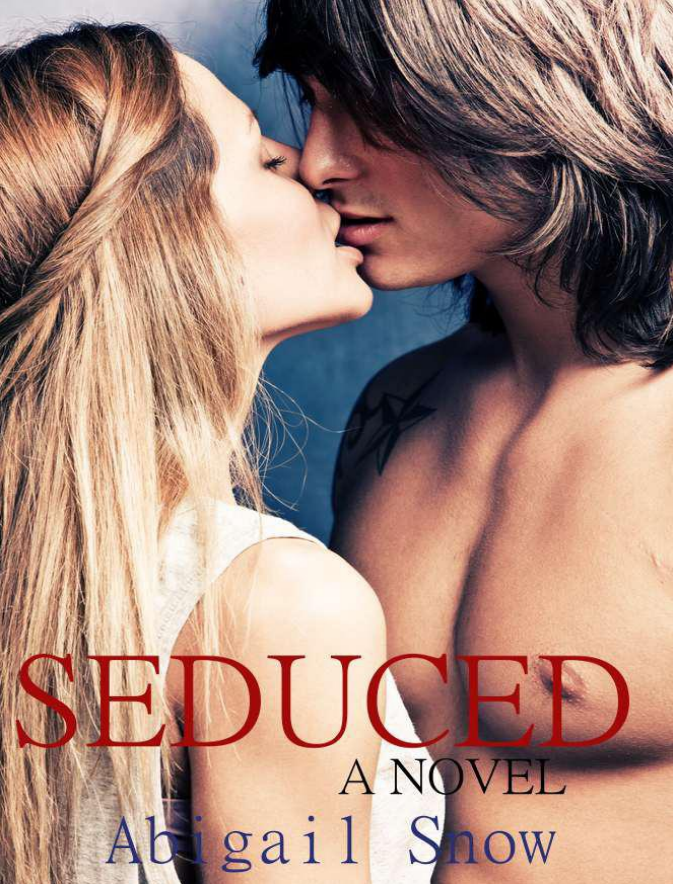




SEDUCED

A NOVEL

Abigail Snow

Royal Expat Seduced

Prologue

The bar was crowded and dimly lit, and the air was warm and heavy with the scent of booze. Damian scanned the crowd, wondering about the identities and personalities of all the assembled people. What did they do—more importantly, why did they do it? Not one of the people here looked contented or at ease. It was all false smiles and make-up smeared over desperation. Sure, some of them looked like they were enjoying themselves, but in the morning, they'd be back to the drudgery of everyday life. The night before would only be a blur of regret; money wasted and a bad

headache.

He thought about his own free and easy lifestyle, traveling the world without worrying about money, family and careers. Why did so many people live life like robots, too afraid to enjoy themselves? Not one of these people, not one... his eyes glided idly over the crowd, registering the tired, bored and anxious expressions plastered to each overdressed person with little interest. Then Damian's shrewd, smoky gray eyes swept over the figure of one woman, sitting on the balcony and sipping her drink—and darted back, focusing on her completely.

She was exceptional—petite and

elegant, her slender arms bare and white, gleaming like satin in the questionable lighting of the bar. Her face was bright and captivating, and Damian couldn't help but stare. Her eyes were alight with excitement and laughter, her full lips red and delightful, like some form of forbidden fruit ripe for the plucking. Her hair was like a curtain of liquid ink, sleek and black and beautiful. She was exquisite, any man's dream. Damian was no exception; he instantly felt pulled towards her, an almost animal desire for her coiling in his stomach. But most of all, he was captivated by *her*. Her very being gave off energy, innocence, and a hint of uniqueness, with all the power of an intoxicating drug.

She was something special.

He knew that no matter what, he had to have her. She was like the one gleaming apple in a barrel full of rotten mush. He knew that she would be juicy, delicious, and devastating, like the apple Eve had bitten into before the dawn of time.

His heart beat faster as her liquid mischief eyes, with their alluring glow of innocence, met his across the dimness of the bar. She smiled coyly at him, and he grinned internally. She would be the sweetest thing to ever touch his lips. In all his travels across the globe, he had never seen such pure enjoyment and such energy. She was unspoiled, and he was hooked. He could tell that she was too.

The delicate, peachy blush spreading across her alabaster cheeks was enough to tell him that she was his for the taking. Almost too easy... perhaps it wasn't worth the effort after all.

His eyes left hers for a moment as he noticed a shadow behind her, a dark, lean and powerful figure of a man. He wasn't good-looking, and he seemed much older than the young woman, who barely looked old enough to be in a bar in the first place. His eyes were close-set, and his lips were thin and unpleasant, although this might simply have been because of his expression. He was glowering at Damian, and as their eyes met, like a red hot poker to skin, he

could sense the hatred and jealousy hidden beneath them. They said that the beautiful woman was his, and his only, even as the cherry-red smile and the half-lidded eyes directed at Damian said differently.

He thought about going over there and causing trouble—seeing if he could pluck the ripe apple from the greedy grasp of this man—but decided to wait, bide his time, and play out the game. Move too soon, and he wouldn't get to draw out the fun.

The flirtation continued. He'd meet the woman's eyes and smile, enjoying the game, saving the best for last. He was laughing internally as he saw the man's

face grow darker and darker behind her as their flirtation escalated, the sparks of attraction between them near igniting the row of spirits sitting out on the bar. He wondered who would snap and approach the other first. As he was about to order another drink, he felt a firm hand on his shoulder. Turning around, he came face to face with the dark, angry eyes of the woman's companion and knew that the games had truly begun.

"I saw you looking at her," the man said. "And I advise you to look somewhere else." His accent was clipped, precise—an English accent, out of place in a bar in Washington DC.

"Is she anyone's property?" Damian

replied in his own American drawl, relaxed and smiling slightly. “I like to think that people can make their own choices, and she hasn’t decided against me yet if her smile is anything to go by—or the way her nipples are pressing against that sexy little top.” He loved to provoke this man, who was powerless to stop him from having anything he wanted. After all, what could he do?

“She’s under my protection,” the Englishman said, his face contorted with fury. “And I won’t let a dirty hippie like you get his hands on her.”

“Dirty hippie?” Damian cast his eyes down his loose t-shirt, only barely hinting at the tan, toned body beneath,

and the scruffy shorts, clinging perfectly to his hips and displaying long, lithe legs which went on for miles. “She didn’t seem to object.” Damian knew that women found him attractive; his dark, wavy hair, kissed by the sun, his crooked smile and muscular, athletic body were the result of many years of adventure and time spent outdoors, not the artificial sunbed and gym so many narcissistic men resorted to. He was strong, fast and active—and if he had to, he knew he could take this guy out.

“If you touch her,” the Englishman threatened, “I guarantee you that there will be so much hell to pay that you’ll still be Satan’s whipping boy in

thousands of years to come.”

Damian considered the man's face. His eyes were narrowed to black pinpricks, his face was contorted into a furious leer and even his large fists were clenched at his sides. It was a scary image, but Damian had been around people too long to be afraid. Life only got interesting when there was a challenge to be had. Damian laughed in the man's face. What was going to be a tasty morsel had just escalated into an all you can eat buffet. There was nothing in the world he loved more than a challenge.

“You know what they say,” he said to the Englishman. “Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. And I think I'll

take my slice of heaven while I can get it.” He winked wickedly at the man. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a beautiful woman to seduce.”

And leaving the Englishman sputtering furiously, he slid gracefully out of his seat and headed over to where the black-haired beauty was waiting, ready for the ride of a lifetime.

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Matilda Stuart rolled her eyes and pulled a childish face at her cell phone as it continued to rant at her with the voice of her sister, Caroline. She half listened while internally, she buzzed with excitement. This was it—the first step towards freedom, and there was nothing that Caroline could say to dissuade her.

She idly braided and unbraided a thick strand of her silky, coal-black hair as Caroline continued to berate her.

“What on earth possessed you to want to go to America of all places?” Caroline queried. “You know our family doesn’t have nearly as much influence over

there. Daddy won't be able to protect you, you know. You'll be entirely on your own. You're only 20. A month ago you were a student. Are you really ready for such a big step?"

"Caroline, of course it's what I want," Matilda said, exasperated with her sister's narrow view of the world. "Do you really think I want everyone to know my face and hold my hand every step of the way? I've been angling for this for months—years, even. It's my dream."

"Your dream? To go and work in some stuffy office in DC?" Caroline sniffed.

"Tilda, you could do anything you wanted to right here in England. There's no need to work as some common

secretary.”

“I’d rather make my own way than use the family’s influence,” Matilda replied stubbornly. “It’s bad enough that Daddy’s name helped me to get this job—and even worse that Colin is coming with me.”

She gave a dark look towards the boring, black luggage of her unwanted travel companion. Colin Astor was her father’s henchman—a political crony who shuffled paperwork and made her life difficult. She had only been allowed to go to DC on the condition that Colin would accompany her and make sure she didn’t get to enjoy even an ounce of freedom without it getting back to her

incredibly strict family.

She pouted as she looked at Colin's lean, irascible profile. They could at least have sent her over with someone fun. Colin was a boring pencil-pusher without even an ounce of humor. Of course, her sister would approve entirely.

"At least there's that," Caroline sounded slightly happier as she echoed the thoughts of her younger sister. "It's not that I don't love you, Tilda, but you do tend to get into all sorts of ridiculous situations. You need someone there to watch out for you."

"I'm an adult," Matilda sighed, trying to convey the point to her year-older sister.

“I’m twenty years old. I can take care of myself and I do not need to have a babysitter. Honestly, it’s ludicrous that I even have to get Daddy’s permission to go anywhere in this day and age. I should have ignored him and gone on my own.”

“He has a reputation to uphold,” Caroline reminded her. “Not even just his reputation—you know this, Tilda.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Matilda pulled another face at her cell. This was the bottom line—the real reason she wanted to get away from England. “I’m the daughter of a prince. It’s kind of a pain, you know.”

“You are lucky,” Caroline said. “You are a member of the Royal Family. Most

girls only dream about something like that!”

“And I have nightmares about it,” Matilda snapped. “Look, Caroline, I never asked to be a princess. I’m not, even, really.”

“You are in the eyes of the media, which means you are in the eyes of the family,” Caroline lectured, using the same tired, exasperating line of argument she always did when Matilda tried to do anything fun. “Even if you are illegitimate, you are still the daughter of Prince Laurence and the granddaughter of the Queen. You’re 18th in line for the throne, for goodness’ sake!”

“Which means that I am basically

irrelevant and the only thing that being a royal does to my life is mean that I never get to do anything I want to do in case the media makes it into some big scandal,” Matilda said, a little too loudly. Behind her, a few ears perked up, and fingers began racing on the keyboards of iPhones.

“That’s not true. You’re relevant to us,” Caroline said. “We don’t just want you here so we can keep an eye on you. You have to admit that you’re impulsive, Matilda. We—I don’t want you doing anything that you might regret.”

“Like what?” Matilda challenged.

“Oh, I don’t know. Getting in with a bad crowd, going off the rails with drinking

and drugs, getting pregnant,” Caroline listed off. “Or getting shot or mugged or something—America can be dangerous.”

“I’ll be working within a stone’s throw of the Whitehouse,” Matilda reminded her. “I don’t think anything too dangerous is going to happen to me. Besides, I’m not stupid. I’m not going to get myself into any kind of trouble. I only want the option of living my own life without the media and the family breathing over my shoulder and judging every last thing I do.”

“I know. I just worry. Couldn’t you do something a little closer to home?”

Caroline asked mournfully. Although she was as strict and proper as their father,

she had a soft spot for her spirited younger sister. It was, Matilda thought, because everybody else she spent time around was bone-achingly dull.

“I can’t be like you,” Matilda said sadly.

“I can’t just be the good daughter and settle down and cut ribbons at public events—like they’d even let me near anything like that anyway. I’m the family embarrassment.

“I need to be doing something exciting. I need to be free, Caroline. Don’t you ever wish that you could be free and travel the world, without a single care about your duties or responsibilities?”

“Not really, no,” said Caroline bluntly.

“Well, I do,” Matilda said stubbornly. “I

want to go out into the world, make my own way, I don't know, even fall in love! I don't want Daddy to just marry me off to some politically suitable old man so I have to live my life behind closed doors, except when I have to come out and smile for the cameras.”

“I knew it!” Caroline sounded both triumphant and concerned. “This is just about finding a man, isn't it? Don't do anything stupid, Matilda. Men are willing to take advantage of women—especially rich or connected women—who are stupid enough to let them.”

“I'm not stupid,” Matilda said loudly. “I'm not going to fall in love with the

first American I meet. I just want the chance to meet men who don't already know who I am. Maybe they'll like me for the real me rather than just wanting to be connected to the Royal Family."

"I don't know where you get your ideas from," Caroline sighed. "Just make sure Colin stays with you and I suppose you'll stay out of the worst danger. You're so young, Matilda. I don't think you realize what kind of dangers are out there."

"I'm a year younger than you, so don't try to patronize me," Matilda said sternly, but she couldn't help but smile a little at Caroline's misplaced concern. She couldn't get mad at her older

sister—she was just a fretful person who had sat through one too many of their father’s lectures about propriety. “I promise I’ll keep Colin in the loop. I’ll even have him escort me to the rehab and the abortion clinic.”

“Matilda,” Caroline groaned, and Matilda laughed out loud.

“Seriously, chill out,” she advised her sister. “I’ve got this all under control. I’ve got a year’s internship with the National Archives. I’ll probably just be sorting files and things, maybe making some coffee, but it might be enough for me to come back home and get a good job where I can make some changes—”

“Oh no—not your freedom-fighter thing

again,” Caroline said.

“Don’t put it like that,” Matilda warned her. “I just think there are some changes that need to be made, and one day I’d like to try and make them. So I’m going to spend my time in America wisely. I’m not just going to go off the rails and snort cocaine all the time.”

“Daddy doesn’t want—” Caroline began.

“I don’t care,” Matilda insisted. “I have the right to do what I want to do—and I want to have some fun, explore a new country, and yeah, maybe kick back a little without the media breathing down my neck. But I’m planning on taking my job seriously.”

“Well I hope Colin will have the good sense to stay by your side,” Caroline said. “And—please be careful?”

“I promise,” said Matilda. “You know me. Careful is my middle name.”

