you. There weren’t any maybes. No fucking secrets.”

“No. There was one secret, darlin’.” His voice and face went alarmingly blank, and that brought her up short. She leaned back against the sink, finding it difficult to look at him. She felt raw and hollow, exhaustion seeping into her bones. He rubbed out a sore spot in his shoulder and cracked his neck; she heard it pop and winced, then felt guilty that her big moving day was responsible. “It was a humdinger. I’ll give ya credit where it’s due that you told me about your ‘condition.’”

“What?” she whispered. “Logan-“

“Yeah.” He cut her off, and there was pain in his voice, even though his eyes were still devoid of empathy or any willingness to placate her. “She wasn’t the only one I lost. I found her test results in an old box of stuff her sister shipped to me.”

The tears fell, disobeying her strict injunction to stay put. “Oh, Logan…”

“Stop. Don’t. Let it sink in that I can’t let ya leave.” He stayed rooted where he was, ignoring his body’s demand that he hold her. “I can’t.” His voice calmed.

“It’s not up to you whether I stay or go.”


“God…” She wiped her cheeks and rubbed her eyes, pausing there for a moment. It was so heard to see him through the blur of frustration and yellow, prickly anger and helplessness. “Is this why you came? Is this how you help me pack?”

“Not usually. It’s supposed to involve a goodbye dinner of pizza, bein’ thanked with a case of beer, and chipping in with some buds on a gas card.”

“Doesn’t involve chewing your girlfriend’s ass out?” she huffed, and Logan felt her getting wound up again.

“Tory…”
“No. No. Uh-uh. We’ll arrange something. Somehow. Logan. I have a job. I gave up my apartment. I’m not going to pressure you into whatever this is. I’m glad you want her.”

“Her?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes. I’m glad. I won’t be part of the proverbial ‘drama with my ex’ that’s the new trend with everyone I know. I don’t expect you to jump in and make me an honest woman to soothe your conscience.”


“Bring cigars to the delivery room. Don’t bring a marriage license.”

It was like she slapped him. He turned on his heel and stormed out, and for several breathless moments, she could only hear the rushing in her ears drowning out the heavy thuds of his feet, punctuated by the slam of the door. Dizziness buckled her knees, and her mouth was painfully dry, throat closing on the promise of more tears.

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She was a tearstained, hoarse mess by the time Ali, Anna and Cain came back. Scott was conspicuously absent. Anna found her first, just as she emptied the cleaning bucket into the bathroom sink. “What else needs cleaning, kiddo?”

“Just some detailing. Just enough to get my deposit back. I defrosted the fridge.”

“I’ll hit it with some Clorox,” Anna volunteered. “You okay?”

“Hell, no.”

“Right. That bad?”

“Worse. The worst.”

“Girl, I was afraid of that. Damn it. I don’t know what to say.”

“Get me home to my plants. Let’s get this day over with. I’m so tired, Anna.” Her red-rimmed eyes said it all, and Anna nodded, wordlessly hugging her again.

“Take it easy.”

“I can’t.”

“This ain’t helpin’.” Anna’s hands on her back were still soothing, urging the tension from her with gentle strokes of her hair.

“Hurts so much.”

“Always does when ya love ‘em, kiddo.”

“No,” she argued, backing away and shaking her head.

“Don’t lie ta me, shoog. Don’t lie ta him, either. God, I could knock your two heads together. Yer leaving tonight with me, when you should be going after him.”

Pride turned her back on her friend, and she gathered up her cleaning supplies, packing them into the
waiting box. “Uh-uh.” Anna’s sigh was heavy.

“You know Ah hate this, right?”

“You’ve got my back or you don’t, Anna Marie.”

“Then Ah guess Ah’ve got yer back.” Anna headed to the hall, where the Swiffer mop leaned against the wall. “I’ll hit the ceilings and lights and knock down the cobwebs. Go eat. I brought ya back a sandwich.” Ororo’s stomach soured at the thought.

“Ugh…”

“A bite. Take a no-thank-you bite. Brought you back an apple juice, too. Don’t wear yerself down to nothin’, ‘Roro, y’hear me?” Anna leveled her with her best schoolmarm glare. “This ain’t just about you anymore.”

“Fine.”

“Fine, then,” Anna grumbled under her breath before she began dusting the ceiling corners.

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They chatted little as they wrapped it up. Cain tied off the last garbage bag and hauled it to the dumpster. Ororo dug in her purse for her phone, which tweeted at her that she had a text. For a tense, hopeful moment, she thought it was him. She smiled weakly at Scott’s brief words, instead.

Safe travels, Ororo. Email or call when you get there.

Okay, she texted back. Another little green balloon popped up instantly,

Not just me. Don’t leave him out. Don’t leave it like this. Please.

She sighed. It was too much. Scott meant well.

I have to do this. I won’t leave him out. Thank you for today, Scott. Thank you for everything. She tucked her phone into her purse, ignoring the next two or three chirps. She couldn’t have this discussion or any more tugs at her reasoning. She unwrapped the sandwich Anna brought her with too little enthusiasm and choked down a couple of bites. She washed it down with a little juice and decided to take it with her.

“Kiddo, c’ere.” Cain appeared by her elbow and tugged her into a protective bear hug that she didn’t expect. She smothered the low “oomph” that was squished from her lungs, and yelped when Ali enveloped her from the opposite side.

“Too…much…love,” she grunted.


“I love you, Ali. I love you, Cain. Start the truck.”

She locked the door, leaving behind echoing emptiness and the stench of bleach.
Arrangements

Chapter Summary


“We’re gonna talk about those plans. We’re gonna make ‘em together.” Something hopeful flickers inside her, and he feels it resonating between them. “We’ll figure this out.”

Today:

Her face was resolute, forced into a smile that was barely approachable and work-safe whenever a pair of familiar eyes made contact with hers. Her homecoming was stilted and slapdash. She chased away a bout of morning sickness with a third of a sleeve of Premium saltines and ginger tea. Her AMT’s effort at a welcome-back coffee hour fell flat when the scent of the cardboard carrier of Starbucks made her queasy; she offered polite replies to the predictable “How was your trip? How was it in Boston? Did you miss us?” before just as politely tripping off to the ladies’ room. She resumed the meeting, flat-voiced and green around the gills.

Her heels scraped over the same slate blue, low-nap carpeting. She navigated the same cubicle maze, groove seemingly worn into the floor, but she felt… lost. Off. Her attache felt heavier than usual; she tired of carrying it on her shoulder, blaming the crick in her neck for her discomfort. Sleep was her callous, absent friend.

The rest of the move went well enough. Cain and his friend, Tom, finished the heavy lifting and stowed all of her larger furniture in her unit. She unpacked a meager amount of clothing into her dresser, settled temporarily into what used to be her spare bedroom. The apartment didn’t smell like hers anymore. Her plants still graced the kitchen and living room.

“Eunice has missed ya,” Anna remarked as Ororo murmured over the spider fern and watered it delicately.

“Just as sensitive as pets, but easier to clean up after.”

The highlights of her day included an unexpected haggling match with her prospective landlord about the cost of the deposit, doing her level best not to pitch a hissy fit into her smartphone. Every time someone walked past her office door, she quickly lowered her voice to a hiss. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him to suck it if he expected her to pay an extra two hundred dollars when he’d originally told her he would prorate her rent because she was moving in mid-month. She’d spent the want ads perusing apartment listings, hating herself when she confessed to Anna that she’d need to camp out a few more days. Anna hedged, sweet as syrup when she agreed, but her new “friend,” an auburn-haired, tall drink of water named Remy, made frequent house calls and liked to camp out with Anna, too. Ororo and Sleep weren’t on speaking terms, but Awkwardness arrived at the party and wouldn’t take hints that it was time to leave…

She dove into her team’s new business, writing rates like a fiend. It felt good to crunch numbers and research member lives and demographics, and her new account manager, Emma, was a bit of a shrew, granted, but she was more independent than Selene and didn’t seem to need any help wiping
Lunch consisted of more saltines, bottled water, and three no-thank-you bites of a Subway sandwich that tasted like cardboard before she had to chuck it into her wastebasket. Relief to be back where she belonged fueled her day up until about three, but she was flagging, fading, and her feet seemed to swell up, cramming her toes painfully into her patent leather pumps.

And she thought of him. She measured every male voice she heard in the halls and cubicles and board rooms, discarding each one for tone, pitch, mannerism, patina and accent. Each one was wrong. Dark heads and broad backs briefly caught her attention, then left her mired in disappointment when she didn’t see his swarthy skin and rugged features. Ororo shrugged to herself. They were better off.

Weren’t they?

The pain throbbed, then ebbed, worse whenever she finished a task and came up for air. She rose and stretched, trying to work out the crick, and she drifted over to her window, grateful her office was one of the few on her floor that had one. The traffic built itself up to a dull roar, preparing itself for rush hour. Luxury cars’ impeccably waxed paint reflected the silhouettes of multi-story buildings and neon “Open” signs, contrasting with the borrowed supermarket carts of homeless denizens tragically overdressed in every piece of clothing they owned, their lives stuffed into threadbare backpacks. A gaggle of girls garbed in black school sweaters and plaid uniform skirts mobbed a hot dog cart and dropped loose coins into a street guitarist’s case; Ororo wondered what song he played.

Her stand-up break ended prematurely. She startled at the sound of her office intercom. “Tory, call on line two. It’s Donald Pierce.” She sighed heavily as she returned to her swivel chair and punched the speaker button.

“How was your trip?” he boomed cheerfully. “All settled in?”

“More or less.”

“Has Emma brought you up to speed?”

“Still jogging along.” She gave his voice an insincere smile as she fiddled with her pen, rolling it through her knuckles one at a time. “She knows her stuff.”

“That she does. I know you’ll be a good fit. We’ll miss you in our market, Ororo.”

“Miss you guys, too.” Scott came to mind, and Yukio, her only two real friends at their sister site. The memory of a smoky voice and brown eyes she could drown in saddened her.

“I know it’s after the fact, Ororo, but we sent you out there with a souvenir.”

“Oh? What kind?”

“A broker,” he told her smugly. “We sent our cracker jack sales guy out there to the Big Apple with you. He should be arriving about now.”

Her heart tripped, and she broke out in prickles. “What?”

“Check your email. It was just announced to distribution, but I thought Selene had mentioned it to you by now.”
“Um… she didn’t get around to it. Sure she was busy… excuse me, Donald, but I’m… I’m being pulled away. Sorry.” OhGodOhGodOhGod. Ororo breathed out through her nose, trying to master her panic and shock.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Not bad, just… at a tricky one. I’d better skedaddle,” she babbled. “Don, it was great to hear from you, sorry I’ve gottamakethisshortbutI’dbettergo-“ Her heel tapped a mad tattoo on the floor, and she was shaking and fidgeting all over. Logan’s coming out here???

“All right, Ororo. It’s been great working with you, a real treat. We’ll keep in touch, and don’t be a stranger to the Boston office. We consider you family. ‘Bye, now.”

“Bye,” she yelped, punching the speaker button and propelling herself from her chair. She paced, wiping away the sheen of sweat that broke out across her cheeks from nowhere. “Shit,” she hissed, “shitshitshitshit…”

What did that mean? What the hell could it possibly mean? Sent him to the Big Apple? With her?

She regretted not pressing Donald for more answers while she had him on the line, but she was rattled and needed time to herself to process it all. Logan was coming to New York.

“And he’s arriving- just about now???” Her eyes flitted to the clock, and she collapsed back into her chair. Feverishly she clicked back into her Outlook inbox and scanned the red flagged items. Five messages down was an AMT distribution with “IMPORTANT” in the subject line. Weren’t they all?

She opened it, holding her breath, then read it aloud.

“It’s both to my pleasure and regret that I announce that our northern market broker of select and flexible products for medium to large groups, James Howlett, will be transferring to our sister site in New York City. Please join me in extending congratulations and best wishes to him. He will work out of that market in his new role, effective today.” She paused on that last word, voice dying. “Wow.” She leaned back in her chair, fanning air on her hot cheeks with her small notepad.

Her intercom chirped at her again. “Yes?” she asked with some effort.

“You have a visitor coming up, just got on the elevator down here.” Ororo’s office was on the third floor. Her stomach flipped.

“Oh, God.” She got up and paced again, scraping back her long bangs. These things didn’t happen to her. Ever. Her life was organized. Her day planned was her Bible, her smartphone alerts held her Ten Commandments. Ororo didn’t like being caught off-guard or at a loss. She’d known too much loss, and ignorance wasn’t blissful.

A quick glance at her reflection in her glass pane of her door told her that she was a wreck. She straightened her bangs and retouched her lipstick, retucked her blouse and put her blazer back on, even though her office was stifling, and the air conditioning lagged, taking its sweet time to kick on when she adjusted the thermostat. She paced. She fretted. She sat down, then stood up again, running scenarios through her head, trying to shake off the cold fear… mingling with sheer exhilaration that burned in her veins.