“Oh my god! It’s Princess Matilda, look everyone!” Matilda was jerked back into the reality of the airport as someone yelled loudly, pointing her finger at Matilda. Heads turned, and suddenly there was a clamor of people all craning to get a look at her.

“Gotta go,” she told Caroline, and hung up the phone on her sister’s protests, looking around for Colin, who had gone to check in their suitcases while she had been arguing with Caroline. He was

nowhere to be seen.

Shit.

“Princess! Can I have your autograph?”

“Where are you going, Princess? Oh my god, I can’t believe it’s you!”

“Can I take a photo with you, please?”

Matilda winced as half a dozen people who hadn’t had the good manners to ask her first snapped pictures of her on their phones. Immediately she realized that she’d been talking loudly enough for anyone to overhear and realize who she was. What an idiot!

As she despairingly signed her name on a number of notepads, flight tickets and other scraps of paper and grinned blindly into a gaggle of lenses, her heart

sank inside her. This was just what she was trying to get away from—would she really be safe from it in America?

As an illegitimate offspring of the fourth child of the Queen, it wasn't likely that many people overseas knew what she looked like. In fact, she knew for a fact that most people abroad only followed the stories about William and Kate, and didn't even know of her existence.

However, the English media simply adored the story of the lovechild of Prince Laurence, and as a result, she had grown up all her life with the media at her feet whenever she tried to branch out.

Her father was almost chokingly

protective. Although he loved her, he didn't seem to understand her desire for freedom. She was a royal above anything else in his eyes, and had to behave accordingly. He had sent her only to the most elite schools and had insisted that she go to Cambridge over any other college. He also insisted that she toe the line perfectly so as not to let the Royal Family down or give the media any more fodder.

This was her first chance to go out into the world—and it was being ruined by the unpleasant reminder of her fame.

“Matilda! Through here, quick.”

Matilda looked up and Colin was striding towards her, tall and dark and as

strong as an ox, his lean features, close-set, small eyes and thin mouth all set grimly, pushing easily through the crowd. He grabbed her and tugged her behind him, and for once she was almost—almost—glad that he was there to protect her. The other part of her was annoyed. She had never had the chance to do anything truly by herself, and this was just another indicator of that fact.

“We should have gone to the VIP section in the first place,” he scolded her. “All that nonsense about being just like anyone else. You’re not like anyone else. You’re a princess, or as good as.”

“I just—I know,” she said, feeling stupid and young as he stared down at her

sternly. “Thank you,” she forced out. “I hate it—the media, the attention—the sooner I get away from it all, the better.”

“That’s my job,” Colin said. “To keep you away from it all. And I intend to do it to the best of my ability.”

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Three days later, on the plane, off the plane, in and out of a new apartment and into a new office, Matilda was both elated and exhausted. Jetlag meant that her hours were haywire, and she'd already spent Friday night and most of Saturday passed out and drooling on her new and extremely nice blue satin pillows.

All afternoon she had been trekking around the country's capital, taking in everything there was to see. She would have liked to do it all on her own, but unfortunately, she'd had to accept the fact that everything she did, she did with Colin as her constant bodyguard. Now it

was close to 8, and she was eager to get a taste of the city's night life, even though, to her disappointment, she was too young to drink.

“Are you sure you don't just want to go back to the apartment and try to get into a regular sleeping pattern?” Colin suggested. He looked tired, and reluctant to accompany her any further.

“Don't be such a bore,” Matilda chided. “Daddy can't watch you here either, you know. Don't you ever do anything for fun?”

“I take my job seriously,” Colin replied. “Fine,” Matilda sighed, giving up on being able to enjoy herself fully whenever he was around. “Well I don't

need to be supervised every minute of the day—you're free to go back home but I'm going out."

"Then I'll make sure you get back safely."

A wave of annoyance rushed through Matilda. It wasn't that she didn't like Colin. He was just her bodyguard, always there and always casting a shadow on anything she did. She wanted to be free—properly free—to enjoy the city and her new life, and he was always there, breathing down her neck.

Why had her father insisted on this arrangement? It was stupid, and in the end it was only going to make both of them miserable.

“You don’t have to, you know,” was all she could find to say in response.

She eventually gave up trying to make Colin go on home without her, and focused on finding the perfect location to get the feel of the city. Eventually, she settled on a bar in Georgetown, electing to sit out on the open balcony, an extension of the upstairs bar room, and take in the sunset, looking out over the elegant architecture of the street and enjoying the feeling of freedom—even if it was only a feeling. After all, after being ID’d at the bar and recalling the age restrictions in America, she was sipping at a glass of ginger ale.

“Isn’t this sort of like London?” she

asked Colin with a smile. “It’s kind of quaint—not at all what I’d expect of America.”

“Oh my god, you’re English?” a group made up of a few guys and girls of around her age were suddenly paying attention to her.

“Yeah. I’m working here,” she said, glad of the chance to turn away from Colin and talk to other people her age.

She began to chat to the group, who she quickly found out were students, while Colin lurked behind her like an unwanted shadow. Matilda wondered briefly if she ought to have included him and tried to talk with him—but he wasn’t her friend, he was just an annoyance, and

he was getting paid to be there. She didn't owe him the courtesy of being friends with him when she'd rather he'd disappear.

It had been a long time since she'd felt this free and happy, away from anyone who knew who she was, or wanted to get their picture in the paper. Even without alcohol, adrenaline was pumping through her veins and she was excited—excited to be there, to be away from home, and to be starting out on an adventure.

She looked back into the bar—at the faces of all the people, enjoying a relaxing night away from their cares. What would it be like to be any one of

them? Were their lives really as simple as they seemed? Everyone seemed to be in a group, spending time with friends or maybe even partners. She envied them their freedom. She wondered if they even knew how lucky they were.

As she surveyed the crowd on the inside of the room, she noticed one guy in particular over by the bar. He was looking right at her, unabashedly studying her face as if she was a work of art at a gallery. She felt warmth flood over her entire body at the humorous, thoughtful eyes sweeping over her face and body. His eyes were a beautiful shade of gray, soft, yet with overwhelming depth. There was

something predatory in his gaze, as if he was a wolf contemplating whether or not to swallow her whole. For some reason, it made her tingle from head to foot, as if someone was blowing a soft breath over her.

She usually would have looked away, embarrassed, but there was something about this guy which kept her eyes fixed on his. His expression was somewhere between amusement and attraction. She could see in his eyes that he wanted her, and she had to admit that she liked it. His lips were pulled into an amused smirk which made her stomach twist itself in knots. His face was tanned and unbelievably handsome, and his eyes

were so intense and gray, both warm and somehow mysterious, and it made her long to know his name, or what he was thinking. His cheekbones were high and dashing, and his dark hair was sun-kissed and slightly wavy. Her heart beat faster as she took in his lazy, effortless posture, the long, lean body and the hint of raw power which clung to his well-muscled arms, broad shoulders and strong hands. He was absolutely gorgeous!

She realized she'd been staring at him, and quickly looked away, a blush spreading over her cheeks. Quickly she took a sip of her drink and choked on it, the bubbles tickling her nose. She looked

sharply up to see if he had noticed, and saw him chuckling slightly. She gave him a coy smile, and felt a hot spike of elation as he grinned back, his charming smile making her as warm as if she had just swallowed a shot of whiskey.

Electricity crackled off her skin as she looked away again, pretending to listen to what someone was saying. She could feel the power of his gaze on her, and it was all she could do not to look back again. She'd never felt this before—the excitement, the nervousness, the feeling that all the lights in the bar (which were admittedly not many) were directed out onto the balcony, right at her.

She couldn't resist another peek at the

mysterious man. She tried to do it subtly, but he spotted her right away. He gave her a wink, and raised his glass at her. Looking down and blushing, Matilda took a sip of her own drink—she was sure they must have accidentally put alcohol in it. What else could be making her behave so foolishly? She'd never met this guy before, and yet...it was as if there was an invisible force pulling her towards him.

Suddenly she remembered Colin, and her heart sank as she realized that there was no chance that she would be able to approach the guy without him taking note of everything she did. She wondered if she could convince him to leave for the

night so she could approach this man without him breathing down her neck. She looked around for her new shadow, but he had disappeared. Figuring he must have gone to the bathroom, she turned back to her mystery man—only to see his broad shoulders and back turned towards her, the contour of his spine and his slender yet powerful build perfectly defined in his t-shirt. She wondered if he was a student. She didn't think so, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Somehow he seemed more... dangerous than any of the other students here, as if he had seen things they hadn't even comprehended. Maybe it was that undertone of confidence and adventure that gave her thrills every time she

looked at him.

He was talking to someone, but his strong frame was blocking that someone from view. Was he here with someone? He almost certainly had a girlfriend, with looks like that. Waves of disappointment crashed over her at the thought, and she realized how badly she wanted to talk to him. Should she go over there? But even as she was thinking it, he turned around and indicated to her, giving her another of his dazzling smiles and causing her breath to hitch. What was it about him which affected her like this? It wasn't as if she fell for every handsome guy she met. There was just something about this guy that was

different.

She looked up again, and saw him sliding lithely out of his seat. He moved with confidence and elegance, but she could see the strength and speed hidden just below the surface. Her heart beat like a blacksmith's hammer as he sauntered towards her, his eyes fixed on her face and a confident smirk on his lips. As he reached the balcony against which she was leaning, she realized how much taller than her he was. She could feel his physical presence like a blanket around her, and she caught an enticing whiff of his bold, smoky scent which made her mouth go dry.

“You’re not drinking,” he told her. His

voice was deep and smooth, but with just a hint of dry humor which had her heart dancing the rumba.

“Can’t,” she admitted. “I’m not 21 for another few months.”

“Can I get you something?” he asked, a spark of mischief in his eyes.

Matilda hesitated. Something in his voice made it into a challenge—would she dare, or wouldn’t she?

“I’ll have another ginger ale,” she said decisively, refusing to get lured into anyone’s traps, even if that person was the hottest man she’d ever met.

“With a shot of...?” the man encouraged, grinning broadly. His tone was light and full of mischief.

“With ice,” she said firmly, pressing her lips together in a show of stubborn disapproval. He laughed—a deep, mellow laugh which made Matilda’s skin tingle—and sauntered away.

For a horrible second, Matilda wondered if she had blown it. He must think she was boring, refusing to bend the law. She should have lived up to her family’s opinion of her and been reckless, but she didn’t want to give Colin a reason to take her home, and she didn’t want to prove her critics right about her.

Luckily, she was able to breathe a sigh of relief as her mystery man headed back to the bar, returning in a flash with two

glasses of ginger ale.

“You made it sound so tempting,” he teased, as he held out the glass. “I’m Damian Knight.”

“Matilda,” she said. She deliberately omitted her last name on the off-chance that he tried to google her and found out who she was. The last thing she wanted was for some hot guy to find out she was a princess. He’d either try to use her, as Caroline feared, or, more likely, drop her like a hot potato. After all, who needed a complication like that in their life?

“You’re not from these parts, are you?” he asked, oblivious to the thoughts rushing through her head.

“No,” Matilda admitted. “I’m working here. It’s my third day,” she confided.

“Aha!” Damian looked triumphant. “I thought you looked more excited than usual to be in a shitty bar.”

“Oh, is it that obvious?” Matilda felt a wave of embarrassment as she realized how stupid she must seem to him.

“It’s refreshing,” he told her, and the way he looked at her, as if he was longing to touch her, made her feel confused but excited. Even as her mind told her no, her body was unconsciously leaning towards him. She purposely changed the subject, trying to take the spotlight off herself.

“What about you? Are you a student?”

He looked young up close, younger than she had taken him for, but something in his eyes simply looked to mature to be a student. He had what could only be described as a rebellious edge.

“Student of life,” he admitted. “I learn more by traveling than by being in one place. Once I’ve experienced something, it’s time to move on to something else.”

“Does that apply to women as well?”
Matilda found herself saying before she could stop herself.

“Let’s see where the night takes us, and maybe you’ll find the answer you’re looking for,” he grinned.

Matilda felt intoxicated just being near to Damian. Now that he was right next to

her, she could feel the warmth emanating from his body, an enticing contrast to the cooling air which was blowing in from the balcony. His smoky scent, subtle and pleasantly spicy, was making her head spin, and she couldn't seem to look away from his eyes. Up close, his irises were the cool gray of a pebble beach, with flecks of yellow and dark gray rings around the irises, making his gaze almost unbearably intense. Matilda felt like she could get lost in his eyes for days.

They were separated now from the group she had been talking to before, standing a little further down the balcony, resting their glasses against the

wooden ledge. Matilda had just about forgotten Colin when she felt his hand clamping down on her shoulder, like a noose wrapping around her neck. The action sent shivers of disgust down her spine, although she couldn't explain why.

“Time to get back,” he told her firmly. She could see from his tight expression that he expected to be obeyed, but she was tired of being told what to do. Why couldn't she have one night to enjoy herself like a normal person? Drunk on Damian, on his talk of freedom and independence, she decided to rebel.

“Do I have a curfew?” she asked sarcastically.

“Matilda—don’t be childish,” he said.

“I promised your father—”

“Colin,” Matilda cut across him, “I’m not a child, and any issues you have with my conduct you can take up with my father. It’s not even 9 in the evening, and I am a grown woman. I can choose to do what I like. And I would like to stay here, unaccompanied. Is that clear?”

“You clearly can’t make good choices. You’ve been here barely a few days and you’re illegally drinking alcohol in a bar with a suspicious man trying to chat you up.”

Matilda’s temper flared.

“Give me a little credit,” she said. “This is just ginger ale. You can taste it!” She

held out the glass and Colin sniffed it suspiciously.

“I’m not drinking. All I want to do is have a quiet, relaxed evening and get to know a new person without being guarded like a prisoner. I won’t allow you to prevent me. That’s not what my father sent you for.”

Colin looked both confused and furious. He cast a look at Damian, who gave him a diffident shrug.

“What the lady said,” he said. “It’s a free country.”

“Right,” Matilda agreed decisively.

“Goodnight, Colin.”

“Your father won’t like this,” Colin warned.

“Then don’t tell him,” Matilda said simply.

She watched Colin’s back recede into the crowd with an air of satisfaction before turning back to Damian, who was looking at her quizzically.

“You aren’t secretly 16 or something are you?” he quipped.

“What? Oh, no, my dad is just really overprotective.” She rolled her eyes, trying to play it cool and hoping she was succeeding.

“Right,” Damian said. “And you just let his—what is he, an informant—ollow you around all the time? You’re not royalty, are you?”

Matilda laughed awkwardly, hoping that

it came off as natural—she almost felt sick at the thought of him coming so close to the truth. She was terrified of how she must look to him—silly, immature, and under the thumb of her father.

“He’s gone, so let’s not worry,” she said, hoping to drop the subject which was spoiling her feeling of elation.

“But doesn’t it bug you—having to live by someone else’s rules?” Damian persisted, raising his eyebrows at her.

“I live by my own rules,” Matilda said stubbornly. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes you are,” Damian surveyed her thoughtfully, making her blush yet again.

“And why are you here, Matilda?”

“I’m working,” she said, trying to avoid the obvious implication of his words. “I work in the National Archives.”

“Woah,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “How did a little girl like you get a job in a big place like that?”

“Oh, family connections. What about you?” Matilda was desperate to know more about Damian. He was such a mystery, his relaxed attitude with just a hint of wildness and danger. It intrigued her more than she could fathom.

“I go here and there,” he said. “I thought I’d stop by and see what DC was all about. It’s been a while since I visited, and I love it here.”

“Oh, you’re on holiday?” Matilda was

downcast at the thought that he would only be there for a handful of days.

“Not exactly. I guess you could call me a nomad,” Damian explained. “I go wherever I want. I prefer to enjoy life and see as much as I can—it’s pointless to be confined by society. Do you see anyone truly happy who has to live by someone else’s rules?”

Matilda tried to take a sip of her drink and missed her mouth by at least a few feet, colliding the glass with someone else’s ear. As she hastily apologized, she tried to hide how envious she was. He was attractive, interesting and he had the one thing she desired—freedom.

“What about your family?” she asked

curiously. “Don’t they mind you going off into the middle of nowhere?”

“Nah,” Damian shrugged. “They’re both as conventional as you could get. I think they’re proud of having a son who can think for himself and does what they only ever dreamed about doing.”

“What about money?” asked Matilda, who had always been taught never to take without giving something in return.

“Money is something that brings people more trouble than happiness,” Damian proclaimed. “I make some when I need it—I write a little, tend bar or help out in a garage if I need some extra cash. Otherwise I just go where the mood takes me—and I’m glad it took me here

tonight.”

Matilda bit her lip to try and hide her pleasure as Damian gave her a warm, approving look.

“I wish I’d gone to England,” Damian said, giving her his trademark charming smile. “If I’d known they made women as beautiful as you there, I might have been persuaded to settle there for good.”

“Don’t give me lines,” Matilda protested, although secretly she felt like beaming at the cheesy compliment.

“Many men have tried and failed.”

“Then what makes me different?”

Damian grinned, reaching out his hand and touching her cheek, sending lightning bolts of excitement through her body.

“N-nothing,” Matilda gasped out. “What makes you think you are different?”

“I can read people pretty well,” he confessed. “Besides, you stood up to the ogre just so you could spend the evening with me. That’s got to count for something, right?”

Damian leaned closer, his hand cupping her cheek, looking intensely into her eyes. Matilda felt her breathing hitch, and she opened her mouth instinctively as Damian’s fingers brushed against her lips. He was going to kiss her, she realized. She panicked, almost drawing her head away, not wanting to mess up, but Damian’s large, warm hand was holding her in place.

His lips met hers for a brief moment, a mere brush of his lips against hers, but it was enough to make her face bloom as red as a rose, and forget how to breathe for long enough that she had to gulp in breath as he pulled away. How, just how could he affect her like this? It was crazy!

Damian was sitting back in his chair, looking at her quizzically, as if waiting for some sort of reaction.

“I think I’ll take that drink now,”

Matilda said frankly, and Damian burst out laughing. As she watched him order for her at the bar, she wondered what it was about him which made her feel like she was holding a butterfly convention in

her stomach. Maybe it was his easy confidence and respectful yet teasing manner. She was shy and awkward in contrast. Why was he interested in a silly little girl like her? She couldn't bring herself to let the evening end, though. Not yet.

“What's it like? Being free?” she asked him a few hours and several drinks later. They were sitting now, alone on the balcony, and his warm, strong hand was running its way up her thigh, making her entire body alive with excitement. Her skin felt warm and tingly, and she could feel the insistent pulse of arousal as his fingertips brushed the soft skin, sliding just beneath the hem of her skirt.

“Why don’t you try it and find out for yourself?” Damian suggested. “What’s stopping you?”

“You have no idea,” she sighed. She thought regretfully about Colin and her father. There really were no benefits to being a princess.

“Anyone can be free. All you have to do is reach out and embrace the opportunities which are out there,” Damian said. “Nobody ever gave me permission to be myself or to turn down a job at a bank or a business in order to go and backpack across Thailand. And nobody handed me the money, either—it’s all about making it possible. You have to stop being so afraid of what

other people will think.”

Matilda toyed with the idea of explaining why exactly this was easier said than done—but she didn’t want to spoil the evening with her confession. Instead, she had a bold thought.

“Not be afraid, huh?” she repeated. “Just go out and take what I want?”

“Exactly,” Damian said.

“I guess I’ll start right now.”

Ever since their kiss earlier, Matilda had been craving the taste of his lips. She couldn’t get that soft, perfect kiss out of her mind. She found her eyes frequently flicking down towards his lips, too shy to make a move. Now, though, she would prove that she wasn’t

afraid to take what she wanted.

Matilda leaned over and kissed Damian, catching him by surprise. For a moment he didn't respond, and she pulled back a little, terrified that she'd made a bad move—but Damian pulled her towards him and kissed her with a fiery passion, pressing his soft lips hard on her yielding ones, gliding his warm tongue easily across hers. Comparing this to their first kiss was like comparing a campfire to the sun. It sent every thought in her head reeling, scattering her common sense like beads across ice. She could smell his delicious scent all around her, and she longed for more. Passionate impulses she hadn't even

known she was capable of suddenly rose to the surface, fierce and impulsive. She wanted to mount him right there in the bar, regardless of the people around them, and ride him with reckless abandon, taming the raging ache which was begging her to give in to her animal desires.

She finally pulled away, gasping, and looked into Damian's eyes. They were stormy with lust, his pupils wide and black like the eye of a tornado.

“Will you come home with me?”

Damian asked, his voice husky with desire.

“No,” Matilda said. “But you can come home with me.”

As she pulled him out of the bar stool, sending him a coy look as she weaved through the crowd and towards the door, she thanked god that Colin had gone home—if her father ever heard about this, he'd probably have her deported in a heartbeat.

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Matilda's hand felt warm and secure in Damian's strong, warm grasp as they wound their way through the streets and towards her apartment, only a few blocks away from the bar in the most attractive part of Georgetown. Her heart was thudding in her chest and she felt both buoyed up and terrified in the knowledge of what she was about to do. She'd never brought a man home before—her father would kill her if he knew—but she didn't care. Damian made her feel as if she was on fire. He was a heady drug which brought out hidden, mysterious feelings in her, and she needed more.

“How long is it before we get there?” Damian asked, his voice a low hum of arousal.

“A few more blocks,” Matilda said, wishing it was closer.

“Too long,” Damian said, echoing her thoughts, and he pushed her up against the wall, kissing her fiercely, pressing her entire body against him as he wrapped his arms around her.

The kiss was completely dominant, and Matilda gasped into it, overwhelmed by his warmth, his scent and the feel of his mouth working against hers, plundering her lips and taking everything she had to offer and more. She could feel the hard lines of his stomach through the thin

material separating their bodies, and she was tempted to rip off their clothing right there, to run her hands over the smooth, heated flesh. Desire was pulsing through her like a volcano just waiting to erupt, but the tiny part of her which was still rational was sending out a warning. She couldn't be seen like this. What if someone caught them and recognized her? It was too risky.

“No,” she said weakly, struggling to push him off. “We have to get inside first.”

“OK,” Damian agreed, kissing her again and running his hand below her t-shirt, up the silken skin of her back. Matilda moaned and arched into the touch,

desperate for more. Suddenly, the need to get inside didn't seem so important. He hitched her up effortlessly, lifting her bodily from the ground so she could wrap her legs around his waist. Matilda knew she should put a stop to it, but her entire body was screaming to be touched by him, her panties soaked with the evidence of her arousal. One of Damian's hands stroked up her thigh, and she shuddered at the delicious touch, silently begging him to go further. He obeyed her silent wish, finding her soaked panties and stroking teasingly at the thin cloth. Matilda pressed against his hot fingers, eager for more contact. She sighed as his fingers found a way

through the flimsy material and touched her exactly where she needed it. Her pussy was throbbing and wet, ready for more, and Damian's fingers were like a balm and a poison all at once, heightening the tension and the pleasure to dizzying peaks.

"You want it?" Damian whispered breathily in her ear.

"Yes," Matilda moaned, barely recognizing her own voice.

"You don't want to get back to your place first?" Matilda could hear the mocking edge in Damian's voice, but she didn't even have the willpower left to hesitate.

"Just do it," she commanded.

Snickering, Damian obliged, his fingers sinking into the tight, warm orifice, rewarding him with a symphony of delicious sounds. Matilda was breathing hard, struggling not to scream out her pleasure as Damian's fingers stretched her deliciously, stroking her trembling walls and teasing her, bringing her waves of intoxicating pleasure.

She bit back a scream as he began to increase the pace of his strokes, kindling a fire in her pussy which only climax could quench. She thrust up against his fingers with abandon, needing to feel the pure waves of pleasure as he made her come with his long, clever fingers.

Matilda's vision had turned into a blur.

She could feel the cold stone of the building behind her back, but the buildings, sky and streets surrounding them were nothing more than streaks of indigo and gray. Every nerve in her body was overwhelmed by the intense pleasure she was receiving. She'd never been so aroused before, so desperate to reach her climax.

As Damian's thumb found her engorged clit and stroked it in tight, firm circles, her world exploded. The blur of indigo was suddenly an explosion of stars and sparks, and her body bucked against Damian's firm grip as she finally reached her climax with the force of a meteor hitting the earth.

As she fought to get her breathing and vision back to normal, she became aware of Damian's safe, anchoring arms around her, preventing her from falling. Suddenly aware of her surroundings, Matilda wanted to hide her face in shame, but Damian smiled down at her, and the approval in his eyes was evident. Somehow, that made her feel more sure of herself.

"Your place?" he asked huskily.

"Yeah."

Matilda slid gently to her feet, supported by Damian, and they resumed their walk as if nothing had happened. Matilda's legs felt like jelly, and her thighs were slick with her juices. She had never felt

so alive before, or so attuned with her body's needs. As she took a sidelong glance at Damian, his profile elegant and powerful in the twilight, she knew that she wouldn't be satisfied until she'd felt every inch of him against her.

Matilda took a deep breath as they reached her apartment building, hoping that Colin would by now be fast asleep and not notice her slipping into her apartment, which was located directly above his own. She gestured silently to Damian as she unlocked the door, and pulled him inside, finding his lips in another searing kiss.

As the door closed behind them, Matilda felt Damian's warm hands sliding up

inside her t-shirt, caressing her taut stomach and slender waist. Their kiss broke for a moment as he pulled the t-shirt over her head, casting it onto the floor before possessing her lips once more, taking the delicate flesh into his mouth and biting down gently before entwining their tongues in a dance of passion and desire, the slick, hot motion making Matilda weak with lust.

She tugged insistently at his t-shirt, and in a few seconds their bare torsos were pressed up against each other. Damian's smooth, tan chest and chiseled abs felt impossibly good against her skin, and she tried to get closer, closing every inch of space between their bodies. His

hands left swathes of fire as he explored every inch of her skin, stroking her satin flesh, plundering every curve with unbridled enthusiasm.

“God you’re sexy,” he whispered in her ear, capturing her earlobe between his teeth and tugging. The sensations danced down Matilda’s neck and exploded in her stomach. Her arousal was raging once more, and she held him close, desperate to feel more.

Damian picked her up as if she were a leaf and carried her towards the bed, where he laid her out and surveyed her hungrily, his eyes dark and lustful. Leaning over her, he began a trail of kisses at her navel, working his way up

with soft, feathery touches of his lips against her fevered skin. His lips came to rest on her neck, against the searing rush of blood as her pulse elevated to a frenzied hum. She couldn't breathe properly; her breath came in ragged gasps as Damian bit down hard on her pulse, and she let out a quiet moan. Carefully, Damian hooked his arm around her back to undo her bra and cast it aside. He took in her bare breasts with reverence. They were small but pert, perfectly soft spheres of snowy white. Damian's tanned hands covered her breasts, massaging them gently, and she arched her back towards his touch. She could feel her pussy throbbing as her

nipples tightened, responding to the persuasive touch of Damian's hands. Her panties would be ruined, dripping with arousal and clinging to the lips of her pussy, warm and swollen with desire.

Matilda bit back another moan as Damian began to use his mouth, taking one hard nipple between his teeth and tugging gently. She threw her head back in pleasure, aching for more contact. The shy, reserved girl she knew had disappeared, and she was now a goddess, ripe and uninhibited.

He worked his way down lower with agonizing slowness, pulling her skirt down inch by inch to reveal her soaked

panties. Gently, he took the thin material in his teeth, tugging it lower to expose her willing pussy. The soft tickle of his lips as he dragged her panties off was driving her wild. It was so animalistic, yet so gentle and sensuous.

She let out a yelp of surprise and excitement as he leapt up the bed and crouched over her, surveying his handiwork. She had the sudden desire to cover herself, self-conscious as he took in her bare, bruised breasts and soaked nether regions with enthusiasm, his eyes roving over the supple curve of her waist and the delicate V between her legs.

“No, don’t hide,” he murmured, his

voice husky and low.

Instead, Matilda pulled him down into a kiss. Now it was gentle, almost reverent, the way he caressed her lips with his own and cupped her cheek with his slightly rough palm. It only added fuel to her desire. As beautiful as it was to be gently kissed like this, she wanted him to plunge into her and take her with long, powerful thrusts. She whimpered and arched up into his body, eliciting a low growl which vibrated through her entire being.