She schooled her expression and sat back down, resuming the colossal task of cleaning out her inbox. She deleted five server-generated messages that she was using up too much space on the network first.
Last week:

His face was a grim mask, even after his first cup of caffeine. The other riders in the elevator gave him several inches’ berth, feeling the low, palpable thrum of hostility and determination radiating from him, a walking, breathing, ass-kicking wrapped in an Armani suit.

The weather was eighty and humid, Boston tiptoeing its way toward summer days, and the tie and jacket were stifling him. His fingers tired of the feel of the leather briefcase handle; his nod to the receptionist was obligatory and brief, one more obstacle on his way to his office. He strode into it reluctantly, logging into his PC while he was still standing up.

His inbox, unsurprisingly, was full. He enjoyed each savage slice of the letter opener through his mail, needing to destroy something, somehow, to take the edge off the weekend’s failures. His head wasn’t in work this morning; his heart was lying in smithereens on her freshly swiffered linoleum. He felt hollow and thrown aside. Logan chucked the empty envelopes dispassionately into the trash and checked his messages.

Scott entered his office as he knocked, not waiting for a welcome. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You look like hell.”

“Yeah. Funny story.” Scott sighed and sat across from him, idly swirling the contents of his coffee mug.

“What are you going to do?”

“What I haven’t done,” Logan shrugged. “Be more direct.” Scott’s expression was worried as he eyed him over the edge of his cup.

“Do I need to post bail?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Seriously. How much bail are we talking, here? I just paid off my car and had new linoleum installed in my condo. I might have to move a few things around if you need a big bond, Jim.”

“Back when Tory and I got into this mess, we weren’t playin’ it safe, Summers. Playin’ it safe now isn’t gonna get us out.” Logan dug his smartphone out of his briefcase and punched in his passcode. Scott felt his agitation and fidgeted in his seat.

“Meaning?”

“I can’t let her leave things like this.”

“She left you, though. That said plenty.”

“Bullshit. She left a lot unsaid. She ran off again. That kinda thing’s a habit of hers we’re gonna hafta work on.”

“What are you going to do?” Scott repeated, his tone cautious this time. He didn’t like Logan’s blank
“I’ve got a meeting with Donald and Selene. I’m conferencing in the Westchester office, too.” Logan imported his calendar entries from his Outlook into his phone and set reminders. “Boston’s feeling too quiet, lately.” Scott choked on a sip of his coffee. “Easy. Don’t hork it out yer nose, Summers.”

“*…uuurrghh* Geez… Logan. Tell me I’m not hearing what I think I am. You’re leaving this site?”

“New York isn’t a white space state. We’ve got a thriving market out there. I just renewed my license, so I’m rearing to go.”

“You’re serious.”

“When ain’t I?” Scott sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“Logan… you watched her leave. You helped her move, fer cryin’ out loud. Shouldn’t the two of you talked it out more before she hired a truck?”

“I did what I was supposed to do. I didn’t make any demands. I gave her space. I didn’t breathe down her neck. I was a gentleman, and I got a so-long for my troubles. She’s leaving me high and dry.”

“Did you tell her you love her?” Scott asked quietly. Logan paused in his email, rapidly clicking fingers stilling over the keys, and he exhaled loudly. “Is that a no?”

“Did I tell her… fuck. Didn’t get much of a word in edgewise over her whole ‘things won’t work between us because we’re too different’ spiel, or her overall hangup that two people can’t make a relationship based on a night of knock-down, drag-out sex.”

“Seems like you’ve been making one. You’re not exactly Ward and June, but it’ll do. My thoughts, which I know you don’t wanna hear, boil down to this: Go. Crawling. Back. Give her the ‘L’ word.”

“‘L’ for ‘left my ass out in the cold again’?”

“Stop,” Scott snapped, waving him off. “Logan. C’mon. I’ve seen you happy. I’ve seen you in love before. This is you in love, and in a world of hurt if you don’t fix this. This isn’t as cut and dried as just chasing her down to a different state. How are you two going to work through this?”

“It’s not just about her and me anymore. Baby’s gonna make three, Summers.” Scott choked on his coffee again.

“Come… again?” he rasped. His dark eyes were watering, and he banged on his chest, gathering his wits and breath.

“She took a little surprise with her back to New York. There’s no way I’m not getting involved. I lost out once. I lost everything.” His voice was rough and faltered slightly. “I haven’t slept. I can’t focus on work. I can’t think about anything but her, Summers, and everything that she’s taking away from me right now, if I don’t get off my ass and do something about it.”

“Don’t make it all about what she’s taking away.”

“It is!” Logan retorted, drawing together his heavy brows. His stance was tight and hard.

“If she left, she thought there was something you aren’t willing to give her.”
“What about what she won’t give me? I know how ta commit, but the last I checked, that doesn’t involve running away when things get a little heated.”

“Her job was in jeopardy. You knew that, right? Selene was riding her. She didn’t just sit there and take it; give her credit for not just whining about the problem. She did something about it.”

“Life ain’t just about careers. Tory thinks she’s gotta be uptight to get the job done, and then she takes on too much, and takes too much bullshit from everyone involved.”

“Ever thought supporting her might have helped things between you two?”

“She didn’t want my support. She wanted me to tell her she was always right.”

“She’s the underwriter, and a damn good one. She usually is right.” Scott acted like it was the second thing Logan should have learned in kindergarten after saying please and thank you. “It’s her job to keep you on track and compliant.”

“I know how to be compliant!”

“Why do your select plans always end up modified and going to Regulatory for review?”

“Fuck off.”

“I rest my case.”

“She didn’t want me to rush in like some knight in shining armor and fight her battles.”

“No. But maybe she would’ve liked knowing you were in her corner.”

“If she doesn’t know that by now, Scotty, then I’ve been doing it all wrong.” Logan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yer the only client service rep I don’t wanna punch in the face. Ya know that, right?”

“I’m honored.”

“Keep in touch. And, Logan? Take it easy on her.”

“Scout’s honor. I’ll be sweet as pie.”

“Give her a hug for me.” Scott’s eyes twinkled.

“Fuck off.”

*

**Right now:**

The elevator takes its time, too much for his taste. His stomach reminds him that the overpriced pack of Pringles and dry-tasting sandwich he had on the plane wasn’t enough, and the cookie cart in the subway tunnel food court sold him a piss-poor excuse for a cup of coffee. He’s overdressed for New York’s humidity, more accustomed to Massachusetts’ weather that seemed to change every ten minutes. He chafes and tugs at his tie, loosening it slightly as he enters the crowded corridor. Staff milled around like they had nothing stacked on their desk, even though it was shaping up to be a busy renewal season. No one pays him much attention, just another suit and shiny pair of shoes, walking with a purpose.
He catches his reflection in the pane of a snack machine in a nearby break room as he asks which way to the underwriter’s office. He rakes his fingers through his hair, noticing it’s slightly flat where he nodded off against the subway car window. Logan and Sleep aren’t on speaking terms, and its beginning to show.

He’s stiff as a board, loaded for bear… yet so anxious for one look at her, needing to hear those lips say his name. His pulse is racing and he feels too hot and hemmed in by the building’s slate gray interiors and upholstered cubicle walls and marble-look Formica countertops. There are too many steps between Logan and his goal, too many bodies to weave between, too many voices clamoring over his thoughts for dominance.

His throat is dry as his eyes land on her door pane, reading the tiny, nondescript lettering of her name, “Ororo V. Munroe” emblazoned on the sedate plaque. He pauses, masters himself, then knocks briskly on her door. He doesn’t wait for her to tell him to come in.

She looks up calmly, composed and decked out in too many damn clothes for his liking, hair pulled mercilessly into a chignon. “James.” Those perfectly painted lips move, but the voice isn’t the one from his dreams. There’s little emotion in it. She rises smoothly from her seat and meets him at the door. His pulse is hammering in his throat, but she reaches for his carryall, stunning him by taking it from him. She hangs it up on her coatrack by the strap and beckons to him to enter so that she can gently close the door.

He can’t know, doesn’t have so much as an inkling that she’s drinking in his scent, needing his presence more than oxygen.

“It’s Logan. It’s always gonna be Logan.”

“Welcome to New York, Logan,” she tells him dryly. Her smile is brittle. She rocks her weight to one hip and folds her arms. “How was your trip?”

“Do ya really wanna know how my trip was?” Annoyance blossoms and pries at his skull, clawing its way in.

“I’m all ears.”

“How was my trip. I’ll lay it on ya. Hope it’s entertaining. I got up at the ass-crack of dawn and was told that my flight was delayed by an equipment failure. I got stuck in commuter class behind two screaming babies and stuck sitting next to a guy who no doubt ate a truckload of scrambled eggs for breakfast, if the way he kept lighting up that seat with his farts was any clue.” Her lips twitch at this. “I get stuck in a teleconference with Charlie about my schedule for the month and two more groups he wants me to add on.” Charles Xavier was the eastern regional director and not a man whose appointments you skipped out on. “Your red line sucks, by the way.”

“No different from riding the T,” she shrugs, but she almost pities him. “Pull up a chair.” She sits back in her own seat and crosses her long legs, which tempt him.

“Don’t worry, darlin’. I ain’t staying long. I’ve got another appointment.”

“Who with?” She hides her disappointment behind a small swig from her water bottle.

“Property manager over on Westchester Avenue. I’m touring a couple of apartments and turning in my paperwork.”

“Apartments? Paperwork?” The blood drains from her face, and her heart pounds, but his only indication of her distress is her slow change in posture. She leans forward in her seat and folds her
hands on her desk, but her knuckles are white. “You’re...staying?”

“Moving,” he corrects her. “Been doing a lot of that lately. Thought I couldn’t look another cardboard box in the eye, but it didn’t take me too long to pack up my pod. They’re moving my stuff in two days.”

“Oh.”

“Pretty warm welcome, there, darlin’. I’m feeling overwhelmed, here.” Her blue eyes flit away for a moment, then return to his face, drinking in every detail and measuring the intent of his words.

“You’re here in New York. To stay.”

“Gotta read those emails.”

“Oh, I did. I’m still getting settled in, but I’ve gotten that far.” She gnaws the corner of her lip. “Won’t it be hard to live so far away from your family?”

“Not all of my family lives in Boston.” His tone is bland, but he exhales roughly, silently asking her Why did you even go there?

“Right. Not all.”

“Are ya happy to be back?” he inquires, baiting her.

“Oh, yes.”

“Ya sure?”

“So glad.” Her smile is cool, and he longs to shake her.

“Missed it that much?”

“Terribly.” She won’t tell him that she feels off-balance, or that she took some of Boston home with her, and that the memory of him still sings in her blood.

“Anyway. I’ve got another meeting. Wanted to check in on you for a minute.”

“You didn’t have to go out of your way.”

“I’m a handful of states out of my way. We need to talk, when you have time. About those arrangements you said we’d make.”

“Logan…”

“It’s gotta be done. That talk’s gotta be had. This is it. I’m meeting you where you live. No more running away.”

“I have a doctor already,” she blurted out. “She’s... the same one I had last time.” His face softens slightly.

“Is she good?”

“Yes. I have an appointment next week.”

“What day?” He instantly reaches for his phone, but she is up in a flash, covering the small screen
with her hand.

“Don’t worry about it. You don’t have to go to the trouble.”

“This ain’t trouble. Don’t you dare. Don’t. You. Dare.” His voice is quiet steel, and he gently snatches his hand out from beneath hers, depriving himself of her brief, cool touch. “You want arrangements. You want things organized. You’ve got a neat and tidy little plan, and yer gonna share that plan with me. What day and time, Ororo?”

“Logan…”

“What time?” he repeats, giving her another opportunity to process what he’s asking for. She sighs, worn down and lacking arguments, something out of character for her.

“Nine. Tuesday the fifth.”

“I can move some things around. I’ll be there with bells on.”

“Fine.” The word is a bullet aimed from carefully glossed lips.

“Of course it’s fine.” Ororo hates how Logan mimicks her tone and shakes his head sadly. “Ororo… I don’t wanna do this. Not this way.”

“What way? Didn’t you mean to barge your way back in to my life?” she asks with a shrug. He feels resentment for him rising within her, sparking from her blue eyes.

“It ain’t just your life. But if ya want me to be honest, lady, then yeah. Bargin’ in’s what I do best.” Her nostrils flare slightly with her loud breath. “We’re gonna talk about those plans. We’re gonna make ‘em together.” Something hopeful flickers inside her, and he feels it resonating between them. “We’ll figure this out.”

“Famous last words,” she murmurs doubtfully.

“C’mon, Tory…”

“Let’s stick with Ororo, for right now.” He huffs, chuckling at her. Stubborn as ever.

“We’ll be in touch, Ororo.” He turned from her and headed for the coat rack, taking his carryall. She rose and followed him sedately toward the door. “Still have the same cell?”