To her astonishment, he flipped them over so that she was balanced on top of him, looking down into his eyes, two black pools of lust and desire, his lips

apart, his high cheekbones dusted with color. It was erotic, looking down at him and seeing the evidence of his arousal in his face. She felt a sudden rush of power, and her shyness had disappeared. She began to explore the planes of his well-muscled stomach, enjoying the feel of his toned, hard flesh against her hands. She shuffled a little lower, and took in his arousal, straining against his shorts. She undid the buttons of his shorts, and bit back a gasp as his erection sprang free.

He was big and thick, and just the sight of him sent another throb of desire through her. Gently, she took him in her hand, delighting in the power she felt as

she pumped him up and down a few times. She wanted him inside her so badly. Looking at his eyes for confirmation, she took control. Raising her hips, she sank down onto his engorged cock, gasping at the feel of him filling her, stretching her walls as far as they would go.

The pleasure was so dizzying that she sat for a few moments, adjusting to his enormous girth, before slowly rotating her hips, throwing her head back in ecstasy at the feeling. A million sparks were exploding inside her. It was incredible, and she never wanted it to end.

She began a rhythm, thrusting down hard

on his cock, grinding her hips and finding the exact spot that made her whimper with pleasure. She was going to come already, the pleasure too intense to be held in for another second. He groaned with her as her walls clamped down around him, and flipped them over easily as she writhed in pleasure, her climax exploding as she squeezed him inside of her.

“You have such a sweet pussy,” he whispered, continuing to thrust into her as she came down from her climax. His thrusts were everything she needed—long, hard and vigorous, his thick cock caressing her walls and stirring up the embers of her passion. Every stroke

made her whimper with pleasure, his cock dominating her, forcing waves of pleasure down on her so it was all she could do not to scream out loud.

His thumb found her clit as his pace quickened, and Matilda threw her head to one side, using the blue satin pillow to muffle her moans. She grabbed his muscular arms, needing something to anchor her as he thrust into her relentlessly, plundering her pussy as deep as he could go.

Before she was ready, a second orgasm crashed through her. She didn't feel attached to her body any more. All she could do was ride the crest of the orgasm to its conclusion. As she came

down once more, she felt Damian's thrusts becoming erratic, hard and jerky, before warm spurts of his come filled her to the brim. She clamped her walls around him, milking him for every last drop. They both fought for breath, holding onto each other tightly.

Matilda wasn't sure if she'd passed out or if time had simply moved on, but as she regained the ability to process thought, she found herself snug and secure within Damian's embrace, their naked bodies twined together, exhausted and spent.

"Will you stay with me?" she murmured. Damian answered with a lingering kiss to her forehead, and she drifted into a

deep, peaceful sleep.

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When she woke up, the early morning sunlight was peeping through the blinds, and Damian was still beside her, propped up on one elbow and considering her thoughtfully, his grey eyes lighter in the morning light, full of mystery.

“Good morning,” she mumbled, suddenly self-conscious again as she remembered what they had done last night. She had never done anything like it before, and she didn’t know how to act.

“Hi,” he grinned. He leaned down and gave her a long, deep kiss, instinctively knowing how to soothe away her anxiety. She could feel the stirring of

arousal beginning again, but she pulled away before either of them could respond to the call of their bodies. As much as she wanted to lie with him forever, she had to be level-headed about this. With a heavy heart, she realized that she'd have to approach Colin before getting in too deep with Damian.

"I hate to say this, but you need to get going soon," she said reluctantly, hoping he wouldn't take it as a dismissal.

"Are you sure?" Damian's palm stroked from the nape of her neck down to the base of her spine, causing her to shiver with delight. "It's a Sunday morning. I don't know about England, but around

here, that means morning sex and pancakes.”

“Mmm, that sounds amazing,” Matilda grinned. “But there’s something I have to admit.”

“Yeah?” Damian looked curious.

“Us being together—it can only be this one time. It’s a bad idea for my family to find out about this, trust me.”

“So you only wanted a one night stand, is that what you’re saying?” Damian tried to look casual, but Matilda could read the disappointment in his eyes, which made her feel both happy and guilty at the same time.

“Not at all. I’d love to see you again. Just...I could get into real trouble over

this.”

“You worry too much,” Damian said.

“Besides, now I’ve had a taste, I’m never going to give you up.” The look in his eye now was unreadable. It looked almost like triumph, but that didn’t make any sense. She ignored the thought, and tried to concentrate on the matter at hand.

Matilda hesitated—the warmth from Damian’s body pressed against hers felt so good, and she could smell his smoky, delicious scent on her skin. Did she really want to walk away from that? Could she even walk away from it? The idea that he wanted to keep seeing her was flattering, and she had never felt so

good before. She knew that there was only one answer. She had to see him again.

“Then... if we saw each other again, it would have to be a secret,” she warned.”

“If you insist,” Damian shrugged. “I don’t care if we have a secret—so long as I get to see you again. In fact, I kind of like the idea of having you all to myself.”

Matilda smiled, and leaned in for a short, sweet kiss.

“Whatever happens—that guy who was with me last night—he can’t know,” she stated.

“He’s not a boyfriend is he? Because I

don't like to share," Damian frowned. Matilda felt a thrill of excitement go through her at the words. She loved the fact that he had already claimed her for his own.

"No, like I said, he's a friend of my dad's who's keeping an eye on me," she said. "My dad's protective, but I like to humor him."

"Well, whatever," Damian said. "I won't cause any trouble if I can help it."

"Thanks!" Matilda breathed out a sigh of relief.

"So, when are you free? I don't want to be away from you for too long." Damian looked at her naked body hungrily, and Matilda felt a sparking of arousal shoot

through her, although she was too tired and sore from the night before to act on it.

“I’ll call you,” she said.

“I don’t have a cell,” Damian admitted.

“I don’t like society to be keeping track of me.”

“Oh,” Matilda was surprised.

“How about tomorrow? Same time, same place?” Damian suggested.

“OK,” Matilda agreed happily.

“I’ll take you somewhere amazing,” Damian promised.

“Where?” Matilda was immediately curious, excited for their next meeting.

“Wait and see,” he said with a mysterious smile.

As Damian walked away from her apartment, he smiled to himself. He'd done it—seduced the cultured little English girl right out from under the nose of that stuffy old man. But instead of feeling the rush of triumph over him at his conquest, Damian couldn't get her out of his mind. She had been so sweet, shy yet curious, like a tiny kitten with coal-black fur.

Damian passed the door of the apartment under hers. He knew from what she had said that *he* lived there. The man he had challenged last night. Should he knock and gloat? He thought about it, but Matilda's serious face floated in front of

his eyelids.

“Whatever happens—that guy who was with me last night—he can’t know.”

Was it worth it? Would he rather have his victory than see her again? He usually didn’t feel the need to have a woman more than once, but he could already feel his body yearning for hers. Something about her was intoxicating. Maybe it was just because it was a secret. Maybe that added mystery and excitement. But he thought it was more than that. He had felt real jealousy and disappointment when she had said she couldn’t see him again. For some reason, he still wanted her.

Well, last night had been some of the

best sex of his life. Why give that up? He'd stay with her a while longer, as long as it took for him to get itchy feet and need to move on. He wasn't tied to this place, so there would be no repercussions for him when he did. Smiling to himself, he found himself eager for the next day, when he would be able to see her again.

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Once Damian had left, Matilda began to let her mind consider the consequences of her rash actions. A strong part of her was triumphant, exulted at the evening's activities and delighted at the idea of seeing Damian again so soon. It felt as if she alone in the universe had been picked out and given the best prize imaginable.

On the other hand, she remembered what had occurred with Colin the night before—what would the consequences of her actions be? He was surely going to do something about it. He would almost certainly tell her father, and then what

would happen? Her only option was to reach some kind of agreement with him. After all, why shouldn't she see someone? It wasn't as if anyone in the media would find out if they kept the relationship discreet, and there was certainly no need for her father to even know about it unless Colin wanted to lose his job.

Matilda decided to wait until Colin spoke to her—which he undoubtedly would—and in the meantime, she tried to empty her head of her worries and delights. As much as she tried to keep her head clear, though, all the feelings and sensations from the night before came flooding back to her—the way

Damian's rough hands had felt against her soft skin; the way his lips had felt pressed against hers; the way he had felt moving inside her.

Matilda was jerked out of her fantasies by a sharp knock on the door—it had to be Colin. Taking a deep, calming breath, she went to answer it.

“You are going to tell me everything that happened last night,” Colin told her sternly, “and then I will decide what to do about it.”

“Now wait a second,” Matilda said, her sense of fairness flaring up at this command, “I’m not a child. I’m a mature adult and I’m allowed to make my own decisions.”

“Well my job is to make sure those decisions don’t lead the Royal Family into embarrassment and notoriety,” Colin said. Matilda thought he looked a little crazed, like a bull being taunted by a matador. His close-set eyes bulged slightly, and his nostrils were white, his face taut and twisted.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” Matilda protested.

“No? Did you fuck him?”

“I beg your pardon!” Matilda was shocked by the vulgar language coming from the usually boring and polite man.

“Did you? Did you open your legs for him like a little hussy?” Colin sneered, a fleck of saliva at the corner of his mouth.

“I won’t be spoken to like that,” Matilda said strongly. She had expected him to want some answers, but he was acting crazy and it took her by surprise.

“You’ll be spoken to how you deserve to be spoken to,” Colin spat. “You’ve put me in a difficult position and you’ve jeopardized your family’s reputation. You had a one night stand with some wastrel who’s probably given you a whole host of diseases or got you pregnant.”

“How dare you accuse me of being stupid?” Matilda said, her usually calm temper rising. “I spent the night with a man I have every intention of seeing again. I am well within my rights to have

a boyfriend—my father is hardly going to force be to be a nun for the rest of my life. Even he allows me to date.”

“Not while I’m around,” Colin said decisively. “While you are under my protection you will be living by my rules—and I forbid you to go near that man again.”

Matilda was speechless. How could the usually calm and quiet man who spent his time shuffling papers and agreeing with everything her father said be verbally abusing her and ordering her around? She was her own woman—but the fear of what her father could do made her pause. One word from Colin about her behavior and he could have

her deported with a click of his finger. She wouldn't put it past him, either. Prince Laurence was a kind man, but where it came to his daughters, he ruled with an iron fist. She had to somehow gain the upper ground without her father finding out.

"If father knows you left me alone that night, he'll fire you," she said, hating herself as she said it. "You're at risk just as much as me if he hears about it. So why don't we make a deal. I promise to be discreet when I see Damian, and you don't let my father in on anything. That way, we both get what we want."

She thought it was a fair bargain, but the look of contempt on Colin's face told

her that he wouldn't be agreeing with her any time soon.

“Your father trusts me,” he said. “I’ve been working with him for the past seven years and he knows that I am completely honest with him. When I tell him that you deliberately tried to cause a scene in order to make me leave, who do you think he is going to believe?”

Matilda considered—would her father really believe an employee over his own daughter? She thought about how strict he was, and how hard he had come down on the idea of her dating anyone while she was in high school and university. The first boyfriend she had ever had was in her second year at

Cambridge. He had been a nice guy, but after their photographs together had cropped up in several newspapers and gossip magazines, her father had come up to Cambridge and insisted on talking to him.

After their ‘talk’—which neither her boyfriend or her father ever elaborated on—her boyfriend told her that he wasn’t ready for what their relationship meant. After that, Matilda had given up on trying to have a normal relationship. She had never met a guy who had been worth the hassle—until now. But it would be so easy for her father to separate her from Damian. He was sure to disapprove of him, not only because

he was American, but because he didn't match up to the educated, neat and gainfully employed ideal he had in mind for her. It was hopeless. Of course he would side with Colin.

It was a disgusting situation, but her hands were tied. The only way she could get Colin off her case was to obey him, much as she wished she didn't have to. She hated not being in control of her own life.

"Fine," she said. "I won't see him again."

"Damn right you won't," said Colin.

"Now that you're seeing sense, I don't see any need to tell your father about this little indiscretion—but if it ever happens

again, rest assured that there will be consequences. And Matilda, you won't like those consequences at all."

Matilda nodded meekly, suppressing her anger and loathing. It was clear that she would not get anywhere arguing with him. The only way she could do this was behind his back. If that's the way he wanted it, then she was willing to take the risk.

All in all, she considered, perhaps it was better this way. Colin would be stalking her every move if she was dating someone out in the open—this way she could keep Damian all to herself.

The entire day at work on Monday, Matilda floated around with the words of Damian's promise repeating in her head—same time, same place, and I'll show you something incredible.

She was intrigued about what he could possibly have meant by that. It only crossed her mind for a moment that he might not turn up—that it might just have been a one-time thing, and he would move on without a word. Somehow, something about the way he'd looked at her the next morning, as if he was trying to memorize each and every one of her features in order to keep him going until the next time they met, told her that he

was just as eager to meet again as she was.

“Are you OK? Job getting to you?” her colleague, Sylvie, asked her as she stood in the middle of the archive, file in her hand, completely spaced out. Sylvie was a warm, middle-aged woman with light brown hair and nut-brown eyes. She had probably once been very beautiful, but her once voluptuous curves were now slightly more voluptuous than curvy. Nevertheless, she had taken Matilda under her wing since day one, and Matilda liked the kind older woman despite her tendency to talk a little too much when they were supposed to be working.

“Oh—yeah, sorry,” Matilda said, realizing that she had been standing there daydreaming for the past ten minutes at least. “Just jet lag, you know.”

“Looks more like love to me,” Sylvie said shrewdly. “Did you meet an American cutie over the weekend? I’m sure that accent of yours will have guys rushing at you like flies.”

“Not really,” Matilda said, blushing.

“Ah, I see. Unrequited love,” Sylvie decided, based on absolutely no evidence other than her extensive bookcase of romance novels. “Poor lamb.”

“No, really, it’s nothing like that. I’m still just a little spaced out from jetlag is

all,” Matilda said earnestly.

“Well, if that’s the story you’re sticking to, then fine,” Sylvie smiled mysteriously. “But I always have an open ear for a love story.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Matilda said politely. “Um—where does this file go again?”

She tried to listen attentively as Sylvie gave her another run-down of how the extensive archive system worked.

The day seemed to crawl on, and Matilda was relieved when five o’clock came around and she could catch the bus back to Georgetown and walk the few blocks up to her apartment.

“Good day at work?” Colin smiled at

her from the door of his apartment, where he was loosening his tie, fresh from a day at the office completing some dull-sounding paperwork related to the British Royal Family.

“Fine,” Matilda shrugged.

“Are you hungry? I thought I’d cook dinner for us both,” Colin suggested. His face was clear and possibly even penitent. Matilda hated to bear a grudge, and part of her thought that perhaps if they got on friendlier terms, he would begin to see her point of view and give her a little more of the freedom she deserved.

“That sounds lovely,” she said, hitching a smile onto her face. Somehow,

something about him left her cold, but she had to make an effort to come to an understanding with him if she wanted to see Damian again.

“We’re not so different, really,” Colin told her as he added some herbs to the pasta sauce he was making. “I’m not so much older than you. I know what it’s like to want to go out into the world and see things for yourself.”

“So you do understand,” Matilda said gladly. Maybe he realized how much he had overreacted the day before.

“To a point,” Colin acknowledged, “but sooner or later, everyone has to grow up and accept that trivial romances and flights of fancy don’t get you anywhere.

Reputation—that's what gets you places. Status, power; without those, you're nobody. Your father understands that, and he's giving you the opportunity to learn for yourself what it truly important."

"Isn't happiness more important than power?" Matilda ventured, feeling a little disgusted that Colin would value status and power above anything else. She herself would give up all claims to being a princess if she could only have freedom and happiness.

"You can't have happiness without two things: money and freedom. And the only way to get those things is to have power," Colin said. "Take now for

instance—I have power over you. But if you were to marry a suitable person with status, you would have the power.”

“No,” Matilda corrected him. “I would be tied into an unhappy marriage and I’d have no freedom or power at all.” She didn’t like where this was going. What was he suggesting?

“It depends who you married,” Colin reasoned, putting food on two plates and bringing them over to the table. “If it was someone your father approved of and who you came to love, you would have the ability to choose your path in life.”

“I don’t think anyone I know fits into that category,” Matilda said, privately

thinking that nobody apart from Damian could ever live up to her expectations now. Although she had only spent one night with him, the way he made her feel was unlike anything else. She couldn't imagine any other man living up to that.

“Well, what about me for example?”

Colin said lightly. “Your father trusts me, and I would certainly allow you the freedom to be successful in your career.”

“Ha,” Matilda said without thinking.

“My dad certainly wouldn't want me to marry my bodyguard—that's basically what you are, isn't it? The only person who he would ever be satisfied with would be a politician of some sort, or

minor royalty—at least someone well educated. I couldn't think of anyone I was worse suited to marry.”

She noted the way Colin's hand shook as he forked noodles into his mouth, and wondered why on earth he had brought it up—it couldn't be his goal to marry her, could it? It was preposterous. Even if the thought of embracing him didn't leave her cold and grossed out, her father would want someone of far higher status to marry his daughter. She wondered if she had been too honest in her reply. To make up for it, she hastily changed the subject, hoping that this conversation would be forgotten.

After dinner, with a lot to think about, it

was no time at all before it was time for Matilda to sneak out and meet Damian. Her nerves were tingling with excitement, and she could barely contain her anticipation. She slipped quietly out her front door, careful to close it in a way that made no sound. Creeping down the stairs on tiptoes, she was satisfied that she had made no sounds which would arouse Colin's suspicions. Once out the front door of the apartment building, she broke into a run, rejoicing in the feeling of being completely and utterly free.

As she turned the corner, she slowed to a walk, conscious that she was attracting attention. Her entire body was buzzing

with anticipation. She couldn't wait to see Damian again. Just picturing his charming, handsome face in her mind caused her to break out into a beaming smile, and the memory of his touch sent shivers of eager excitement through her limbs.

She was dressed casually in a light blue cotton skirt and a white tank top, with her glossy black hair loose over her shoulders. She hoped she didn't look like she'd made too much effort, but she also wanted to see Damian's eyes light up at the sight of her. She was oblivious to the numerous other lustful looks she received as she made her way down to the street where she had met Damian.

She was ten minutes early when she arrived at the bar, and she hesitated, wondering if she should go inside or wait for him outside. Before she could decide, however, she spotted him, striding purposefully from the same direction she had walked in, a broad smile on his face.

As he reached where she was standing, he swept her up in his arms, spinning her around and kissing her hard before putting her down. She was flushed and giggling, delighted by his enthusiastic greeting.

“I saw you coming,” he said. “You were in front of me. I thought of running and surprising you from behind.”

“I’m glad you didn’t; this was a much nicer greeting,” she affirmed.

“Glad to be of service,” he grinned, stealing another lingering kiss, tilting her chin up with one finger in order to capture her lips. Matilda felt the now familiar dizziness from his proximity, and immediately leaned in for more.

“I thought you wanted to keep our relationship on the low down,” Damian teased her between kisses.

“Mmm, who cares,” murmured Matilda.

“Not me,” Damian said, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips, making her heart flutter. “I want the world to know that you’re all mine.”

“We can’t,” Matilda sighed reluctantly.

“It has to be a secret for now.”

“As you wish, my lady,” he said.

“So where are we going tonight?”

Matilda asked, excited about the surprise Damian had promised her.

“Follow me and you’ll soon find out,”
Damian grinned.

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As Damian and Matilda walked away from the bar together, their hands intertwined and their bodies close as they talked and laughed, a shadow pulled away from a building. It crept stealthily forwards as the couple turned a corner, making sure to stay in the shadows as much as possible to prevent being noticed.

The figure was of a man, tall and lean, but with wiry, powerful muscles under his dark clothing. Although his face was shrouded and a dark cap pulled low over his eyes, the man's close-set eyes could still be seen, dark pools of black with a faint glitter reflected from the

fading evening sun. His thin lips pulled into a bitter, satisfied smile as he raised a digital camera, snapping a picture of the oblivious couple as they walked down the street, without a care in the world.

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Matilda was both nervous and excited as they wound their way through the streets of Georgetown and down towards the river. She wondered where they were going—whether he was really leading her somewhere exciting or whether he was making it up as he went along.

When she questioned him about it, he merely smiled mysteriously, telling her to wait and see.

“I’ve been to DC dozens of times,” he explained finally, as they left the roads of the city for a small, beautiful trail which wound its way through the trees and along the river. “I’ve found all the secret spots where you can be at peace,

away from everyone else. I love the city—its bustle, its people and its history—but sometimes the places where nobody ever goes are the best of all.”

“Where does it lead? This trail?” she asked, looking on ahead at the endless green, the river flowing gently to their left.

“Oh, it goes on for miles and miles—all the way to the ocean if you follow it far enough. But what I wanted to show you is just a little bit further up...”

Matilda followed him, unable to help admiring his confidence and mysterious air as he led her further and further up the river. Nobody had ever done anything as spontaneous with her before.

Every date she had been on was tame, carefully planned and uninspired. Every holiday she had experienced had been littered with public engagements and marred by bodyguards and crowds of staring people. Making her way into the countryside, following a rushing river, was almost like a dream for her. She felt more like a real princess than ever, being singled out by the handsomest of princes. Why couldn't being a princess always be like this?

Finally, Damian led her from the path and into a thicket of trees next to the river, pulling her towards a tiny, run-down gatehouse hidden from the view of the path or the river.

“Here,” he said with pride. “I discovered this many years ago, when I was hiking around this trail. Even though it’s only a few miles from the city, it’s a part of the Chesapeake National Park which nobody ever really goes to. Hang on a sec.”

Matilda watched as Damian strode towards the little hut, then looked back at her, grinning.

“It’s not locked—come and see!”

Matilda followed him towards the small shack and he opened the door, showing her the interior. Inside was a small rowing boat, unchained and seemingly waiting for them.

“Surprise,” Damian grinned at her. “I

found this ages ago. There's nothing more incredible than taking a rowing boat out on the quiet water in the moonlight, all by ourselves. Are you game?"

Matilda could only nod. She was delighted that he would share this secret with her, of all people. She felt like she was being invited into his own private world, and it was like magic.

As she watched Damian rowing them out into the still, clear water of the small lake separated by a thin stretch of land from the river, she felt as if her heart had always been missing a piece, and now it was complete. How was it possible for him to make her feel that way in such a

short space of time?

“I always think more clearly out here,” Damian told her. “Somehow I feel more at peace with myself.”

“I know what you mean,” Matilda agreed. “Everything seems so clear.”

“You’re the only one I would want to share it with,” Damian said. “Something about you makes me want to be near you. I couldn’t get you out of my head at all. That’s not usual for me.”

“I couldn’t get you out of my head either,” Matilda confessed, feeling self-conscious as she said it. A tiny part of her half expected to laugh in her face and say “Just kidding!”, but he looked down at her with an expression on his face

which made her truly believe that he was sincere.

“That’s good,” Damian gave her a warm smile which made her toes curl up with happiness. “I’ve been thinking about your smile, and the way you look down and blush whenever I give you a compliment—it’s adorable. And I can’t forget how fucking beautiful you are when I’m inside you.”

Dropping the oars, Damian leant over and kissed her, pouring all his desire into the one kiss, so that Matilda felt that all the breath had suddenly been sucked out of her lungs. She let his body guide hers, let it wash over her, and surrendered herself to the passion of the

night. After all, why not? It was just the two of them, under the soft silvery light of the moon.

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“Damian...,” Sylvie said thoughtfully into Matilda’s ear as she sat compiling data in the archives.

“What?” Matilda sat up, alarmed, wondering if her thoughts had somehow been projected onto the screen in front of her. She looked around at Sylvie grinning like a fat spider who has just discovered a treasure trove of juicy flies.

“So that’s his name, hmm? You doodled it in the corner of the notes you left on your desk.”

“Oh, did I?” Matilda blushed at her blunder. She was still such a schoolgirl!

“Not to worry, I won’t tell a soul—who

is he?" Sylvie asked, her face full of lively curiosity.

"He's... just some guy I have a crush on," Matilda lied. Although she liked Sylvie, a lifetime of experience had taught her never to fully trust someone with her secrets. The less people knew about her, the less information could leak out to the media.

"Oh really? You're glowing like that just over a little, unrequited crush?" Sylvie teased.

"I'm not glowing, am I?" Matilda wondered. When she looked in the mirror, she saw the same pale face and dark hair, the same wide, innocent green eyes, despairing over how boring she

looked compared to some of the golden, glamorous girls Damian must have met in his travels. She looked young and plain.

“Like a beacon,” Sylvie confirmed.

“I’ve honestly never seen anyone so happy in this archive in my life. It’s usually full of dry old men and women who haven’t so much as thought about sex in a decade, let alone had any.”

Matilda reflected over the last week, during which she had seen Damian every night. They had talked, laughed, made love over and over, and she still couldn’t seem to get enough of him. He was under her skin, filling her mind and overflowing into every aspect of her

life. There was barely a second where she wasn't picturing his face or lingering over a conversation they had been having the night before. Even when she slept, all she dreamt of was Damian, his gentle, warm voice, his never-ending resources for new and exciting places to show her around the city, and his strong arms encircling her.

“Hello? Earth to Matilda?” Sylvie tried, waving her hand in front of Matilda’s face.

“Hmm? Oh, I’m sorry.” Matilda realized she had sunk into a daydream. Discreetly checking for drool (she had been pondering Damian’s razor sharp abs) she tried to look composed and

professional.

“Well, damn,” Sylvie said, looking faintly envious. “If that’s not love, I’ve never seen it. I remember the first time I met my husband—fat and balding now, I’ll grant you, but back in the day he had a butt I could have eaten my dinner off and licked clean after...”

Matilda stopped listening as she thought about the envy on Sylvie’s face. She knew the expression all too well. She had worn it herself many times as she had looked at couples holding hands in public, looking into each other’s eyes, and smiling. Even people who were hanging out with friends and laughing together, without a care in the world,

caused her to feel a tiny twinge of jealousy. Now, somehow, she was the lucky person. How had it happened? She thought back to the conversation she'd had with her sister the night before.

“You’re being careful, aren’t you?” Caroline had asked her as they chatted via Skype. “You haven’t got into any scrapes?”

“No, of course not,” Matilda has said. “I’ve been doing great at work and been taking in a lot of the sights around the city, but that’s it, I swear.”

“How are you getting on with Colin?” Caroline queried. “You are making sure not to go out without him, aren’t you?”

You never know in America—it might be dangerous.”

“Caroline, it’s the safest city I’ve ever been to—much safer than London,” Matilda assured her. “I couldn’t get in trouble if I tried.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you,” Caroline said. “There’s something...you seem, I don’t know, different. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I’m happy, Caroline,” Matilda translated for her. “Could that possibly be it?”

“I guess,” Caroline said slowly. “I’ve never seen you in this mood before. It’s like you’re looking at everything optimistically, I guess. It’s so different

for you. You always seemed so restless at home. Nothing any of us did could make you happy.”

“I finally have some freedom,” Matilda said. “It’s refreshing. Was it so surprising that I wasn’t happy whenever we did anything at home? A restaurant always meant other people gawping at us, and a trip to any public place was always more of a photo opportunity than a nice day out. Now I can be myself and go where I like without so much as a second glance.”

“It just seems like it’s more than that. There’s not a guy, is there?” Caroline asked shrewdly.

“Please,” Matilda scoffed, putting on a

masterful expression of scorn. “I work in an archive full of people three times my age. The only person anywhere near my age is Sylvie, and she’s at least in her thirties, probably her forties.”

“If you say so,” Caroline said, not entirely convinced. “Oh, by the way, I thought you’d want to know that daddy’s arranged three interviews for me this week.”

“Jobs?” Matilda asked blankly. She didn’t think that Caroline wanted to do any work outside of the charity events she organized for the family.

“No, idiot—marriage interviews,” Caroline said. “I’m 22 already. Daddy thinks it’s high time I found a suitable

husband.”

“So you’re letting him arrange your marriage? Caroline, this is the modern day,” Matilda said, astounded. “Even our cousins got to pick their own spouses.”

“I know, but I agree with him that it’s the best way to find someone suitable,” Caroline said primly.

“Oh, Caroline,” Matilda sighed. “You don’t know what you’re missing out on.” Since that conversation, Matilda had been wondering whether, but for her decision to move to America, her father would be trying to do the same thing for her. She could envision the type of marriage interview Caroline would be

sitting through. Men in their late thirties, dried-up and dull, chosen for their political importance, their business connections or simply their money and reputation. They'd do their duty by her and breed little heirs to the throne, but behind her back, they'd be having dirty little affairs with their secretaries whilst Caroline sat at home, lonely, never even knowing what love felt like.