“Uh-huh. You?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, then.” Her hands itch to touch him, and some needy voice inside her screams at her not to let him leave, not to leave things this way.

“Okay, then.” He feels her heat at his back, even though no physical contact is made between them, and he smells her perfume. That old urge is driving him crazy, and his fingers twitch as she leans around him to open the door. He sighs. “Shit…”

“What…mnmnmnmnmmpph…” It’s too much for him, and it’s been too damned long since he’s touched her, even though she’s infuriating him, testing him, but he reaches for the door and slams it shut, drops the carryall, turns around and reaches for her in one motion. He consumes the strangled little whimper from her lush, soft mouth, fingers working their way into her hair. She startles at the feel of him, realizing that yes, this is happening, and this is how he tastes, and his arm locked around
her waist is strong, supple and hard. “Mmmmmmm…” She doesn’t want to talk anymore. He doesn’t want anymore excuses or another turn in the pissing contest between them. Her palms slide up the solid planes of his chest, arms coiling around his shoulders, and it feels like coming home.

The sound of the lock clicking on the door knob distracts her from the passion boiling in her veins. “What are you-“

“Go with it,” he mutters over her lips, devouring them, and she moans in agreement.

“That’s fine.”

“Fine, then.”

She remembers where they are between kisses, despite the sweet insanity his teeth and tongue are wreaking at her throat, and Ororo grabs the rod hanging from the vertical blinds covering the door pane and gives it a couple of savage twists. He spins her around and backs her up against it, making blinds rattle, and his fingers are busy prying open the buttons of her blazer. She kicks off one of the torturous shoes and slides her heel up the back of his calf, an open invitation. He heeds her call and deepens their kiss, cranking up the heat ten notches. She doesn’t fight it when her hairpins hit the floor with tiny pings, or when his fingers thread through the thick mass; the bun was giving her a headache, anyway, and his caress feels so good. Logan’s hands slide her skirt north, heedless of how nicely it was ironed at the dry cleaners. She feels the draft against her rump as he bunches it up at her waist, then reaches down to wrap her legs around his waist. He carries her to the desk. It’s too cluttered. One sweep of his arm clears the way, sending her inbox, pencil cup, magnetized paper clip holder and stapler flying in all directions.

“Want you.”

“Missed you,” he hisses back as she relieves him of the stifling Windsor knot of his silk tie. They grapple for his belt buckle. Ororo takes his hand and covers her breast with it, and he concedes, letting her have her way with his pants. Gravity and need tip her back against the desk top, taking him with her. He tugs down the waistband of her pantyhose with his teeth, and she’s glad to be well rid of those, too, aroused by the cool air bathing her skin and the wicked look in his eyes. They’ve always stopped at this point or been interrupted. Logan turned off his cell the moment he entered the building, and Ororo’s calendar isn’t cluttered with meetings yet, having been back too briefly.

Her blazer is growing hopelessly crushed and wrinkled beneath them. His shirt is hanging open, offering her the view of his chest; its crisp hairs tickle her flesh as he covers her, briefly, to drown in her softness afforded by her gaping blouse and unhooked bra. They linger there wordlessly, hungrily, their kisses making up for lost time and the indignity of his flight. She cries out in protest as he draws back, but his fingertips skim over her lips, and she suckles them, drawing them down into her mouth. Logan groans, removing them reluctantly after a few pulls, already rock-hard and aching with need. He loops her legs over his shoulders, strokes the velvety, slick crease of her sex, and sheathes himself fully; he nearly collapses from her snug grip and how she milks him, squeezing him, welcoming him properly at last.

“Logan,” she husks roughly, “take me.”

“Ain’t gotta ask, Tory,” he rasps. And his hips drive home the point again. And again. She bites her lip against crying out, disciplined as he’s accustomed to hearing her, but low whimpers and gasps fill his ears, evoking a smirk from him, the first smile she’s seen from him since his arrival at her door. His fingers press into her long, supple thighs as he finds purchase within her depths and his own rhythm, and he rubs his cheek along her knee, kissing it before he returns to thrusting, taking them both where they need to go.
Her eyes drift shut in pleasure, but he keeps her present with occasional sharp, hard thrusts that make them snap open and focus on him and the desire in his face, for her. Only her. His face is strained, but the tenderness in his eyes is her undoing. Explosive sensations in her core build at an overwhelming pace and she sees spots dancing behind her eyes. “Logan,” she breathes. “Oh, Logan. Please.”

“Damn it,” he grates through his teeth. She is so beautiful, writhing beneath him, clenching him so tight, her fingers clutching the weave of his pants legs, her feet bouncing off his back, and he knows he’s nearly done, teetering over the edge. Skilled fingers stroke her, searching for and finding the sweet, hidden little pearl, and he caresses it, creating the tiniest hint of friction. Her breath catches in her throat, chest rising and falling more rapidly as he drives her toward her peak, and she feels him stiffen further within her, signaling his completion. They fall over the edge together, and he lowers her legs as his pelvis spasms, wringing out a few more thrills between them, transferring her legs around his waist instead, where she cradles him, supporting him as he rides it out.

Replete, limp, boneless, they sag against each other and listen to each other’s breathing. His is sawing out of his chest, steaming her throat and stirring her hair; he jerks slightly at her light caress, hands skimming over the expanse of his back.

“You have my cell,” she murmurs.

“Yeah.”

“Tuesday the fifth.”

“At nine. Right.”

“Okay.” Sweat’s cooling on their bodies, and their rapport evaporates with it as they slowly detach and right themselves, fingers finding fastenings and adjusting briefs. She turns from him as she hops less than gracefully back into her stockings and lets her skirt hem drop back into place, hopelessly crumpled.

Logan isn’t faring any better. He takes it out on his necktie, forcing it back into some semblance of the knot he left the airport with, but it feels like a waste of time. She wants to say something, but the words won’t come. He isn’t looking at her when she glances at him, and she finds herself turning away, retrieving her shoes and bobby pins from the floor. As she is halfway through re-coiling her bun, he lets the door swing shut behind him.

She stares after him, confused and bereft.

“Damn you, Logan.”
Logan was about ready to turn her over his knee. The ride to the tiny clinic had been a circus. His jaw ached from clenching it, and Ororo's eyes were icy blue chips every time they made contact. She sat beside him, stiff as a board and occasionally fanning herself. Pregnancy turned her body into a space heater, and she complained - not necessarily to him, yet, but to the front receptionist - about hot flashes that seemed to come out of nowhere. Logan's questions about her condition yielded terse answers and deep sighs, and it was driving him batshit-crazy. Logan was grateful that it was almost summer, and that he could get away with leaving his suit jacket back at the office. The subway was packed, and the passenger on his other side easily weighed in around four hundred pounds, taking up two seats and leaving him crammed up against Ororo, something he wouldn't have minded a couple of months ago. For the most part, he still didn't mind, but he felt her tension every time they occupied the same space. It was impossible not to occupy it at the moment. To her credit, she smelled nice; whatever hair product she used tickled his nostrils, and the curling white strands brushed his shoulder.

"Damn it," she muttered.

"Whatsamatter?"

"The car's rocking too much," she complained. "Stomach's not happy." He winced. The train rumbled through the tunnel, and the corridors myriad lamps threw patches of light over her face, showing him her slightly greenish pallor. He frowned.

"How unhappy are we talkin' here, darlin'?"

"I need air. Soon." Her voice sounded tight, and his hand gently, gingerly covered hers.

"Breathe through yer nose," he suggested. Logan suddenly remembered his laptop carryall, tugging it onto his lap. He unzipped it and rummaged around inside, grumbling under his breath. Ororo shot him an evil look as he accidentally jostled her with his efforts; Big n' Cuddly on his other side looked almost as annoyed, but his hand found the crinkle of a foil and paper-wrapped packet. He extracted a pack of Trident, and Ororo held open her palm. She looked miserable; he juggled his case and opened a piece of the gum, tucking it into her hand. She popped it into her mouth, giving it a few cautious chews and breathing slowly through her nose, slowly mastering her nausea and fighting down the growing taste of bile.
"You did this to me," she accused on a low hiss.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled back. "Ain't gonna forget it, Tory." Didn't hear ya complainin' at the time. Logan scrubbed his hand over his face and inwardly raged in helplessness. He reminded himself of all the ribbing he'd subjected his brother John to whenever Rose was expecting, and it had come back to bite his ass. Spectacularly.

When his Outlook reminder chimed at him onscreen, Logan logged off with equal amounts of trepidation and excitement for the appointment. Ororo was still side-stepping him in corridors, break rooms and meetings, and it was pissing him off. Their little, impromptu "meeting" in her office hadn't broken much ice between them, but Logan knew they had to take baby steps. Whether she liked it or not, and call him a stubborn bastard, her life was about to become their life. Logan sighed. He'd never been one for subtlety. If he chased her and barged back into her town, it was only because he was tired of twiddling his thumbs.

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When he arrived at her office, she already had her purse over her shoulder and was locking her door. She pinned him with an impatient look. "We need to hurry," she nagged. "We're catching the red line to Cambridge."

"I had to send Scott the benefit summary before I left, so he could give it to Installation." He fell in step with her long, angry gait, listening to her pumps click against the tile.

"She's hard to book an appointment with," Ororo explained. "Work's work, but this is important."

"I never said it wasn't," he shot back. He punched the elevator button on a low growl. It was going to be one of those days. Once the elevator dinged and opened on their floor, Ororo dug into her purse for some saltines. "Whatsamatter? You feeling queasy, darlin'?"

"Don't talk about it. That just makes it worse," she told him sourly as she crammed one of the bland, dry things into her mouth. Logan's own mouth felt dry and pasty, watching her. They emerged in the lobby and joined the bustle of foot traffic, making a beeline for the subway tunnel. Logan mused to himself that the token vendors in their glassed in booths were just as hostile in New York as they were in Boston as his change was shoved back at him through the slot, making him scramble to gather up the coins. They huddled closely on the platform, grimacing at the stale odors and noisy clatter of the rails as the Hudson Avenue Northbound pulled out.

They bickered as they waited for their train, and he hovered over her protectively, practically snarling at anyone who jostled her in the crowd. Logan was in a mood. For the briefest of moments, he felt her hand tuck itself under his arm. His tension and frustration dwindled with the contact; he drew her close, looping her arm through the crook of his. When the red line arrived, they bustled inside, rushing for a seat close to the door.

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He felt her hand gently cover his, squeezing his fingers. "This is our stop."

"How much farther is it?"

"Just a few blocks."

They spilled out of the train car with the rest of the crowd, and Ororo shuddered in relief to be out of its close confines. Logan heard her exhaling slow, even breaths alternating with rough chews of the minty gum as they pushed their way through the turnstiles. He had to double his pace to keep up
with her as the walked up the moving escalator. "Y’alright?" he pressed.

"Ugh," she told him. "Hate the subway, even on the best of days, but today... Everything's too close, too stuffy, too loud..." She ceased her litany of complaints as they reached the street and what passed for fresh air.

"Smell got to ya, didn't it?"

"Every smell gets to me," she confessed. "Might want to ease up on the cologne, just a tad..."

He'd come to her rescue with the gum, only to become Public Enemy Number One with his aftershave. He couldn't win. He fell in step with her and instinctively linked arms with her as they crossed the busy street. For an inkling, she remembered another brisk walk they took together on the way to the airport, on a warm, uncomplicated day. His grip on her was still protective; it walked the line of being affectionate. Her mind swirled with questions and what-ifs as they neared the five-story brownstone. The last time she came there, she was with Victor, and her world was about to fall apart.

Pine-sol and cloves. The smell hit her as they entered the front lobby. The same ficus trees stood in their large, terra cotta pots. They crossed the same floor with the same flaw in the sedate gray tile. She recognized the framed print of a cowboy riding a wild bronco; the watercolor drip mark hadn't gone away since her last check-up. She gave the receptionist at the desk a noncommittal smile as she signed her sheet.

"Which floor is she on?" Logan asked.

"Third." Ororo led him to the elevator, and he pressed their floor then let his hand rest at the small of her back as the doors closed. Her sigh was heavy.

"All right?"

"Fine, I guess." She was more fidgety now than she'd been on the train.

"You guess." His brow furrowed, and she felt him tense. "You'll tell me if anything's wrong, right? If ya feel a little off, or -" She held up her hand to deflect him, which earned her a look of annoyance.

"I won't keep anything a secret. Don't worry."

"Considering our track record, darlin', don't blame me for asking." Her mouth dropped open, then shut, then opened again before she found words.

"Excuse me?" Ororo's hand went to her hip again, and he suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. Barely. "Our... Our track record? Mind explaining what our track record includes that involves me not telling you what you need to know?"

"I need to explain it to you?" His voice reeked of snark. Her blue eyes narrowed.

"Explain." The word was a drop of poison.