Matilda wouldn't trade in what she had with Damian for that lifeless political world. How could anyone be contented with an arranged marriage? She pitied her sister now, rather than envying her for her practical outlook on life. Where her sister was marrying herself off

through a sense of duty, she was living the romance of a lifetime with a sexy American who had come to sweep her off her feet. It was better than any romance novel she had ever read. The only black mark on her horizon was that her relationship with Damian couldn't remain a secret forever.

She thought back to each lie she had told Colin over the past week—early nights, going out for a breath of fresh air and meeting some friends from work. Every time he seemed to swallow the excuse without complaint, and he had been making only a small effort to keep on top of her movements.

She was getting good at telling lies to

her family, and part of it scared her. The other part of her, however, was proud, and excited to have such a big secret all to herself. She loved the secret rendezvous, the intimacy of knowing that Damian was entirely hers, and the excitement of getting away with it. It was something a girl could get addicted to. She realized that Sylvie was still talking, and politely tried to pick up the thread of the conversation.

“...used to be so spontaneous, and now he thinks it’s a romantic gesture if he picks his socks up off the floor. I’d give anything to be your age again.”

Matilda smiled sympathetically at Sylvie, and internally danced with

excitement at the thought that, in five hours, she would get to see Damian again. Against that, everything else paled in comparison

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Matilda dressed carefully in a loose cotton dress, perfect for the humid weather currently winding its way through the city, and tied her hair back in an elegant but casual knot. Her entire body was thrumming and, like a caffeine addict about to enjoy a steaming hot, aromatic cup of coffee, she was eagerly anticipating the delicious feel of Damian's lips on hers. She practically danced her way to their usual meeting spot a few blocks from her apartment, telling Colin that she needed to do some research at the library for her work. She turned the corner, her senses straining for the first sight of Damian's

tall, athletic body, leaning casually against the brick of the building. She spotted him, and immediately her heart started beating faster, her lips automatically stretching into a smile.

“Hi, babe,” he greeted her, giving her a long, lingering kiss. “Mmm, you taste like strawberries and cream.”

“More like ham sandwiches, probably,” she said, and he chuckled.

“You always taste amazing,” he told her.

“Ready for another adventure?”

“Yes, please,” she said eagerly. Over the past week, Damian had shown her so many amazing spots in and around the city. From the first day on the boat, they had explored the nooks and crannies

around the parks, enjoyed searching through quirky stores in Dupont Circle and eaten at amazing little restaurants in local spots like Chinatown and as far out as Rockville, where Damian had promised, and delivered, some of the best food she had ever eaten.

She had been blown away by his independent spirit and his seemingly unending knowledge of great spots to visit. She delighted at the feeling of his arm around her shoulders as they walked to where his car, a battered old sedan, was waiting.

“Food first?” he asked. “I know a great Thai place.”

“I’m starving,” Matilda said.

She leaned back in the faded passenger seat, intrigued as ever with studying his profile as he drove. She still couldn't wrap her head around why someone so handsome and exciting would be with someone dull and boring like her.

"You've been to Thailand, right?" she asked, eager to hear his stories about his travels. He gave her a lazy smile, and turned off the street and headed north.

"Yeah," he said. "I travelled through Thailand for about a year. It's got to be my absolute favorite cuisine. You ever tried Thai food?"

"Not really," Matilda admitted. "Just Chinese."

"Oh, you're going to love it," he said,

and Matilda thrilled at how excited he sounded to introduce her to something new. “When I was in Thailand, I tried a khanom chin nam ngiao—you ever heard of it?”

“No,” Matilda admitted.

“Oh, man, it was hilarious. It was one of the best things I ever tasted. A native guy I met invited me to his home and told me this dish was a specialty, and it was his grandmother’s recipe, so I knew it had to be fantastic—and it was!

“I only asked afterwards what was in it. I thought his English was wrong when he told me.”

“Why? What was it?” Matilda asked, fascinated.

“It’s fermented noodles with pork blood,” he said. “Absolutely delicious, but you have to do a double take when someone tells you you’ve been sucking down pork blood,” Damian said frankly. “They make it by curdling the blood, then dicing it. Really flavorful.”

“I’m not sure I’d eat that,” Matilda admitted. “Although we do eat blood pudding in England.”

“Yeah, it tastes pretty good,” Damian admitted. “Don’t worry, though, the place I’m taking you does plenty of good stuff which doesn’t have anything too outlandish in it.”

“I trust you,” laughed Matilda. She loved his casual attitude to the outlandish, and

she longed to prove to him that she, too, was adventurous. Although she felt like she could be herself around him, a part of her still longed to impress him and show him that she wasn't just a silly little girl.

They reached the restaurant, a little place tucked into a side street, with small, cozy tables and tranquil music playing.

“My favorite place to sit is in the garden out back,” Damian said. “It might be small, but it feels like a little corner of Thailand, especially in this weather.” She allowed him to usher her outside, and asked incredulously as they sat down,

“How do you find these places? I mean, it’s not as if you lived her for more than, what, a few months?”

“When you travel a lot, you meet all kinds of people, and they’ve been all kinds of places. I’ve met dozens of people who’ve lived in and around DC, and they’ve given me all their secrets—or some of them at least. I bet if I asked you the best places to go in England, you’d have all sorts of interesting secrets to tell me.”

The way he said the last part made Matilda blush, the double meaning in his words making her at once excited and nervous. She also felt a pang of guilt about the biggest secret she was keeping.

She still hadn't told him that she was a member of the Royal Family.

"You've been here before, though?" she asked.

"Loads of times," he admitted. "Like I said, Thai is my number one favorite—the spicier, the better."

Matilda looked up at him and felt like she could never live up to him. He'd been so many places and tried so many new things compared to her. What had she done? What could he ever see in her, aside from a pet he could entertain easily?

The waiter came for their orders, and Matilda resolved to be ambitious.

"I'll have the—what was it again? The

cunning chin no-no?”

“Khanom chin nam ngiao?” he asked.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I want to try new things,” she said stubbornly. “I’ll have—what he said, please,” she directed at the waiter.

“It’s not on the menu,” he pointed out.

“Oh!” Matilda felt incredibly stupid. She wished the little fountain in the garden would suddenly turn into a flood and wash her away. Damian, on the other hand, was looking at her with admiration.

“Points awarded for bravery,” he assured her. “We’ll need a few minutes,” he added to the waiter, who nodded and left.

“I’m an idiot,” Matilda stated, blushing from the roots of her hair right down to her toenails.

“No, it’s my fault. I should have told you that’s something of a specialty. I don’t think many restaurants would make it,” he said. “Here.” He held out the menu to her. “These are all excellent.”

Taking the menu and hiding her face behind it, Matilda fell just a little bit more in love with Damian. He was so kind and caring!

As Damian looked at her, hiding her blush behind her menu, he smiled to himself. She was just too cute. He couldn’t help but love spending time with her. Just until my interest fades, he

told himself, but deep down, he wondered if this was it for him. Was this little English girl really everything he had travelled the world searching for, or was she just a passing fancy for him? As much as he hated to admit it, he was pretty sure he had fallen for her.

After dinner, Damian drove them back into the city, and they strolled, hand in hand, down towards the National World War II Memorial, where pillars representing each of the states surrounded a pool of clear, tranquil water. It was empty; although it was Friday night, the clouds were heavy in the sky, promising rain, and it was already late.

Matilda was quiet, still feeling embarrassed by her stupidity, although Damian had been incredibly nice about it and, for some reason, didn't seem to think she was an absolute idiot.

"Have you been here yet?" he asked as they drew level with the pool.

"No," Matilda said.

"We're lucky to be here in the evening when all the tourists have gone elsewhere," he said. "Usually it's full of people. Come on." He led her to the edge of the water, slipping off his sandals and dipping his feet into the pool.

"Are we allowed to do that?" she asked nervously.

“Of course. Besides, would it stop you?” he asked, his eyes daring her to be bold. She decided she’d looked like enough of a fool for one evening. She’d be reckless for once and not care about the consequences.

She sat down next to him and slid her feet into the deliciously cool water. It felt wonderful in contrast to the heavy summer air.

“This feels so good!” she said out loud. “I never got to do anything like this back in England.”

“Why not?” Damian asked.

“Just... I was never allowed to do anything fun, or by myself. There were always rules to obey and commitments

to fulfil,” she said.

“You sound like you had such a sheltered life. I don’t understand how anyone could keep such a free spirit in chains,” Damian said, looking straight into her eyes.

“I’m not a free spirit,” she said desolately. “I’m just a girl.”

“You’re much more than just a girl,” he contradicted her. “You’re amazing. You’re so beautiful and strong and you don’t even realize it. You’ve never let anyone tell you what to do as long as I’ve known you, not even me. Everything about you tells me you’re independent and completely able to think for yourself. You’re the most remarkable

woman I've ever met.

"I think I've fallen for you hard, Matilda," he finished. "I don't think that I'll ever want to leave, not now that you're here."

Matilda's heart was thumping hard in her chest, and she wondered if she was dreaming, or had imagined the words. How could a guy like Damian have fallen for a silly little girl like her? He must just be leading her on, telling her what she wanted to hear. But he always seemed so sincere. Could he truly mean it?

"I just don't think I'm as great as you seem to think," she said, and then thought: what am I saying? This amazing

guy likes me and I'm trying to tell him what a loser I am. Why am I so dumb? "I think you're a lot more exceptional than you think," Damian said. "You've had people telling you what to do all your life, yet you're here, in America, doing something you love, with me. Tell me how exactly that makes you ordinary?"

"But my family would never allow it if they knew," she said, forcing herself to speak the ugly truth.

"Sometimes you have to stand up for what you want no matter what anyone else says," Damian said. "I want to show you everything, Matilda, not just this city. I want to take you with me to

Europe, to Asia, to each and every country on the planet, just to see your face as you discover something new.”

“That sounds incredible,” she admitted, and her heart yearned to do it even as her mind gave her an update on all the reasons she couldn’t. “But I can’t leave. I have a job here, and my family would never allow it.”

“I understand you not wanting to leave your job, but you’re a grown woman—I can’t say I understand why your family holds such sway over you,” he said, a touch of impatience in his voice.

“It’s complicated,” Maatilda sighed. This was the last thing she wanted to get into with Damian. She wanted to enjoy

her time with him, not to be reminded that she could never really be with him.

“Then explain it to me,” he said.

“It’s not important. Let’s just enjoy our time together now,” she said.

“No,” Damian replied. “I want to be with you, Matilda. I want to travel with you. This isn’t just a fling for me, no matter what it is for you. I want to stay with you, explore new things with you—and I can’t do that if you’ve put some sort of sell-by date on us because of your family.”

Matilda felt tears welling in her eyes at the harsh tone of voice Damian was using, and blinked them back. She felt as if she had been punched hard in the

stomach just from this small reprimand. Had she really fallen so far that Damian could affect her emotions with a few words?

“It’s not that I’m trying to keep anything from you,” she said desperately, “I just—there are things about me that aren’t great, and I don’t want you to hate me for anything outside my control.”

“Everything can be controlled. You just need to be brave enough to do it,” Damian said. “If you’re not, then maybe you aren’t the woman I thought you were.”

“Maybe I’m not,” Matilda agreed, a heavy feeling in her stomach. It was over. It was already over between them.

She tried not to let the despair swallow her whole. Quickly, she rose with a splash from her seat next to the water, trying to pull away, run home.

Damian caught her around the waist, holding her tight and burying his face in her hair. She could feel his remorse for his hard words in every point of contact between their bodies.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently, kissing her softly on top of her silky hair. “I didn’t mean that.”

Matilda turned around and kissed him tenderly on the lips, trying to tell him without words that he was forgiven. He pulled her closer, deepening the kiss, and she was left gasping when he finally

pulled away, her hair a mess and her heart thudding. A split second later, Damian pulled her towards him again for a second savage kiss, bruising her lips with his intense passion, holding her so tight that she could barely breathe. He pulled away finally, and they both fought for breath. Matilda knew she was flushed, disheveled and a complete mess, but the frantic kisses had turned her on to the point that she didn't care. All she wanted was to feel Damian's touch again. But before she did, she needed to tell him the truth about who she was.

“Damian, I... I need to tell you,” she said. “I’m...”

Somehow, the words wouldn't come out of her mouth. *I'm a member of the Royal Family and every aspect of our relationship would be hounded by the press or more likely forbidden by my father if it came out in the open.* She couldn't say it.

“I don't want to hide anything from you,” she said eventually. “My family is somewhat well known in England. That's why I can't just do as I please. I have them to think about. But I don't want to disappoint you, either. I want to travel with you. I want to be free. I just—it's too much to think about right now.”

“Don't worry, babe. We'll work it out,”

he promised. “Right now, it’s just you and me, so let’s forget your family.”

“OK,” she nodded.

“Hey—you want to go for a swim?”

Damian asked, mischief sparking in his eyes, making him look more handsome than ever.

“Seriously?” Matilda looked behind them at the still water of the pool. She thought how amazing the cool water would feel against her heated, sticky skin.

“Yeah, there’s nobody around. Let’s go for it,” Damian said. He jumped into the pool, which only came up to below his waist, and before Matilda could do anything, he grabbed her around the

waist and pulled her in next to him. She gave an involuntary shriek as he lifted her off her feet and into the cool water, and then started laughing at the broad smile on his face.

“It feels so good,” she said, enjoying the cool water lapping against her stomach as the humid air curled around her torso.

“It’s our own private swimming pool in the middle of the city. I hear the presidents comes here to take a dip all the time,” Damian said, straight-faced. Matilda giggled.

“Does he take his wife with him?” she asked, pretending to take him seriously.

“And the kids—the dog, too,” Damian replied, not skipping a beat.

“Hmm, well we’re lucky they’re not here tonight. Just us,” Matilda said with a coy smile. Her white dress was soaked, and the thin material was clinging to her skin, leaving little to the imagination. She could tell Damian was appreciating the view if the bulge in his shorts was anything to go by.

Feeling bold, she reached out and cupped him in the palm of her hand. He groaned, and pressed himself against her.