But the elevator doors mercifully opened into a crowded hallway, and they wisely, silently proceeded toward the clinic suite. A gold name plaque read "Cecilia Reyes, OB/GYN" beside a door with slightly peeling wood veneer; Logan's first glance through the window pane yielded a pregnant woman wrangling a toddler from where she sat on a vinyl-upholstered seat. Ororo preceded him inside, and he still felt her pissitivity radiating around her as she approached the desk clerk, her insincere smile pasted onto her face.
"I think we're a teeny bit early to see Dr. Reyes. Ororo Munroe?"

"Okay!" The bubbly girl didn't look old enough for junior high per-algebra, and she cracked her gum at them as she handed Ororo the paperwork. "Take this clipboard and fill these out, and I'll copy your insurance card, unless it hasn't changed since the last time?"

"It hasn't," Ororo said tightly. The clerk prattled on aimlessly.

"It's been a while since we've seen you! Is all of your info the same?" She smiled up at Logan. "You're Victor?" They both chafed; Ororo smothered a sigh.

"Hell, no," Logan muttered. "We'll be over here filling out the papers, kid."

"That's fine!" She pointed in the direction of the back of the lobby. "There's a water cooler if you need a drink. Make yourselves comfy while we get an exam room ready. Dr. Reyes will see you shortly." They found two empty seats together by the large fish tank. Logan peered over her shoulder occasionally as she filled out the forms. "Forgot your middle name was Victoria."

"People don't slaughter it." Logan smirked.

"That bad?"

"It was worse as a kid. No one makes stuff with your name on it when you're an Ororo. Couldn't have just been a Cathy, a Heather, a Crystal or a Sue."

"You can't even count how many Jim's you've met in your lifetime."

"You go by Logan, though," she pointed out.

"Has more pizzazz." Ororo smirked.

"Fair enough."

"Mom didn't hit the baby books. She went old school with me and my brother."

"Just one brother, right? What's his name again?"

"John."

"He go by anything else?"

"Nope." Ororo shrugged and went back to her paperwork. Logan reached for his phone and thumbed through it, then nudged her. "John's kids. They just had the baby." Her demeanor softened for the first time all morning as she took it from him.

"They remind me of you. Look at your niece's red hair."

"Rose is a ginger." Logan sighed. But Ororo just handed him back the phone, not digging any more deeply into the subtle shift in his mood.

"No redheads in my family."

"How about those blue eyes?"

"Hm? Oh. My mom said her grandmother was blue-eyed."
"Bet you were a cute baby." She peeked back at him, ignoring her forms again, but he went back to his phone, checking the Red Sox scores. It was too tempting to stare at her and inventory his favorite details, and she'd likely bite his head off. She made short work of the forms until the last sheet, which she handed to him.

"What am I doing with this, Tory?"

"Family history of any illnesses. You're the daddy. Mention everything you can think of." He sighed and took the pen.

"I'm healthy as a horse." He checked almost an entire column of no's. She peeked over his shoulder at the yes beside "heart disease."

"Your dad?" She inquired.

"Yeah." The next column was nearly as blank, until he reached "cancer."

"Who had it?"

"Mom. She's been gone about three years."

"I'm sorry that's something we have in common." She leaned against him slightly as he finished the sheet. The tension he'd been carrying in his neck and shoulders began to dissipate. "It's been a little longer than that for my dad. Mom was only fifty-five."

"Wow." He handed her back the sheet, and he felt a bit bereft when she got up and returned the form packet to the front desk. Before she could sit back down, Ororo saw a nurse in pink scrubs come into the lobby.

"Ororo Munroe? Come on back!" Logan joined her, despite her dubious look.

"You don't have to come for the exam."

"What am I gonna do, pick my nose and read an issue of Cosmo? Life? Newsweek?" Ororo sighed and rolled her eyes. Logan gathered both their belongings and they headed into the exam room that felt no bigger than a shoebox. She called Ororo back into the corridor and handed her a plastic cup with a white lid. "Before you get too comfy in there, go fill that to the line right there." She marked one of the measurement marks with a Sharpie. Ororo sighed.

"Oh, goodie." Logan snickered. "And so, it begins."

"Hey, we can tell a lot from your pee. You'll be doing a lot of that, anyway, right?"

"Ya've gotta talk about it?" Logan wrinkled his nose, and Ororo rolled her eyes before retreating to the small lavatory. Logan did reach for a magazine then, until the nurse nodded to his forms.

"Those all filled out?" Logan obediently went back to them, resuming the too-personal questionnaire with another sigh.

"Couldn't make these things any longer?" The RN smirked.

"I know. We like to be thorough. It was nice that you could come today." Logan didn't dignify that, giving her something between a nod and a shrug. "Would you like some water?"

"Sure." She filled him a paper cup from a filtered tap at the sink; it was dwarfed by his sturdy fingers. He tossed it back in a quick gulp, and she chucked it into the small kick bucket. "You look
like you've had a long day already."

"Nope. Just peachy." She gave him a knowing nod.

"Anxious?"

"I'm not the one peeing in a cup." Before she could retort, Ororo came back and set the specimen on the counter. She glanced at Logan's expression and murmured, "What?"

"Nothing, darlin'."

"Let me check your vitals and weight." Ororo pouted, then nodded. Logan looked amused when she stepped out of her pumps and followed the nurse into the hall. She looked cute in her stocking feet, padding over the carpeting, and it conjured images in his mind of her idling in his apartment in far less. He heard the slide of the weights across the rail and Ororo’s tsk of disgust, and Logan suppressed a smirk.

"Okay. Gown up and hop up onto the table."

"You really don't have to stay for this part," she told him with some irritation.

"Wish I knew why ya keep givin' me the bum's rush, Tori."

"These exams aren't the most dignified thing in the world." She demonstrated the stirrups, levering one up and spreading it out.

"Um..."

"That's not the creepiest part." She picked up the speculum sitting on the tray and removed it from it's plastic sleeve. She cranked it open a notch and pretended it was a hand puppet. "Go to the lobby and wait, Logan," she chirped in a goofy voice.

"Uh..."

"The ultrasound isn't the good one yet. They use the wand..."

"Wand?"

"Kind of like a dip stick on your car."

"Geez... Right. I'm out." He paused at the door and doubled back, giving her a kiss in the cheek. "Have 'me come get me if they tell ya anything important."

"Okay." She watched him go, covering the imprint of his lips with her hand. She gowned up and folded her clothes, discreetly hiding her undies inside the pile. Five minutes later, Dr. Reyes walked inside with her stethoscope and clipboard. She smiled fondly. "Long time, no see, lady. You look good!"

"I feel puffy."

"Then you're beginning to feel pregnant," she said cheerfully.

"Queasy, too."

"Oh, joy. Anything else?"
"Low grade headaches. Crying at the drop of a hat. Everything smells weird. And I'm having this weird craving for bananas. Which wouldn't be weird if I didn't hate bananas."

"Really?"

"I don't trust any food that turns black and mushy five days after you buy it." Dr. Reyes grinned and nodded, jotting some things down.

"Fair enough. Good source of potassium, though." She looked over her paperwork. "Separated?"

"Divorced."

"Different dad, then."

"He's out in the lobby."

"Is he on board?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Glad you'll have support." She adjusted the stirrups. "Saddle up! Scooch to the edge of the table."

"Ugh..."

She spent the next few minutes answering questions, making faces and counting dots on the ceiling while Dr. Reyes finished her exam. "All right. Now for the fun part."

"Ultrasound?"

"That, and the heartbeat." She paged her assistant on the intercom. "Jubilee, go ahead and bring Ororo's fiancé back." Ororo gaped and stammered.

"Um, he's..." Dr. Reyes raised her brows.

"Did I misspeak?"

"It's complicated."

"Always is." She laid a second sheet over Ororo's lap for discretion and readied the transducer. By the time Ororo heard Logan's heavy steps, there was already an image on the monitor. He grinned sheepishly.

"Looks like I've been missing the party."

"Nonsense. This is where it gets good. Pull up a chair with the lovely mother of your child and get ready to enjoy the show." Excitement fluttered in his chest, and he stroked Ororo's arm once he pulled up a seat beside her and leaned in to watch.

"It's all blurry."

"I know. It looks weird, but you can make out a few things... Aahhhhh. Here we goooooo..." Ororo squirmed slightly as she moved the wand. "There it is."

"It looks like a floating potato chip." Logan's voice was awed, and Ororo heard a hint of amusement.
"So he doesn't look like family just yet," she conceded. Logan peered up into her face, and his heart twisted. She smiled, a look that wanted to be smug, but that stopped at sheepish, and even a little anxious.

"He?"

"Not sure yet." Dr. Reyes paused. "Are we finding out?"

"Yes," Logan exclaimed, just as Ororo announced "No!"

"Aaaaaand there we go. I can tell this is going to be a fun ride. Okay." She launched into an explanation of what they were looking at, and Ororo's hand crept into Logan's as she explained that the tiny flickering thing was the beating heart. Dr. Reyes degloved and scribbled on her clipboard. "Wasn't a great view of the sex yet, anyway, but everything was where it belonged. You're about nine weeks." Ororo nodded.

"That sounds right to you?"

"Potluck day."

"Potlu... Right, right." Heat rose up into his face as the memory unfolded itself. Ororo smirked and stared down at their linked hands.

"I'll let you get decent, and then meet me in my office." Dr. Reyes stepped outside, leaving Ororo to put herself back together. Logan couldn't stop smiling.

* 

The rest of the consult went as expected once they met Dr. Reyes at her desk. She avoided Victor's name, only mentioning her last pregnancy in context of what to expect.

"Sometimes it's easier. Shorter pregnancy, shorter labor, less aggressive symptoms if you're lucky."

"Not sure how lucky I feel at five AM every day when I'm hugging the porcelain." Logan cringed and shook himself. Ororo pinned him with a look.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Just give me a call if anything feels out of the ordinary. I hope you're avoiding stress?"

"Yeah, right," Logan scoffed. "She told you what we do for a living, right, Doc?"

"I'm managing it," Ororo insisted. Dr. Reyes' brows lifted.

"Do tell."

"I just moved back. Now that I'm back in my old market, I'm traveling less. I have a much better account manager." Ororo's tone was confident, but Logan shook his head.

"Emma ain't much better than Selene."

"Oooohhh, trust me, she is."

"I don't want you traveling, for now. Short road trips are fine, but no air travel. It does funky things to your blood pressure, and you don't need those TSA nutballs waving their wands over you and getting all handsy, AND I don't want you walking through those x-ray scanners. Are we clear?"
“Crystal,” Logan answered for her.

“Wait... What????”

“I’ll see you both back in four weeks.”

“But...”

“No travel. No stressful business trips. Give baby the rest that he deserves to grow. Go easy on yourself, and stop pretending you're a superhero.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Logan helped Ororo up from her chair, and her mouth still gaped in annoyance.

“Don't I get a say in this?”

“When's the due date?” Logan asked as if she hadn't said anything.

“New Year's Day.”

“There ya go. Don't even hafta make a resolution,” Logan told her.

“I can't travel for work?”

“Nope.” Dr. Reyes shifted her glasses to the end of her nose. “Everything else you want to do should be fine. Just no heavy lifting or running marathons. Oh, and intercourse shouldn't be a problem for now.” Logan's face lit up. "Anything else you wanted to know?”

“Nope.” Logan's Cheshire grin made Ororo want to smack him. They bustled out to the front desk and settled up, rebooking a month out. They headed out into the afternoon sunshine, overloaded with information and revelations.

“January.” Ororo's voice sounded a little resigned. That wasn't long for them to get their acts together.

“New Year's.” He squeezed her hand. Neither of them mentioned that Nate would have been a Valentine's baby, even though it lingered in the air between them. “Just enough time to pack away the Christmas tree.”

“I never get one,” she shrugged. “I was just gonna go to my dad's.” Logan frowned, and she extracted her hand from his grip. “That's what I usually do.”

“You went to Mexico for it last year. I think you can break tradition again at least one more time.”

“Why?”

“Whaddya mean, why?” He was incredulous. “I want ya to meet my family. It'd be a good time to do it.”

“Why wait that long?”

“We can introduce you sooner than that,” he recanted, but irritation was creeping into his voice.

“My dad's alone. I'm going to spend the holiday with him.” They headed back into the subway tunnel, and her stomach was already complaining about the odors.
"Is that something we can negotiate?"

"I didn't think I'd have to."

Logan wanted to bang his head against the wall. He threw up his hands, letting them slap against his thighs before they fed tokens into the turnstile.

The song and dance continued. Heaven only knew who was leading, and the song sounded like screeching cats.
Things in the apartment were getting weird.

Ororo didn’t really know how to live with a roommate. Not since college, at any rate, when she had to share a dorm room on campus with a girl named Lorna who liked dying her hair green and listened to death metal at all hours of the night. They cut each other a wide berth most of the time, split the landline phone bill down the middle, and tried to make themselves scarce whenever the other would have a “hook-up” over, even if that just meant Ororo had to pull the covers over her head and pretend she didn’t hear any noises from across the room. In the dorm, she had to share a bathroom with twenty other women. There wasn’t much privacy or quiet. Everyone knew her business. There was never an hour of the night when someone didn’t witness your walk of shame, especially if you had to stagger up the stairs in platform heels after Dollar Pitcher night.

It was only temporary, she had told Anna, when she moved in with her after subletting it to her. She never realized that it would come to an impasse of who was going to move out first.

“So,” she mentioned on a Saturday over a bowl of “healthy” looking cereal full of flax and chia and almonds and goodness knows how many kinds of aggressive fiber that inevitably got stuck in your teeth, “the lease is up in a couple of months.”

“That thought occurred to me.” Ororo sipped her green tea, butt leaned up against the corner. Her stomach was still being picky about what she put into it, not to mention the foods she allowed herself to smell. Ororo and Anna had to have a serious discussion about Anna’s fried catfish. It hadn’t been pretty.

“I was thinkin’ about signing onto it again,” Anna said. She spooned up another bite of cereal. It was easily the noisiest bite of food Ororo ever heard being chewed.

She sighed. “You don’t say.”

“And Remy and I have been having some pretty interesting conversations about his livin’ situation, too.”
Ororo tried and failed not to exhale loudly through her nose, a voiceless growl that Vic used to despise.

“How interesting are we talking?”

“This apartment’s nicer than his, and his lease is up next month. His landlord wants t’give him five weeks to either renew his lease or get out before he has to prorate a month’s rent for the next tenant.”

Aaaaaannnd of course.

"I know yer in a kinda 'in-between' situation with Logan," Anna allowed.

Ororo laughed mirthlessly. "A 'situation.' That's what we're calling it now?"

"Best Ah can come up with, shoog. C'mon now." Anna shook her spoon at her for emphasis. "That man moved several states fer you."

"For the baby," Ororo corrected her.

"Don't be hardheaded, Tory." Anna's green eyes brooked no nonsense. "That man cares about you. None of mah exes ever helped me move my stuff when I was leavin' 'em above and beyond puttin' anything I left in their apartment in a box, dumping it on the trunk of mah car and then skedaddlin.'"

"So he helped me move." Her expression was cavalier, but she hugged herself more tightly, staring down into her teacup.

"It was kinda dirty not telling him about that bun in yer oven until the last minute."

"Well, now we've been talking about it." They had another appointment in two weeks. Ororo's skirts were getting tight. She had a visit coming up to see her dad, and she was cringing at the thought of that discussion where she told him that she "got into trouble."

Did that even count when you were an adult? She mentally scolded herself. Pop would be supportive, and it wasn't like she was still living at home, or young enough to embarrass her parents. But Ororo still felt like she was going to get scolded - or even grounded - like she wasn't a grown-ass woman, yet. Like she wasn't the one paying her own bills or putting food on the table. Even when she came cruising through the front door of Pop's house, she felt like he was catching her creeping up the stairs during the wee hours in high heels, too much makeup, and the hoochie dress Mama already told her she couldn't wear. She half-expected Pop to be standing there, raising his eyebrows, sucking his teeth and checking his watch.

Pop, you're going to be a grandpop. The thought made the corners of her lips twitch. Anna gave her a look.

“What?” she pried, grinning.

“I still haven’t told my dad.”

“Girrrrl, yer a mess,” Anna told her. “Bet he’ll be tickled pink, though.”

“I’m just hoping he doesn’t get his shotgun out of the attic.”

“Hey, ya’ve been married once, already. He can’t get too mad.”

“He never liked Vic all that much, anyway.” He hadn’t. Mama used to make Vic feel at home, pulling up a chair and setting a plate in front of him, but Pop would give him a peremptory little
wave and flap his newspaper back in front of his face for the better part of the visit. “But ‘married once’ doesn’t excuse knocked up and shacked up now.”

“But, ya could shack up if worse came ta worse. Might even be for the best, woman. C’mon, now. That little sprout ya got growin’ inside ya probably can’t wait t’meet Daddy.”

Ororo made an exasperated noise, narrowing her eyes. “Okay. You’re beating it to death, now.”

“Beatin’ what?”

“A dead horse. Anna, things are complicated between Logan and me.”

“Then uncomplicate ‘em, shooog. Ah’m serious. He’s decent, works hard, and his eyes follow you in and out of the room. That man’s carryin’ a big-ass torch for ya, so quit tryin’ ta put it out!”

“But.”

“Uh-uh.”

“He-“

“Nuh-uh! Zip it, missy! Listen ta Auntie Anna. The two of ya can keep wastin’ time tiptoein’ around it, or ya can admit what’s obvious ta everybody else except you two knuckleheads. Ya care about each other. Ya might have issues, but who the hell doesn’t?”

“You just want me out of the apartment,” Ororo accused, but her cheeks were burning and she had a rash of staticky tingles running up and down her back. Thinking of Logan, what it would be like to wake up to him in the morning, without wondering when he would make his excuses to leave, or tiptoeing out and making a hasty exit herself. The memory of their first encounter, how hard it was to leave his solid warmth, chafed her.

“True. Ah ain’t gonna lie, sugah. But I also want ya ta consider that keeping him close might be a good idea. Ya have a stressful job. Ya need someone ta look after you.”

“Um, no.”

“Do, too. Ya work too many late nights and bring too much work home.” Ororo had brought her laptop home, and it was “sleeping” in her room atop her small desk. “Ya hafta look after yer health. Mah niece or nephew needs their beauty rest and fer Mama not t’be a basket case.” Anna toyed with her cereal while it slowly deteriorated into grayish slime in the bowl. “Look, ya left Boston and came back t’New York. Bravo. Ya were happier here than ya were in that office, anyway, and now ya don’t hafta deal with that Prada-wearing devil of a boss anymore.” Ororo huffed. “And ya have a chance ta start fresh with Jimbo.”

“Jimbo??? Ugh… no. Just, just don’t. He would never speak to either of us if you call that man Jimbo. Stick with Logan.”

“Fair enough. Called himself James when he was doin’ business. Mighta avoided some of the confusion if he’d started out as ‘Logan’ and stuck with it. The two of ya. Ah just wanna smack both yer heads together. But still, don’t throw me off track, here. Ah had a point.” She glanced away for a moment. “Shit. What was it?”

“Got me,” Ororo teased.

“Wait a minute, yeah. Yeah, I remember, now. No more hidin’ out in broom closets. Yer back on yer
home turf. No Selene. Yer back among yer friends, in the market that yer familiar with, close to yer pop, and your baby daddy lives in the same town, now.”

“Baby daddy… that just made it so much worse.”

“But it could be worse. You know it could. This one’s different. He ain’t Vic.”

“I know he isn’t.”

“Yet yer actin’ like yer waitin’ for him ta turn into him. Look, Vic left. That’s no reason ta push Logan away, is it?”

“No. I just don’t know what I’m getting into if we try to turn this ‘knocked up’ thing into a ‘thing.’ See what I mean?”

“Nope.” A divot appeared between Anna’s brows. “Maybe ya better explain it ta me.”

“He lost his wife. He lost their baby, which he didn’t even know about, I might add. So, I move out of town, which he doesn’t do all that much to stop, until after I tell him about the baby.”

“Oh, Lawd…” Anna rolled her eyes. “Ya acted like ya didn’t want him ta stop ya! Poor man’s head’s probably spinning wondering what it is that ya really want!”

“Anna, I know he wants this baby. In an ideal world, maybe he would have had it with his wife. I’m already scared to death that I’ll manage to do this wrong.”

Anna’s face softened. “Tory, ya won’t. Ya hear me? Yer doin’ everything right, if ya just take care of yerself and let Logan help you, be there fer you. Don’t try ta do this by yerself. Don’t ask yerself what would’ve been if he were havin’ this baby with his first wife. Don’t beat yerself up. That’s enough of that, sugah.”

Ororo sighed, and her eyes flitted away, but Anna noticed that they were already glistening. She abandoned her breakfast, took Ororo’s mug away from her and set it on the counter. She dragged Ororo into a hug, ignoring how stiff she felt in her arms, at first. “It’s temptin’ ta wanna think about what things coulda been like between you an’ Vic if Nate were here.”

Ororo’s body relaxed, and she sagged against Anna, releasing a shaky sigh.

“That’s all I think about. I miss my son.”

“Ah know, sweetheart.”

“I miss him so much. I don’t want to do this wrong.”

“Ya won’t.”

“Okay.”

“Yer gonna be fine. Ya’ve got a lot of things ta figure out. Don’t try ta figure ‘em out all by yerself.”

“I can’t stop thinking about what I was supposed to have.”

“Ya don’t have to stop thinking about it. You’re always gonna miss Nate. That ain’t gonna change. And Logan knows that. That might be why he’s givin’ ya room ta think about things.” Anna stroked her hair. “He’s a nice guy. If anyone has any clue what ‘you were supposed ta have,’ it’s him, sugah.”
Ororo gently pulled away. She rubbed her eyes and leaned back against the counter. “I guess he does.”

“Okay. So. We can keep goin’ on how we are, darlin’, or we can write out a list of pros and cons of stayin’ here versus feeling Logan out for what he’s thinkin’ about a living arrangement.”

Ororo sighed again. It was going to be a long afternoon.

*

The list of cons involved in staying on the lease with Anna eventually outweighed those of moving out, even though Ororo didn’t feel like moving in with Logan was the immediate answer. Still, as much as she loved Anna:

Anna needed her beauty rest. Ororo’s baby seemed to get its kicks already from making her pee every three hours in the middle of the night and sending her sprinting to the bathroom to say goodbye to dinner from the night before at the crack of dawn.

Remy was a frequent visitor. That wasn’t bad. It was just weird seeing another disheveled bedhead at the breakfast table most mornings. With stubble. Who wasn’t Logan.

Ororo felt like a third wheel whenever she joined them on the couch to watch TV.

She didn’t want to think of the things that they got up to on the couch when she wasn’t there.

Ororo hated watching anyone else use her favorite mug. Every time she reached for it, Anna was eating instant noodles out of it.

Anna liked the apartment warm, almost to the point of being stuffy. Ororo preferred to fall asleep in a cool room, then pile on the blankets.

Remy ate her last sleeve of saltines and never replaced them. Strangely, that was the dealbreaker.

Ororo quietly reviewed her second list, scratched out in her slanted handwriting.

Reasons to move in with Logan:

He can cook.

He gives good foot rubs.

He lets her sleep on her favorite side of the bed. And he doesn’t mind when she shoves her cold feet between his ankles to warm them up. Her memories of the weekend they spent together made pleasant ripples run down her spine.

He’s a good companion to have on the subway and doesn’t judge her for her claustrophobia.

They have the same twisted sense of humor.

He didn’t mind her bad singing. Sometimes, he sang along just as badly.

He was sensible with money. He marked the due dates for all of his bills on a little whiteboard by his refrigerator. Ororo crunched numbers for a living, and he was more anal about money than she was.
They could talk about baby-related stuff, appointments, sit together with him touching her belly at home, without worrying about having to “sneak” the chance whenever he stopped by her office. Working with him was still weird. He was adjusting just fine to the New York office, and he had made a few friends, but people were beginning to give them knowing looks, not unlike the staff in the Boston office. Except this time, it wasn’t “are they or aren’t they?” Word got out about the positive blue stick (thanks, Yukio), so there was no more speculating. Ororo still felt self-conscious and just plain tired of people up in their business.

Logan noticed, too. She saw him looking over his shoulder every time he approached her door, always seeming to hurry to close it behind him once he came inside. It felt ridiculous, like they were sneaking around. It wasn’t like they were even doing anything wrong. They were of an age. They were both single. There was no need for raised eyebrows. No one so much as batted an eye when Selene and Donald got engaged, or, more interestingly, when Scott began seriously dating Madelyne Pryor. Pictures of him with the redheaded account manager draped over him were plastered all over his Facebook.

She came back into the kitchen to make another cup of tea, stirring in a generous amount of honey.

“Well?” Anna pried.

“Tell Remy I want him to reimburse my half of the security deposit,” Ororo told her, sighing. “And that until I get my new place, he’d better put the damned seat down.”

Anna squealed and hugged her. Ororo silently asked herself if she knew what she was getting into.

Now came the tricky part. She had to broach the subject with Logan, and prepare for the fact that he might have as many misgivings as she did.

* 

Broaching the subject was easier than she thought.

She heard a brusque knock on her door and looked up from her Excel sheet. Logan was peering at her through the gap in her door’s vinyl blinds. His expression was uncertain, like he was chewing on something. “Come in,” she called out. And when he let himself in, she marveled at how good he looked in that Burberry suit in worsted wool. “What can I do for you, Mr. Howlett?” she asked him, straight-faced but with a teasing note in her voice.