“You make me so hot, babe,” he whispered in her ear. He took her earlobe gently in his mouth and tugged. Matilda gasped as shivers of lust ricocheted all over her body, and she

leaned into him. He began kissing her neck gently, his hot breath ticking her skin, causing gooseflesh to break out across her arms which had nothing to do with the temperature of the water.

He found her pulse point with his lips and bit down hard. She moaned, and grabbed a handful of his dark hair, gripping it tight as he worked at her neck, kissing, nipping and sucking the pure white skin, watching purple bruises blossom as he marked her with his mouth.

One strong hand found Matilda's leg and brought it up to hook around his waist. She tried not to moan out loud as his hand ran the length of her thigh, gliding

up the slick flesh until he reached her panties. The sudden warmth of his hand against her aroused clit contrasted wonderfully with the cool water lapping against her heat, and she bit her lip to hold back the moans of pleasure.

“Mm, there’s no one around. I want you to moan for me,” Damian whispered in her ear, his breath an erotic breeze against her cheek.

“What if someone sees?” she whispered back, although she wasn’t sure she had enough restraint to wait until they were back at his place.

“They won’t,” Damian promised. “And if they do... who cares?”

The thrill of possibly being caught or

spotted gave the situation a glamor and excitement Matilda had never experienced before. She loved the feeling of being so daring, of having come so far from a few weeks ago where she had been too afraid to eat a hamburger outside in case someone from the press photographed her and *Princess Loves Junk Food* was spread all over the gossip rags for the next month.

This was beyond belief. It was free, uninhibited and absolutely erotic. She threw back her head and moaned as Damian pushed her dress aside, sucking gently at her engorged breast, nipping at the erect nipple, his hot, rough tongue laving the delicate flesh, sending waves

of pleasure coursing through her.

Damian impatiently tugged her panties aside and found her clit with his thumb, rubbing it hard. Matilda jerked and writhed as jolts of pleasure shot through her like bullets. She was losing her control and it had never felt more amazing. The cool water was heavenly against the urgent heat of her pussy, and the cool, wet trails Damian left as he caressed her exposed flesh were setting her skin ablaze.

His lips came up to capture hers, and Matilda felt as though her spirit was being lifted out of her body, spiraling above where they stood in the pool under the soft moonlight, the stars

illuminating them like two silvery silhouettes. He made her feel so good and she wanted more. She wanted her entire body to be devoured by lust. Her climax was building into a tense pressure in her stomach as Damian tugged and rubbed at her swollen clit, and she tried to hold it back, to prolong the uncontrollable pleasure which was rolling through her. She held it back as long as she could but it was like trying to keep the sun from bursting out from behind the clouds, trying to stop a speeding train dead in its tracks... She came violently, her entire body shuddering with the power of her release as Damian gave her clit one final flick

with his long, clever fingers. As she came down from her high, she felt him enter her, thrusting into her hot, wet pussy in one deft, slick movement.

She whimpered at the feeling of him filling her, and she arched into him, trying to pull him as deep inside her as possible, maximizing the delicious caresses of his rock hard cock against her willing walls.

It was unbelievably erotic how he thrust slowly in and out of her over-sensitized pussy. She could feel every inch of his hot, thick cock pulsing inside her. She squeezed her muscles, clamping down around him to intensify the experience, and she internally grinned in satisfaction

as she heard him groan.

“Damn, you’re so tight,” he moaned in her ear. The whisper sent a jolt of pleasure through her, and she could feel her pussy throbbing with renewed desire as he sped up his thrusts, bracing her small body against the side of the pool. Suddenly he picked her up to sit on the edge of the pool, using the higher angle to thrust upwards. Stars exploded behind her eyelids as he struck her sweet spot, sending her spiraling into ecstasy.

“Fuck, yes,” she moaned, all semblance of control or politeness abandoned. Damian grabbed her bare ass, squeezing the cheeks, adding a flower of sweet pain to her intense pleasure and driving

her close to the edge once again. She could feel his cock slamming repeatedly into her walls, hear the heaviness of his breathing as he fucked her hard. It was bliss, the sweetest, most magical sensation she had ever felt.

“I’m going to come,” Damian whispered in her ear, and those simple words drove her crazy. She lay back on the warm stone and wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him in hard as far as he could go.

She heard him roar his release even as her second orgasm came crashing over her in waves. The feel of his hot come spurting into her, coating her walls, made her climax all the more intense.

As she wound down from her high, she felt rather than saw Damian climb out of the pool, dripping wet, to lie beside her. She snuggled into his arms, feeling complete and exhausted. She wanted to lie here with him forever, the sound of the fountains a gentle song in the background.

As she came down to reality, though, she realized what a vulnerable position they were in, she with her bare ass exposed to the night air. She suddenly sat up, struck by the mortifying thought that her underwear must be floating in the fountain. If she didn't fish it out, anyone could see it.

“What’s up, babe?” Damian mumbled.

“My—my knickers are in the fountain,” she said, alarmed. Then she realized the funny side of it, and burst out laughing, joined by Damian’s deep chuckle.

Any observer would have thought they were crazy—the petite English girl with her soaked dress clinging to her curves, wading in the fountain, and her tall, muscular companion, his shorts hanging tantalizingly low on his hips, laughing as she fished around for some mystery lost item.

In the shadows behind a pillar, somebody was watching. A tall, lean man, well-muscled in a stringy sort of way, was putting away what looked like a camera, an expression of grim

satisfaction etched onto his face like a mask.

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Matilda made her way home in a haze of happiness, wrapped in a warm cloak of memories from the night before. She replayed the moment when Damian had swung her into the fountain, and the moment he had confessed he was falling for her. It buoyed her up so much she felt as if she was either going to float away or explode.

Was this what it felt like to be in love? Or was this simply what it felt like to be normal? Every time she thought of Damian's face, it made her swell up just a little bit more, as if one more tiny puff of happiness had been added to her soul, and it was fat and ready to explode.

Although they had only parted an hour or so ago, she was restless, waiting for the time when she could see him again and run her fingers through his hair, kiss his lips and feel his warm skin against hers. No, this wasn't just feeling normal. It was something more, and there was no reason to deny it. It had gone way beyond physical lust. Although her body sang every time she was near Damian, she also felt perfect contentment just to be resting her head against his broad shoulder, chatting about meaningless things or sitting in silence.

He was irresistible to her. She didn't know how she would be able to make it through the next day before she saw him

again. They had plans to meet that night, and Damian had promised her that they would go to another of his favorite places. It was all she could think about—that, and the touches and kisses from the night before.

She only thought about Caroline with a brief pang of sadness for a few seconds before the thought subsided into the tumult of happiness and excitement churning around inside her.

She reached the door to her apartment and took a deep breath. She knew she had to appear normal in front of Colin, and she tried to smooth down her hair and calm the beating of her heart. Her stomach felt like it was full of frolicking

snakes (did snakes even frolic?) and she didn't want it to show on the outside.

She hoped it was still early enough that she could sneak by unnoticed—her cotton dress was still a little bedraggled from its sojourn in the pool, and it would be evident that she hadn't headed out for a newspaper.

She snuck past his door soundlessly, and tried to make no noise at all as she went up the stairs towards her own front door. She breathed a sigh of relief as she unlocked her own front door and slipped through into the welcoming dimness. She was safe for one more night. Now to shower, get a few hours of sleep and meet Colin for lunch as if nothing had

happened.

The lights went on, and she froze, like a burglar caught in the act, blinking wildly to work out what had happened. Her heart froze in her chest as she saw Colin, his face grim and thin-lipped, standing by the light switch.

“I think it’s time to stop the lies, don’t you?” he said.

Numerous emotions flitted through Matilda’s head. The first was fear at the confrontation which was about to take place. She hated arguments and confrontation of any kind, and she knew that this was going to be unpleasant. The second emotion was shame. She hated disappointing her family, and she knew

that this would do just that—she had been selfish and reckless and now she had to live with it. The final emotion she could readily identify was anger. Anger at herself, anger at her family, and most of all, anger at Colin for being there and controlling her life.

Before she could really react to any of them, Colin had crossed the room to stand face to face with her.

“You were with that man again last night, weren’t you?” he said, his voice tight, controlled.

Matilda looked up into his face, and anger won over the other emotions. Who was Colin to make her feel guilty about doing something which made her happy?

“You’re not my father—in fact you’re not anything to me,” Matilda said. “I’m tired of justifying my actions to you or anyone else.” It was exhilarating to say, both terrifying and liberating. “From now on I am going to see whoever I want to see, whenever I want. I’ll call my father and explain that to him—and that I no longer want anyone stalking my every move.”

Colin’s face went white as she delivered this speech, and she continued to look up at him defiantly, willing him to contradict her.

“You silly, naïve little girl,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, astounded by the contempt in his voice.

“Is it too much to ask to run my own life at the age of 20?”

“Matilda, your life does not and never will belong to you. It belongs to the crown—and the crown has employed me to prevent you from making it look bad. You will stop seeing him once and for all or you will face the consequences of your own actions, and they will not be consequences you’ll like. I’ve warned you before but you didn’t listen to me. I am both much older and much smarter than you. If you try to outplay me again, you will regret it.”

“You arrogant prick,” she exclaimed, losing her temper completely in the face of his threats. “How dare you threaten

me? You're supposed to be taking care of me—and I don't even want you to do that. I run my own life—I do! You have no power over me—none! Only the power my father gave you, and if I'm willing to tell him how I feel, there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Oh, really?” Colin sneered, an ugly look creeping over his lean face.

“Not one thing,” Matilda said stubbornly. “I am a princess and you are merely an employee.”

“Would a princess fuck some tramp she picked up in public—in a national monument, no less?” Colin asked, his voice as light and dangerous as spider's silk.

“Wh-what?” Matilda was dumbstruck. She cast her mind quickly back to the night before. Had someone seen them? Would it be in the press? Had Damian—no, Damian would never have betrayed her, never! He didn’t even know who she really was.

“Don’t look so dumb, missy. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Weren’t you there, last night, letting your precious lover boy fuck your brains out in the middle of the rainbow pool?”

“I – how?” she asked, her entire world falling away like water swirling down a drain.

“You’re not nearly as smart as you think you are,” Colin sneered. “Even I didn’t

imagine you could possibly be this indiscreet, though.”

He made a motion, and she flinched back, her entire body in a state of shock. He gave a brief snort of derision before continuing to pull an envelope from the pocket of his coat. He laid the envelope in front of her.

“Don’t you want to see what sort of things I’ve caught you doing, princess?” he sneered, his upper lip peeled back to show his long, slightly crooked teeth.

Matilda could feel the tears threatening to well up in her eyes, and took a deep breath, willing herself to be calm. In the last week, she had never once felt that she was doing something wrong or

something that she should be ashamed of. Now, looking back on her conduct, she could see that she had behaved recklessly. What had she been thinking? Letting him pin her up against the wall in a public street, and even making love in the middle of a famous tourist spot. It was something which would look beyond terrible for anyone if it came out, let alone for her. She knew full well that she had to behave with more discretion than normal people—and now she had exposed herself to this. She had set herself up to be exposed as a slut and a harlot—but she wasn't! She had just been carried away by the romance and the freedom.

Now...she had a dreadful feeling that she knew what was in the envelope in front of her, but she had to look nonetheless.

With a shaking hand, she pulled the envelope towards her, pulling out the photographs within. She gasped and looked up—the first photograph had been taken that very first night, when she had taken Damian home with her. Had he been watching them even then? The thought made her feel sick. It was as if every memory she had made with Damian had been tainted, poisoned by the fact that Colin had witnessed them, peeping at them from the shadows. She flipped through the photos, her

horror and outrage turning to sickening fear as she saw herself, spread out and naked, Damian's head between her legs and a look of abandoned pleasure on her face. Another showed them in the boat, her breasts bare in Damian's hands. Each and every photo showed them kissing, cuddling, or much, much worse. There were about 20 photos in all, and that was more than enough. She knew that if her father or the media ever got hold of them, her life may as well be over. How could she have been so stupid and so naïve? How could she have trusted to the fact that she was safe here?

“Quite a spectacle you made of

yourself,” Colin commented mildly.

“Now do you still want to tell me that I can trust you to act with decorum by yourself?”

“I—you had no right to violate my privacy,” she choked out. It made her nauseated and shaky to think that Colin had stood and watched her most intimate moments with Damian.

“I had the right to be in public places—and that is where you displayed yourself like a common whore, performing obscene acts with some bum you picked up a week ago.” Colin’s words cut through her like hot knives slicing through butter.

“I—how could you?” she asked.

“You’re supposed to protect me from this sort of thing, not expose me.”

“I hardly exposed you. You left yourself wide open to this. I’m just trying to point out to you what sort of consequences this behavior has.”

“What are you going to do with them?” Matilda asked, gesturing to the photos.

“Well, there is no law to say that I have to do anything with them,” Colin admitted. “Then again, there are so many possibilities. I could show them to your father—that would be the end of any argument from you that you should be allowed the freedom to be independent. Or perhaps I could sell them to the media. I’d get thousands, don’t you think,

for just one. Think how much I could get for a 20 photo feature in a gossip rag.”

“Stop,” Matilda pleaded, not wanting to hear any more of the horrible potential of the photographs.

“But you asked—and you should know just how much damage I could cause. I could, princess, but that doesn’t mean I will—not if you cooperate with me,” Colin said.

Matilda felt the bile rising in her throat.

“You want to blackmail me?” she asked, sickened. She had never expected him to be so low, not even after this.

“What an ugly word from your pretty little mouth. Then again, I guess a mouth which is happy to wrap around some

thick American cock will do pretty much anything.”

“Please, stop talking to me like that,” Matilda said, hating the vulgar starkness of his language. “Just tell me what you want.”

“Well, that, for one thing. What I want is for you to start listening to what I want. You’re going to be a lot nicer to me from now on, princess. Aren’t you?”

Matilda stood silently as he leered at her. Everything about him was disgusting, from his slimy voice and the way he mockingly called her ‘princess’, to his crooked, yellowing teeth, thin, smirking lips and narrow, cold eyes. She felt a bubbling hatred rising in her

stomach, and she knew that if she didn't have self-restraint, she could claw at his face, taking her fury out by sinking her nails into his flesh.

As it was, she simply stood, unable to bow down and agree with him just like that.

“Too proud?” he asked, his eyes hardening from smugness to anger in seconds. “You still think you’re better than me?”

“I would never blackmail a person, let alone follow them and watch them,” she said.