He huffed, shaking his head. He tugged on the hair at the nape of his neck, and his posture was almost… awkward. Uncharacteristically ill at ease. “It’s like this, Tory… I mean… I’ve been meanin’ ta talk to you about… Fuck.”

“Okay.” Ororo murmured, crinkling her brow and backing away from her desk slightly to give him her full attention.

“Sorry.”

“No worries.”

“Let me start again. We’re havin’ a baby.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s comin’ up pretty soon. It’s good ta have a plan in place and be on the same page.”
“Sage words.” Her voice was bland, but a smile was tugging at her lips.

"Ya already mentioned that ya plan on going to yer dad's for the holidays, right?" And he looked a little resigned about that, even deflated.

“That was the plan.”

“That’s cool. I just thought it might be nice, if my family got ta meet ya at some point. What with my pop probably wondering what the mother of his grandchild is like, an’ all.”

“I can see where that might be a concern,” Ororo deadpanned.

Logan looked like he was about to continue, then pulled himself up short, narrowing his eyes. “That sounded kinda smart-assed.”

“Not at all.”

“Are ya implyin’ that yer dad has reason ta be concerned about meeting me?”

Now she outright chuckled, showing him a modicum of mercy. “No need to be concerned at all. You two might end up being peas in a pod. Just don’t be offended if he greets you at the front door with a shotgun, at first.”

“Oh, that’s no pressure at all.” He huffed a laugh and leaned against the edge of her desk. “So. Speakin’ about going home ta meet yer dad… I’ve been meaning ta breach the subject of ‘home’ with ya.”

She felt her cheeks heat up and a funny little tingle run through her belly. “Oh? You have?”

He rubbed his nape again and sighed. “Tory… I wanna be close to you and the baby.”

“We work together. Can’t get much closer than that.” She didn’t want to let him completely off the hook. Some selfish, niggling part of her wanted to hear him ask. Just for posterity. Just… because.

“Might get a little closer, kiddo. I’m gettin’ settled in. Got a month-to-month lease at the moment.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Place is the size of a shoebox.”

“I bet. This is New York,” she quipped. She took a sip of her black chai tea and made a face; it was lukewarm and down to the last few tablespoons, so all of the sweetener pooled up in the bottom.

Logan scowled. “Is that decaf?”

“Are you kidding? Of course not! Decaf is the tool of the Devil, I will have you know.”

“No caffeine. It’s not good fer pregnant women.”

“Excuse me? Says who?”

“All the baby books and the parenting articles and Dr. Oz. And Oprah.”

She sensed he was fibbing. “Oprah? Oprah said that?”
“Probably. But still. No caffeine. Ya don’t need it.” His expression was mulish.

Ororo made a low “pfffttt” sound with her lip and rolled her blue eyes, but he folded his arms. “I need my caffeine. I need it to function. I need it to do the adulty things. I’m unpleasant without it.”

“So, yer tellin’ me that this right now is you on caffeine?”

“What?!? Oh, you… okay. Get out. Out of my office…” She stood and attempted to shoo him off of her desk, but he held up his hands in an appeasing gesture.

“Take it easy. Sorry. That was bad.”

“Very.”

“But back to that ‘home’ question.”

“You never really asked it.”

“Okay. So. Whaddya think?”

“Of?”

“We both work pretty decent jobs. Like I said before, my place is the size of a shoe box. I’m looking ta upgrade.”

“Okay.”

She watched him straighten up and draw in toward her, close enough for her to smell his aftershave. His hands were gentle when he reached for her, taking her slender, cool hands into his. She shivered at his warmth.

“And the two of us might be able ta find a nicer place if… if we moved in together.”

“So, we shack up?”

“That ain’t how I was gonna phrase it. We’re grownups, kiddo.” But his hazel eyes crinkled and he tried to suppress his smile. “C’mon. I’m pleadin’ my case, here.”

“You’re doing a great job of it, too. Go on.”

“Seriously?”

“Give me a list of the pros.” Her thumbs stroked his fingers, though, in a telling way, and she felt a funny tremor of excitement in her stomach. Or, it could have been gas. Lately, she couldn’t quite tell. The baby was the size of a walnut and he was already wreaking havoc with her innards.

“I’d get to see the baby. The baby would get to see me.”

“Mmmm. True.”

“I’d get to see you for more than five minutes. Without a conference phone between us.”

“That could be an advantage.”

“Sure as hell is, darlin’.”

The pet name shivered down her back and all the way to her toes; she remembered how it felt
husked into her ear in the dark, breathed into the side of her neck… Ororo cleared her throat.

“And it’d give us time ta talk about things. Time we haven’t really had.”


“About why ya left Boston. More specifically, why ya left me.”

And there it was. *Boom, goes the lightning.*

"Leaving was about keeping my job, Logan. Not about leaving you.”

“Ya know I don’t believe that,” he said softly.

“Logan, if you think my leaving was all about you, then why ask me to move in with you? Isn’t it just about the baby?”

She saw – felt – the shift in him. His shoulders stiffened, and he sighed deep and heavy, then shook his head. “It can’t be about you, darlin’?” And she wanted to believe him, so badly. Those dark eyes bore into hers. “It can’t be about us?”

“Is it?” Her voice sounded uncertain to her own ears.

“Were you afraid of what was happening between us, Tory? Hm? Do ya have yer doubts about me? Not because of what ya had with Vic, and how things ended with him, but because of me?”

Her skin felt tight and her throat was trying to close up. Her mouth went so dry. “No,” she huffed. “You didn’t do anything wrong.” Something loosened in her chest at those words. It freed some of the emotions clogging up her insides. “You never did anything wrong.” Her eyes flitted away from the intensity in his, but he tugged her closer to him, his large hands feeling warm around her waist. She grew self-conscious about it, wondering if he noticed her thickening around the middle. If he still found her attractive. If-

“Tell me about the things I’ve done right, then. I need to know, darlin’.”

A rough little laugh escaped her. “What? Like a list?”

“A short list?” he suggested.

“Not… *that* short.”

“That’s encouraging.” He looked put out. She chuckled and tugged briefly on his carefully knotted tie.

“There are some good things. Even when you have your clothes on.”

His eyes crinkled with the slow smile that spread across his face, and that was it, she mused. That. Definitely on the list.

“You make me laugh.”

“ Took a while, darlin’. You can be a little hard ta read.”

“Am not.”

“A little.” He held up his finger and thumb, with very little space in between.
“You’re definitely blunt. I’m still deciding if that’s a pro or a con, mind you…”

“Hey!”

“Just being honest.”

“Maybe you can go back ta bein’ hard ta read.”

“Nope.” Her hands slid up to his shoulders, temptingly broad and firm, his flesh radiating heat beneath the sateen of his shirt. “And I like the way you look at me.”

“How’s that? How do I look at you, Tory?”

“Like I’m the only one in the room. Like you can’t take your eyes off of me.”

“Because I can’t.”

She didn’t resist his kiss, and her arms stole around his neck. This was what she had missed. Too much tiptoeing around it, not enough time alone, and this was the thing she couldn’t describe to him, the magnetic pull between them, how she was left with a hollow ache inside now, when she had to be away from him at night.

Her move had _killed_ her. Her body remembered his touch, his scent, the sound of his voice, his breath misting over her skin. She could only admit to herself that he was her lodestone, always pointing north. Toward home.

Yet home was New York. He’d followed her this far. And he’d missed her, clearly. The kiss refused to end, and she was clinging to him, a small moan escaping her that tingled the whole way down his spine, tightening his grip on her. Her fingers curled into his thick hair at his nape, and he shuddered at the light scratch of her nails.

Scott’s words haunted him. He longed to tell her that he loved her, but he wanted her to believe him. Things were tenuous and still riddled with questions.

She pulled back with some difficulty. They were both breathing hard. “Okay,” she rasped. “That’s on the list. You know that, right?”

“Kinda figured. Hope so, darlin’.”

“We can check that one off.”

“Fine by me. C’mere.” His mouth was too tempting, firm and hot beneath hers, and she barely noticed that he’d unbuttoned her blazer. His fingers were hot through the thin silk of her blouse, and she made an indecent noise when he caught her breast, thumb flicking over her obliging nipple. That was when she remembered their surroundings. Her office. They were going at it like rabbits in _her office._

She pulled back, and his eyes were dark with passion, expression dazed. “What?” he asked. She felt a little smug that he was panting.

“People are already talking.”

“I don’t care. Not one fucking bit. You don’t, either.”

Didn’t she?
That had been one of the things that Selene had breathed down her neck about, accusing her of being unprofessional. Of “questionable” workplace conduct. Logan watched her expressions, seeing the moment that she began to shut him out, forgetting about “them” and getting caught up in something uncomfortable, something she couldn’t stop chewing on.

“Can’t do this here,” she reminded him as she drew back. She rebuttoned her blazer, mentally scolding herself that it was getting more difficult with her pregnancy. Logan reached up and straightened his tie. His shirt was faintly rumpled, but his whole face shuttered, as though the kiss hadn’t happened.

“Then pick the place.”

“The place?”


“Pfftt…” She shook her head and gave him a look. “Really?”

“Things were just getting interesting last time, Tory.”

“You’re awful. You realize that?”

“But that goes back to our original discussion. I want more time with you. I want to be able to have these conversations and not worry about someone busting in that door, or my office, or someone catching me staring at your legs of giving myself a quick peek down yer blouse.”

Tory sighed. “You have a one-track mind.”

“Can’t have too much of a good thing.”

That made her cheeks burn. “No more supply closets.”

“Then what’s your suggestion?”

“Ask me on a date.”

He huffed, staring at her. “A date.”

“Yes. A real date. We did things backwards.”

“That’s the understatement of the year.”

“But yes. I want you to take me on a date. Normal people go on dates. People who have relationships with any semblance of hope that they can function go on dates, Logan.”

“Mexico didn’t count?”

“Noooooooo. Nope. That was an ‘encounter.’” She made quotey fingers around it. “You said this isn’t just about the baby. We might be a package deal, but I don’t want to just be the one carrying your child. I know what the baby means to you. But I have to know what I mean to you if we’re going to do this right, James.”

Uh-oh. James.

“That weekend in Boston?”

“So, ya want us to rewind? Go all the way back to where?”

“Tell me you’ve noticed me. Save the clever pick-up lines.”

“You sure? I’ve got some awesome ones, darlin’.”

“Ask me if I want to grab dinner. Make a suggestion that I wear something nice. And don’t bring small talk to the table. We can skip that much, at least. But don’t skip the rest.”

“That’s what ya want.”

“That’s what I want. If you want me, like you say you want me. If you think we can make a go of moving in together, Logan, we have to do this right.”

He mulled that for a moment. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

He turned on his heel and headed for the door.

“Logan-“

“I’ll let you get back to your work, Miss Munroe. Sorry to interrupt.”

“What-“

Her door clicked shut behind him.

“What the fuck just happened?”

She went back to her emails, tempted to call him back. Email him. Follow him down the corridor, except um, no. That would set tongues wagging worse than before.

Blast that man.

*

Yukio texted her on her phone. What’s going on with you two? Logan’s been weird today.

Ororo chuckled without mirth. “Today, huh?” she said aloud as she typed.

Please tell me you aren’t having a tiff?

“Nnnnnnnope. Just dandy.”

Then the thought occurred to her. “How ‘weird’ is weird?”

He asked me about good restaurants for a first date. Can you believe that?

“No,” Ororo breathed aloud. The invisible bands around her chest for the better part of the afternoon snapped.

“Wow.”

She argued with herself about the implications of it for the rest of her day, and she logged off of her
Her stomach was growling savagely, and she dug into her saltine supply. Her stomach only had two settings, “Nauseous” and “Wave a Strip of Bacon Under My Nose, and See How Much of Your Hand You Come Back With.”

She felt hot and uncomfortable, feet swollen in her high heels, feeling the faint hint of bloat that always settled over her toward the end of the day and that definitely plagued her when she was pregnant. Ororo yearned for comfy PJ bottoms, a baggy tee, and red meat. In that order. She unbuttoned her blazer and slung her purse strap over her shoulder, laptop swinging from her hand in its case.

Before she could press the button for the elevator, Logan’s hand beat her to it. She gave him a look.

“Got a minute?”

“Maybe a minute. I have a train to catch.”

“After you.” He extended his hand toward the inside of the elevator with a flourish. Ororo smirked.

“Thank you, polite stranger.”

“My pleasure. Hope ya don’t mind me bein’ so bold when I tell you, miss. You have a nice pair of legs.”

Ororo blushed, ducking her face to hide her smile. “That was a little bold.”

“Just being honest.”

“Honesty is rare these days. Thank you, sir.”

“No. Thank you.”

She cleared her throat and counted the floors as they lit up on the display while they descended.

“ Noticed you around the building. Always wanted to talk to you, but I could never find a good opener.”

“So you held the elevator,” she pointed out. “Effective.”

“Was it?”

“We’re talking. You caught my attention.”

“Good. Mind if I’m a little bold again?”

“How bold?”

“Dinner. I’d like to take ya to dinner.”

“Dinner.”

“Because I’ve gotta admit, miss, I just can’t shake this funny feeling that we’d have a lot to talk about. Think we might get along really well.”

Her lips twitched. “That was awful.”

“Cut a guy a break, darlin’.”
Her smile spread slowly, widely, and her eyes were warm. “I’d love to go out to dinner, if you tell me your name.”

“James Howlett. But my friends call me Logan.”

“I like Logan. Suits you. Ororo Munroe. I also answer to Tory.”

“Charmed, Tory.”

Because this was the other part that they’d skipped, caught up in the thrall of the sandy beach and the tang of tequila and limes, seeing the colors and brilliance of the sunset in each other’s eyes. While they were searching for an escape. Logan wondered if she was ready to stop running.

“Logan, I would love to go to dinner with you.”

“Mind if I make a suggestion?”

“Suggest away.”

“Well, it’s more of a request, Tory.”

“Name it.”

“Wear something red.”
Chapter Summary

They go on a date. Talking happens. And... other things.

Chapter Notes

Smut, smutty smutterness. Because I'm a horrible person. Come hang out with me in my dumpster.

Not much left. There are a few loose threads I want to tie up, so thank you for sticking with it for this long.

Ororo just finished putting on a hint of perfume behind her ears and at the hollow of her throat when he knocked on her door. Anna looked up from her magazine where she was waiting on the couch. Her face was smug. She winked at Ororo and told her, “Right on the dot. Knows how ta make an impression.”

“He is a broker,” Ororo reminded her just as smugly, but strangely, her stomach was full of butterflies. This was unfamiliar territory. He was meeting her where she lived – literally – and he would see a snapshot of who she was away from work, the space where she lounged in ugly pajamas and stole sips of milk straight from the carton (sorry, Anna). She mentally asked herself if she took down the pantyhose from the showerhead. Anna had helped her freshen up the apartment, since Remy mentioned that he might “stop by” while Ororo was out. That they “might watch some Netflix” and just stay in for the night.

It wasn’t a big deal, she reminded herself. She’d seen Logan’s old place in New York. It was cozy, and she was comfortable occupying that space with him. Why should this be any different? He’d even helped her move out, for crying out loud…

She wondered if that fed her nervousness, somehow. She wondered what he was thinking. If this was going to put a weird spin on things for him, remembering the negatives of why she left, instead of trying to move forward. Her heels scuffed across the carpet as she went to answer the door. “Who is it?”

“Who do ya want me ta be?” came the snarky response, delivered in that deep, scratchy voice that she loved.

“I have options?” she teased as she unlocked the dead bolts and chain, after a peremptory glance through the peep hole, and she felt her breath catch.

“Wow,” she breathed. He was damned handsome after a fresh haircut and a trim of his sideburns, his sharp jawline clean-shaven and smooth. He wore a black silk suit and silver Rolex, a high shine on his Stacy Adams shoes. Ororo felt herself grow warm at the look in his dark eyes as they roved over her from head to toe. Logan held out a bouquet of white and pink roses. “Evenin’, Miss Munroe.”
“Good evening, sir,” she countered. Their fingertips brushed when she took the flowers. “Please, come in.” She stepped aside to usher him, accepting his little nod, and so help her, his expression… he looked hungry. Little shivers of anticipation ran down her arms. “You look nice, Mr. Howlett.”

“Ya’ve got a silver tongue. Do ya butter up everyone when ya first meet ‘em, darlin’?”


From the living room, Anna suppressed a chuckle until they both walked in, and then she gave a low wolf whistle.

“Mmn,” she tsked. “Oughta be arrested, shoog, comin’ up in here looking like that. It’s illegal ta go around givin’ women heart attacks.”

“Anna, do we still have that vase?”

“Blue one? Lemme get it,” Anna offered, and she hopped up from the couch and took the flowers with a jealous little gleam in her eyes. “Must be nice,” she muttered.

“Hush,” Ororo hissed under her breath. Logan and Ororo shared a look as she darted out of the room.

“You kept yer promise.” His voice was thick with want, his breath warm as it misted over her fingers when he kissed her knuckles. “That’s some dress.”

She restrained the urge to tell him This old rag? The way he was staring at her was a compliment on its own, and she wanted to enjoy it. Accept it. “Glad you like it.”

“Are we ready?”

“Ready, Freddie.”

Anna returned with the flowers in their new home, setting the vase on the coffee table. “Now Ah can show Remy how it’s done,” Anna claimed, winking at them.

“Give ‘im hell, kid.” Logan winked back as he helped Ororo with her jacket.

“Be home by midnight!” Anna called after them. Ororo turned and gave her a sour look that screamed “Yeah, right” as they headed out the door. “Don’t take no wooden nickles!”

“She’s a kick in the pants,” Logan mused when they hit the street. The air was crisp, and a faint breeze stirred Ororo’s hair, making the curling tendrils around her face fly loose.

“That’s Anna.”

When they crossed the street, Logan instinctively took her hand, and by the time they reached the end of the walk light on the opposite corner, she had her arm threaded through his. It felt natural, and his body radiated heat. He was a solid presence against her side, making her feel safe. They descended the stairs to the subway deck, with Logan letting her go through the turnstile first. They huddled close as they waited for the T, and an elderly woman in a heavy coat and wool beanie smiled and nodded at them.

“You’ve got yourself a snappy looking gentleman, you have,” she told Ororo.

“He cleans up nice, doesn’t he?” she agreed.
“Don’t let her out of your sight,” she told Logan.

“Not a chance.”

It warmed her.

“Never again,” he murmured, softly enough that only Ororo heard him.

The next half hour found him courting her. Holding doors. Pulling out chairs and helping her with her court.

“No one’s taken their eyes off of ya since we got here, darlin’,” Logan remarked.

“I think they envy my date,” she countered. This time, Logan was the one who ducked his head and smirked up at her.

“That sounds a lot like flirting, Miss Munroe.”

“Does it? I’m not normally that bold,” Ororo teased back. She sipped from her water glass, and she returned his stare. Before he could reply, their server arrived to take their order. She erred on the side of salad, nodding when asked if she wanted the chicken option. Logan decided on the special, medium rare once the server told him they weren’t allowed to let the steak “moo back at him” when they brought it to the table.

Ororo pulled a face. “You like your meat bloody?”

“There’s no greater injustice than overcooking a steak.”

They ignored their original agreement not to make small talk.

“I got a call from yer old boss today,” Logan mentioned.

“Lucky you.” Ororo’s tone was deadpan as she reached for the bread, spreading the slice with a thin layer of butter.

“Still no love lost?”

“Still no love won. I know you miss Boston, Logan, but there was no keeping me at that branch with her there.”

“Probably coulda made it work…”

“Nope.” She popped the ‘p’ in the word and bit into her roll, chewing with remembered rancor. “There was no making anything work while I was working for her. Any time she called me to her office, I felt like I was being called to the carpet.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Ever feel like no matter what you do for someone, it’s never enough? And, it’s like the whole universe decides that every interaction you have with that person is going to be an awkward mess from the jump?”

“Awkward? For you?” Logan gave her a dubious look.

“Trust me. Remember that visit you made to my office that one time?”
“Ya hafta be more specific.” His expression was devilish. She was distracted for a moment by it, then brought herself back on track.

“Hush. My hair game had been on point before you knocked on my door. She caught me looking like I had a rough night after you left.”

Logan remembered his penchant for taking her hair down and huffed a laugh. “Sorry.”

“You didn’t look sorry.”

“Probably wasn’t then. Kinda hard ta be, though. It’s hard seeing ya all buttoned up, Tory.”

“That’s called ‘civilized and professional.’”

“Nah. That’s called ‘that outfit’s gonna look nice puddled on the floor in the corner.’”

“Anyone ever tell you that you have a one-track mind?”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Perish the thought. My mind is pure as a lamb.”

“Medium rare lamb?”

He snorted into his water glass with that one.

Once their orders came, they ate slowly, lingering over the conversation in the dimly lit setting, low music, chatter and the clinks of silverware against plates surrounding them. Logan declined the server’s offer of wine, not wanting to partake while Ororo had to content herself with fruit juice in a pretty glass.

“Want a bite of my steak, darlin’?”

“The baby is happy with salad. Because the baby wants dessert,” she explained.

“Baby’s got a sweet tooth?”

“Can’t imagine where Baby gets it from.”

“Baby gets what Baby wants.” Logan wanted so badly to place an identity on the person occupying her body. Ororo’s staunch decision not to find out was killing him.

“Baby wants the chocolate mousse.” Their server materialized, smiling and brandishing her scratch pad.

“Did I hear someone say chocolate mousse? It’s excellent here.”

“You heard correctly,” Ororo told her. “Got a craving.”

“I was trying not to ask. Didn’t want to pry, but are you two expecting?”

“We’re both ‘expectin’,’ kid, but she’s the one carrying the baby,” Logan clarified, earning himself the server’s chuckle and Ororo’s facepalm.

“That was awful,” Ororo told him.
“What? It’s accurate, darlin’.”

“Two chocolate mousses?”

“We could get one with two spoons?” he suggested.

“See how much of your hand you come back with if you even try, pal.”

“Right. Make that two mousses, kiddo.”

But to Ororo’s credit, she ate her mousse at a sedate pace, savoring it. Logan raised a brow at the sounds of rapture that she made, though, and she realized that she should probably tone it down.

“This is better than sex.”

“It’s good, but it ain’t that good, darlin’. Nothing’s that good.”

“No, this is pretty good,” she told him, a hint of challenge in her voice.

“That good, huh?”

“Mm-hmmmm,” she hummed as she enveloped the spoon between her lips again, licking a stray bit of chocolate from her bottom one.

Watching her made Logan’s pants feel a bit tight. “I ain’t convinced. It’s decent, at best.”

“You blaspheme, sir. This is an impeccable dessert.” Ororo gently scraped the inner edge of her dessert flute, taking another decadent bite.

“Ya might hafta prove it, Tory. Here. Maybe yers is better than mine.” He scooped up a delicate spoonful and leaned in, holding it out to her. Ororo’s lips twisted.

“You’re sure? They should taste the same.”

“Give it a try. Indulge me.” He teased her with the spoon, and she obliged him, leaning forward and sucking the sweet dollop of chocolate whip from the silver. She licked her lips, and she watched his eyes dilate. “Luscious,” she told him. “Just as good as mine.”

“Sure? Might hafta have you taste-test it again, just in case.”

“I don’t know why you doubt my judgment, sir.”

“Indulge me,” he husked. He held out another tempting offering, and he felt heat flood his groin at the sight of those plump, lush lips engulfing the spoon.

“Mmmmmmm.”

The sound hit him where he lived. He waved down the server, afraid now to stand up from the table at the risk of revealing his hard-on. “Excuse me. Excuse me, can we go ahead and get the check?”

Ororo’s blue eyes were twinkling as she licked the last of her own mousse off the back of her spoon in long, slow strokes.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d left a restaurant so fast. Logan slapped a generous tip on the table, hustled her into her coat, and laced his fingers through hers, and her long strides matched his easily as they emerged onto the street.
They huddled together on the subway again, this time sitting closer, waiting until the lights went
down whenever they entered a dark tunnel before they would kiss, not wanting to give a blatant
show. It was difficult. Logan tasted the chocolate on her lips and felt her breathing change, pulse
racing beneath his thumb when he caressed her face.

“I’m bringin’ ya home past curfew,” Logan promised in her ear.

“You’ll get me grounded,” Ororo muttered back, lips brushing the crown of his cheek teasingly, and
her voice sounded rich and husky and full of mischief. Logan had to have her five minutes ago and
was restless to get back to his apartment. Anticipation gave Ororo the jitters.

She was going to his apartment. It was something that lingered in her imagination for weeks. Was he
lonely without her? Did he think about her, lying awake in the dark?

They walked who knew how many blocks in the brisk air, and she was regretting her choice of
shoes, but Logan murmured “Not much farther, Tory, don’t worry” when they stopped at another
crosswalk, and he made her pause for a moment to kiss her, and it was hungry and needy. They both
looked annoyed at the blast of a horn from the car waiting on them to cross. Logan flipped him the
bird and earned them another honk.

“Asshole,” Logan muttered.

“We were in a hurry, anyway,” Ororo reminded him, taking his arm and enjoying what was left of
their walk.

“That’s it up there.” The brownstone was three five stories and had a short flight of stairs out front.
Logan held her door and ushered her inside, past the row of metal mail slots and up another two
flights of stairs.

“Never considered a place with an elevator?” Ororo suggested.

“Didn’t have much time to find anything with amenities. I was just in a hurry ta get here, darlin’,” he
pointed out and she felt a moment of guilt. He caught her expression as he fished in his pocket for his
keys. “Sorry. That sounded bad.”

“Not wrong, though.”

“I’ve got a little longer to find something nicer,” Logan told her, and he pulled her to him, stealing a
long, hungry kiss, not caring if anyone walked down the hall and caught them. Ororo sighed into his
mouth, arms wrapping around his neck.

“Wanna get ya inside. Can’t do that if ya don’t let me get my keys.”

“They’re here in your pocket, aren’t they?”

“Hey!” He swatted at her hands as she tried to “help” him find them. “I can get ‘em.”

She leaned down and kissed him behind his ear, and he growled as he found the jingling ring -
finally - and punched the housekey into the knob.

“Yer an evil woman, ya know that?”

They stepped inside the dark front hall, and Logan kicked the door shut behind them, crowding her
up against it. He swallowed her chuckle with a hot, draining kiss. Ororo let her purse drop and
picked back up where they left off in her office, moving beneath his hands, letting him unbutton her
coat. She stepped down out of her heels, grateful for the cool hard wood beneath her stockinged, tortured feet. Logan felt the shift in her height, glad that it reduced the gap between them, and he didn’t care that he’d have to take his blazer to the dry cleaners to have it ironed; it was worth it to feel her peeling it off of him, and her hands roved over him, unbuttoning cuffs and plackets, unzipping his slacks as they slowly wandered down the corridor toward his room. He paused by the couch, leaning her against the arm of it to unzip the fragile, lacy red dress. His hands felt hot on her skin, and he released her hair from the pins holding it back from her face, his favorite thing to do, and his hands framed her face when he kissed her, deep and hot. He lost his undershirt and felt her hands sliding over his muscles, making an undignified sound when she teased his nipple, already pebbled from arousal. He wanted her, God, how he wanted this woman…

He was right. Her dress looked best when it was puddled in the corner, joined by the flimsy pantyhose, lace bra and black satin panties. She backed her way up the mattress, heat in her eyes. “C’mere,” she husked. He dropped his watch onto the side table with a clatter and crawled up to meet her, and his face… the look he gave her undid her completely. He made her meet him halfway, tugging her by the ankle across the sheets and hovering over her.

“Look at you,” he murmured. “So damned fine, darlin’.”

“Missed you,” she insisted, gripping his nape and bringing him down for a hungry, searching kiss.

“Missed you, too. So damned much.”

They lay in a tangle of sheets, taking their time, Ororo’s long limbs wrapped around him and accepting the slow, rutting slide of his body against hers. Her breasts filled his hands, then his mouth, fuller than before, their peaks turgid and inviting. Ororo’s voice rose when he suckled one, and it had been too long that he’d wanted this, craved her. He knew her, knew her responses, what made her gasp and cry out, where to touch to make her squirm against him and plead for more. He loved the sound of his name in that breathy voice she used, loved the way her blue eyes glazed over in lust. He relearned her body and its soft curves and gleaming brown skin, kissing his way down her stomach. Her breasts filled his hands, then his mouth, fuller than before, their peaks turgid and inviting. Ororo’s voice rose when he suckled one, and it had been too long that he’d wanted this, craved her. He knew her, knew her responses, what made her gasp and cry out, where to touch to make her squirm against him and plead for more. He loved the sound of his name in that breathy voice she used, loved the way her blue eyes glazed over in lust. He relearned her body and its soft curves and gleaming brown skin, kissing his way down her stomach. He teased her navel, noticing the minute changes. The faint swell of her belly. The dark line leading down from her navel. Her hips, temptingly rounded and more generous than before; more to grab. He felt her fingers slide into his hair, clutching at it when he nuzzled her sex, and he kissed one long, tapering thigh as she parted them for him. Her hips nearly came off the bed at his first taste, and she exhaled a shaky breath. She was surrounded by the masculine trappings of his room, all dark colors and rough textures in the unlit space, no other illumination inside except for the street lamp’s light leaking in through the window blinds. He groaned against her, telegraphing his pleasure as he lapped at her, tongue slick as it parted her folds. She burned at his touch, needing more. He drew it out, feasting on her, fingers plucking at the tiny pearl hidden within. She was a mewling, squirming mess by the time he was finished, climaxing in minutes. Her body was sensitized and easily stimulated during her pregnancy, resulting in some embarrassingly erotic dreams. Logan was feeding them now, giving her fodder for more.

“Dessert wasn’t better than sex,” Logan told her smugly, his face challenging her to argue with him.

“I might need some more convincing,” she told him, reaching for him, and he felt so good beneath her hands. He settled over her, and she gave his ripe, firm ass a squeeze. “These things are better when put into practice than theory, Logan.” He ground his hips down, and she felt how aroused he was, smooth and hard in her grip when she reached down between them.

“I’m gonna convince ya. I’ll take as long as you need until yer convinced, darlin’.” He thrust himself into the ring of her grip, breathing ragged as she tugged on him.

Ororo wanted him so much, and he returned that need, too, if the way he was leaking hot, slick drops
that dampened her fingers was any indication. He was beautiful in the dark, broad shoulders tapering
down to a toned, narrow waist and hard hips. She leaned up onto her elbows, continuing to kiss him,
then sat upright, chuckling at his confusion. “Where ya going, Tory?”

“Nowhere. Just getting a little closer to get at you.”

“Ya are, huh… mmmmmmpph…” Her tongue licked into his mouth, and he submitted to it, felt his
world tipped on its ear when she pushed him onto his back. “Okay…” Words fled him as she settled
over him, this time, and kissed him senseless, then blazed a trail of kisses down his throat. His fingers
tangled in her hair, holding it back from his face as she descended down his body.

He was so beautiful to her, all sculpted, rounded muscles and hard planes, skin slicked with a layer
of dark, crisp hair. His face was slack and relaxed, eyes dark with desire for her as he watched her
kiss a path down his ribs, to his belly, which tickled, but she lingered teasingly at his groin, lapping at
the tender divide between his thigh and his cock. He felt her hot breath steaming over him as she
gently lifted his sac and licked his taint, and his body shuddered, legs dropping open further to give
her room. She had him carefully wrapped in her soft grip as she lapped and teased, moving up to his
balls and mouthing each one. And he was hot, leaking, pulsing in her hand, hips thrusting, his hands
tangled in the pillow beneath his head. He was breathing hard, cords in his throat straining, skin
flushed as she drove him crazy… he grew lost in her. Her name was on his lips, beating like a tattoo
in his brain, written all over his skin and everywhere that she kissed, because he was hers.

He knew he wasn’t going to last long when her lips finally drew him inside the sultry, slick heat of
her mouth. Her long, thick waves of hair kept drifting into her face, a hazard of letting it loose, but he
didn’t care, he just kept sweeping it back with his fingers, tangling them in its softness. Her cheeks
were hollowed as she suckled him, drawing him down in long, smooth pulls, fingernails lightly
scratching down his thighs. She arched over him, breasts dangling to brush against his skin, and he
reached for them, teasing at her nipples. She chuckled around his flesh, then moaned at how good his
touch felt when he rolled one between his finger and thumb. She eased herself against him and
pushed her breasts together around the column of his cock, coddling it and urging him to thrust
himself between them. The sight of her engaging him like that was erotic – mind-blowing – and he
was too excited, losing control and needing so badly to claim her, to be inside her, even though he
was loath to ask her to stop.

He pulled back, and she gave him a look of reproach, then leaned in to give him one last suck.
“That’ll do,” he said, voice haggard as he pulled her up to meet him. “I ain’t gonna last if ya don’t
stop, Tory.”

“I was just getting to the good part.”

“This is the good part.”

And it was. He rolled her to her back, drew her knees up and apart, and Logan teased her, rubbing
the plump, engorged head of his cock against her slick folds. She gasped and thrust against him,
wanting him to get on with it. “Now who’s impatient, huh?” he asked.

“In me. NOW.” She thrust up at him, and she was about to drag him down where she wanted him if
he didn’t get on with it.

He lifted her legs over his shoulders, kissing the inside of her knee, and thrust himself inside her heat.
The breath left her lungs in a rush. She felt full, stretched, and complete with their connection, and he
pulsed inside her as he rocked his hips forward in smooth, deep strokes. Her moans were low,
forming his name. She gripped the pillow, this time, arching back into the mattress as he drove into
her.
“Ororo,” he grated out. His grip on her thighs was firm as he rutted and rocked, sending waves of pleasure into her core. She was slick and hot, squeezing him, possessing him, and it was better than the first time, here in his room, not as strangers. Not as coworkers with an ongoing rivalry. They were lovers, finally getting themselves together and sorting things out. Logan wanted more nights like these, more mornings of waking up to her smile and her warm curves, wanted to laugh with her and hold her hand in the supermarket produce section and walk in the park when the weather was warm, when the sky almost rivaled her eyes. He wanted to wrestle with her for the remote and make scrambled eggs together in their tiny kitchen. He wanted it to be *their* kitchen. He wanted them to share a mailbox and a subway to work every day.

He wanted to keep hearing her saying his name like that, in that sexy, hoarse husk.

He kept his thrusts controlled, giving her scarce chance to collect herself before shunting again, and her voice would change pitch each time, eyes closing until he beckoned to her.

“Look at me,” he said. “Look at me. Lemme see those pretty blue eyes.” He wanted her to see him, to know it was him who made her feel that way, needing to prove it. Needing her to accept that from him.

“S’good. So good,” she breathed. And that pushed him over the edge, made him quicken the pace, because he loved to hear her.

“Ororo.” His voice was rough and hoarse. “How do ya want it?”

“Like that… just like that,” she confirmed, and she clamped down on him, squeezing him as though she didn’t want to release him. He felt his climax coming, working its way down his spine, every inch of his body flushed and tensed because of the sensual woman wrapped around him.

“Like that, baby?”

“Just like that… oh, God. Oh, GodohGodohGod…”

She wrung it out of him, taking every ounce that he had left. They lay together in a replete sprawl, feeling the little spasms die down to the occasional twitch. Ororo felt boneless, and Logan made contented sounds as she stroked his hair and back.

“Mind if I call ya again sometime, Tory?”

Ororo chuckled and kissed his hairline. “You promise? I won’t have to wait by the phone?”

“Uh-uh. I’d never lead ya on, darlin’. I’m a gentleman.”

So they didn’t end their “date” by the front door with her waving after him as he drove off. So they were continuing to things a little “backwards.”

“Then you’ll have to give me a ring, sometime.”

He tensed, pausing as he kissed her collarbones, and he levered himself up, staring down into her face. “About that…”

“About… what?” she asked, smiling until it dawned on her. “Oh.”

“I might just have to.”

“Logan-“
“I want to.”

Emotion flooded into her chest. She thought she might burst. Heat pricked at her eyes. “Only if it’s what you want—"

“It is. Because I forgot to mention somethin’ pretty important, Ororo Munroe.”

“What’s that?” Her voice was unsteady. She cradled his cheek in her palm, and he turned to kiss it, covering her hand in his and lacing their fingers together.

“That I love you so much it hurts.”

Her throat felt thick, and she nodded. “I think we skipped that part. Par for the course, I guess, with us.”

“ Seems like it.”

“You love me?”

“I’m crazy about ya, darlin’.”

“Good. Because I’m in love with you, too. I wouldn’t want you to leave me hanging. We would have to have words. Very stern words, Logan.”

“Sounds scary.”

“Oh, you know it, buddy.”

“I love you, Ororo.” Because it felt so right, finally coming out with it, that he needed to say it again.

“You’re pretty forward on a first date,” she teased. “But it’s not a dealbreaker.”

“Lucky me.” He nuzzled her neck, and she hummed in approval.

“I love you, Logan.”

*

They woke with the sun, tangled together and smelling faintly of sweat and morning breath, but neither of them cared. Ororo’s hair was a complete tangle when Logan reached down to smooth it out of her face, and she squinted up at him, then smiled blearily. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He pulled her close, tucking her against his chest. “Ya don’t believe in letting a guy sleep much, do ya?”

“Who, me?”

“Yeah. You.” He kissed her hairline, and she smiled against his skin.

“Did you mind?”

“No.”

“Okay, then.”

Round two was slow and tender. Round three nearly killed him. But he would have died happy; the coroners would have come in to find his smile frozen on his face.
But she was there with him. She was content and warm and not in a rush to get up, wasn’t trying to make any hasty exits without waking him.

And she loved him. Logan’s arms tightened around her and he kept kissing her.

“This is nice,” she mused, yawning and stretching against him. Then, “This room’s tiny.”

“Whole place is tiny. Don’t know if ya noticed before.”

“You didn’t give me the grand tour.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘grand.’ I’ll only charge ya two cents for the nickel tour.”

“So you have a full-sized tub in the bathroom?”

“Nope.”

“Then we’ll just have to improvise.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Improvise, huh?”

“I can be flexible about these things.”

That made him smile even more. “Flexible.”

“Uh-huh.”

He tugged her out of bed, despite her protests, and gave her a “tour” of the shower. True to her word, she was “flexible.”

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