Colin's face darkened and twisted into a scowl.

“I'd watch my step if I were you,” he

warned. “You can’t just say anything you want. Make me angry and I might just go ahead and tell your father what you’ve been up to. I should, you know—that’s what he pays me to do.”

“He pays you to take care of me—to protect me from the press, from people who might try to hurt me. Damian would never hurt me,” she said. “Falling in love isn’t something I should be forbidden to do.”

“You met this man a week ago. I call it a worldly man taking advantage of a naïve little girl,” Colin countered. “Didn’t I tell you that I talked to him, that night in the bar? He as good as told me he was in it to score.”

“It’s not your place to decide if he’s a good man or not,” Matilda said, trying to keep calm even as a seed of doubt was planted in her mind. “Not unless I ask you to. I am free to make my own mistakes.” Damian wouldn’t do that—would he?

“Correction,” Colin said with a nasty smile. “You *were* free to make your own mistakes. Now you are paying for them, and unless you want these pictures leaked, you should do exactly as I say.” He took a step closer to her, leaning into her and bringing a hand up to caress her hair, stroking the side of her face. She reeled back, shocked and horrified by the touch.

“What are you doing?” she asked in horror.

“Did you really think that my power over you stops at the press? I can do anything I like to you, princess—and as long as I have those photographs, there is nothing you can do to stop me. You think you’re free and independent? You are my slave. You belong to me. And it’s all because you refused to listen to me. What poetic justice.”

“Justice? It’s sick,” she said, her strong sense of right and wrong bursting out even when she was cornered. “You threaten to sell me out, and now you’re practically threatening to rape me. You’re a monster!”

“Now, now, princess, there’s no need to use such strong language,” he said, leaning away from her again and shrugging as if he had suggested going for a walk in the park. “I’m just trying to teach you something useful. Don’t we all want to learn from our mistakes?”

“I’d never let you touch me, no matter what you threaten me with,” she said harshly. “I’d rather the whole world see those pictures than you lay a finger on me.”

“Harsh words from a little girl with no power,” Colin said, chuckling, although his eyes looked furious. “We’ll see which one you prefer.”

He lunged for her again, and tried to kiss

her. Adrenaline shot through her veins and she struggled, kicking and screaming, not allowing him to get anywhere near her.

“Stop struggling,” he gasped, trying to pin her down. She struggled harder. Finally her arm shot out and collided with his chin, and he reeled back, panting.

“You little bitch,” he said. He looked for a moment as if he was going to attack her again, then seemed to think better of it when he saw the fierce, rebellious look in her eyes. He withdrew, gathering up the photos and putting them back in the envelope.

“Well, I guess I’ll give you a little time

to think it over,” he said, still breathing hard. “No use playing all my aces at once. Just remember: your father trusts me, and I live right below you. I have your key. I can have you any time you want, if I want. Is it really worth facing the scorn and ridicule of the world, shaming your whole family, when you can make it so much easier just by giving in to me?”

Matilda didn't answer.

“Think about it, princess,” he told her.

“How about we make a new deal for now? You put an end to your meetings with that pretty boy, or I'll do whatever I like to you. Maybe that means having you for myself, and maybe it means

having a conversation with you—or the press.

“If you want to find out, feel free to make another cozy little rendezvous with your boyfriend. Otherwise, I’d put a stop to those visits.”

Laughing under his breath, he slammed the door of the apartment behind him, leaving her curled up on the floor, shaking hard, all the happiness snuffed out of her.

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It was a long time before Matilda found the strength to get up from where she was crouching on the floor. She was shaking badly, and she knew she was in shock. She put both her hands on the sofa beside her and pushed herself to her feet. Standing in the middle of her living room, surrounded by all her things, the room bright and cheerful, her confrontation with Colin seemed surreal. But she could still feel his breath on her face, his hand stroking her cheek, and it made her sick to her stomach. His voice sounded slimy and nasal in her memory. She sat down on the sofa, trying to breathe calmly and figure out what had

just happened in a rational manner. She swallowed back the tears which kept threatening to leak out, and tried to play back their conversation from the beginning.

It wasn't working. All she could think about was his thin lips and sneering voice, the way he kept calling her 'princess' in a mocking tone of voice. And his final threat—that he could do exactly as he pleased with her—that threat was lurking in the back of her mind, heavy and terrifying, like the bogeyman lurking underneath a child's bed.

What should she do? Colin was clearly not the man her father thought he was.

Prince Laurence might be strict, but he loved his daughters more than anything else. Hadn't he taken her into his family even though she was only a lovechild and raised her with his wife as though she was legitimate? She had always been treated kindly, if strictly, by her father and her stepmother. He certainly never would have entrusted her to Colin if he knew what kind of man he was.

The thought of Colin's leering face made Matilda shudder again. How could she not have seen him for what he really was? She had thought of him as a tenacious shadow, dull and reliable—unwanted but safe. Now he was completely in control of her life and

her actions.

Should she call her father? She considered it seriously for a few moments. Her father was sure to believe her, wasn't he? She was his daughter and she had never lied to him or tried to trick him. He had to trust her word over the word of an employee.

But it was impossible for her to call him. If he knew—she could see the look on his face as he pored through the photographs Colin had captured of her and Damian. She couldn't bear it, and she knew that he would react badly to the thought of his daughter behaving in such a way.

There was no way she could bear his

anger and disappointment at seeing those photos or knowing what she had done. Besides, he would probably never let her have any freedom again after the way she had acted.

She tried not to care, but it was hard to just throw her entire life up until now away. Could she just not care what her father thought and let him disown her or drown her in his shame and disappointment? She wasn't sure she could bear it. Although her feelings for Damian were strong, the deep bond which existed between her and her father—and Caroline—was equally persuasive. No, she decided. He might have come round to the idea of Damian

in time, but now those photographs were in the mix, it was hopeless. No matter what, he could never know.

As she realized this, it lifted a tiny fraction of the weight from her heart, but replaced it with a thorn. She knew that whatever happened she had to deal with Colin herself, but that left her in such an impossible position that it was all she could do not to break down.

“Shit,” said Matilda out loud. It didn’t really make her feel any better.

“Stupid buggering damn,” she exclaimed. Her problem still remained, and she knew that no matter how many curse words slipped past her lips, she still had to find a solution.

“Damian.” Saying his name out loud was more of a balm than any curse word. Saying his name made him feel more real. His warm embrace and easy smile came back to her, and she found some strength in that.

She considered what Colin had said about talking to him that night. Could it be true that Damian had admitted she was only an easy conquest? But what about all the things they had done together? Damian had even said he was falling for her. There was no reason for him to say it unless it was true. She had to dismiss the claim as just another way for Colin to manipulate her. She knew deep within her that Damian felt the

same about her as she felt about him. She could see it in his face every time they met.

She had to see him again. She didn't want to imagine a life without him. She would go back to the same confinement, the same drudgery and misery and lack of freedom as she had existed in before. She would never hear him laugh, or enjoy another of his ridiculous anecdotes. She could never make love with him again—no, she could never make love again. Nobody could ever measure up to Damian, and anyone else would just be a poor mockery of him. But there didn't seem to be any way she could see Damian again—not ever, not if

the photos did come out and not if they didn't. It was hopeless.

On the one hand, if she defied Colin and saw Damian, her father would see the photos and organize to have her deported in a heartbeat to ensure she never saw him again. On the other hand, if she did as Colin said and ceased to see him to keep the photos a secret, she would have to give him up herself.

Which one was the worse option? Both paths seemed bleak and hopeless to her. Whichever way she looked at it, her time with Damian was over.

The realization was too much for her. Flopping sideways onto the sofa, she curled up into a tight ball and cried. It

wasn't just quiet snuffling. Her body shook with huge, shuddering sobs which seemed to vibrate through her chest and limbs. Tears coursed down her cheeks like waterfalls in the spring, and she could barely breathe.

“Damian,” she choked out. “Damian. Damian.”

The name was her only comfort. She longed for his warm arms around her, his calming voice in her ear. Perhaps he would know what to do. He was always so confident, so sure of himself. He would help her, he would protect her. She sat up, wiping away her tears and trying to still her quaking body once more. She was an English princess, for

goodness' sake! She could do this herself without any help from anyone. She wouldn't let Colin boss her around, even with his blackmail tools.

But what could she really do? She couldn't defy him openly. He would know, and that would be the end. If only she had a phone number for Damian, but he didn't have a cell phone. Their only means of communication was their meeting place. He would be waiting for her there, tomorrow, but she would not be able to come.

A fresh wave of misery swept over her as she realized with renewed anguish how trapped she was. Colin was right. She wasn't smart. She was stupid and

naïve and she had gotten herself into this mess by trusting Colin and being careless with Damian.

Matilda hated wallowing in her own misery, but having her happiness shattered so completely, her victory turning to ashes in her mouth, was a blow that even she could not withstand. Her only option was to wait—to wait and hope that somehow the situation would get better. Maybe Colin would relent and let her see Damian again. Maybe he would be called back to England on urgent business, leaving her free to do as she liked.

Maybe, she hoped with all her might, Damian would realize that she was

being held back against her will and he would fight for her.

Amidst her misery she gave a bleak snort of laughter. She truly was a pitiful princess, waiting for the handsome prince to come and rescue her. Curling up into a tight ball again, Matilda pictured Damian's face in her mind, lingering on the details—the wavy hair, dark and rich, but lightened by the sun; his high cheekbones, perfectly chiseled and unbearable handsome; his beautiful smile.

Trying to block out every other thought in her mind, Matilda thought about Damian. Even so, the tears seeped out, wetting her cheeks. She sat and waited

for the day to disappear and night to fall,
not wanting to feel anything at all but the
anonymity of sleep and the ghost of
Damian's arms around her.

-

Matilda put her head in her hands, trying to shake the negative thoughts out of her mind. A week had gone by since her confrontation with Colin—a week in which she had not seen Damian even once.

It was like a hollow place had opened up inside of her. Where she had been happy, optimistic and excited about discovering the world, now she went through the motions of her job, going home at the end of the work day to stare out of her window, wondering what Damian was doing, and whether he cared about the fact she had suddenly disappeared off the face of the planet.

She hadn't heard from him at all—no messages to her apartment, no figure waiting for her underneath her window and no indication at all that he had even tried to contact her.

She couldn't get the anxious thoughts out of her head that maybe he had simply given up on her, not interested in seeing her any more if it was going to be complicated. After all, they had only known each other for a very short space of time. Maybe he had already moved on and gone somewhere new, somewhere where he could find other women and other things to amuse him. Maybe Colin had been right. He had only wanted to play around with her and now he had

moved on.

The thought was like a punch to the stomach, and she shook her head, trying not to believe it. It was just as likely that he had decided that she wasn't interested in seeing him anymore. She hadn't turned up to their designated spot and hadn't been able to contact him. Surely he thought that she was the one who had abandoned him, and abandoned what they had together.

This thought was even worse than the first. She hated the idea that he might think she wasn't interested. She wanted to shout and protest that it wasn't so, to somehow communicate to him that the thought of him was all that was keeping

her going. But how? There was no way to communicate with him without Colin finding out.

Colin. He had barely spoken to her all week. She had locked the door of her apartment from the inside, using the latch so that he couldn't get in short of forcing the door down. He hadn't pushed it, probably thinking that he had won and he could afford to let her sulk for a bit. The truth was that she was scared of him—scared of the thought that he could come in any time and do what he wanted. She didn't want to so much as look at him. It just brought everything back more strongly.

“Hey, hon, are you doing OK?”

Matilda looked up to see Sylvie sitting opposite her on the table where she was supposed to be researching for a report they were compiling about the history of the city. Sylvie's round face was concerned, and Matilda tried to hitch a half-hearted smile onto her face.

“Just a little tired,” she replied. “Did you find any other files for us to look through?”

“Oh, never mind about that,” Sylvie dismissed. “You know they only send us down projects like this so we don't start getting bored and refileing the archive with some bizarre filing system none of them can understand.”

Matilda giggled despite herself at

Sylvie's assessment of her job. It was true that it was often quiet down here, but she doubted that any of them would go that far.

"So what's eating you? You haven't looked your normal self at all this week," Sylvie said, propping her face on her hands. "Don't tell me there's trouble in paradise already?"

"There never was—I mean, that's all finished with now," Matilda said, trying to dismiss it as nothing. She hoped that Sylvie hadn't noticed the tremble in her voice, but from the look in her eye, she knew exactly what Matilda was trying to do.

"Now, everyone experiences a lover's

tiff now and again,” Sylvie said comfortingly. “The number of times my husband and I have argued about the silliest of things and kept it going for weeks! Now, why don’t you tell me all about it?”

Matilda looked up at Sylvie. Her face was a mixture of sincerity and curiosity. She wondered how much trust, if any, she could put in the woman—would she gossip it all over the archive?

Then again, she realized, Sylvie had no idea who she actually was. She was just Matilda Stuart here, a girl who had come across to the States on an internship. Her identity was completely unknown over here, except to those who followed

everything in the British media religiously or who did an extreme amount of research about the British royal lineage. There would be no repercussions for telling Sylvie anything. Besides, it was suddenly clear to her that this was her best chance to get a message to Damian. In fact, it was her only way. If Damian was still waiting for her and still wanted to be with her, he would be at the only meeting place they had—the bar where they had first met. If he wasn't, well, at least she had tried and she would know for sure that he really had moved on and left her behind.

A plan was forming itself in her head,

and for the first time in a week she felt the kindling of hope. Perhaps it might be possible to get out of this situation. At the very least, Damian would know that she hadn't simply got bored of him and left him behind.

“Sylvie—if I asked you for a favor and I asked you to be completely discreet about it, would you do it?” she asked.

“Of course, hon,” Sylvie said. “Poor little girl like you all alone in a big new country—anything I can do to help, just name it.”

“Well, it's nothing big. Just that I was supposed to meet a—a friend, but I won't be able to make it. I wondered if you could get a note to him?”

“A note?” Sylvie looked confused.

“Why don’t you just text him?”

“He’s a bit scatterbrained and he never remembers to have his phone on him,”

Matilda lied easily, the words slipping out of her mouth without her even having to think about it. “We usually meet at this one bar.” She told Sylvie the name of the place.

“Yeah, I know it,” Sylvie said.

“Is it too much trouble for you to leave a note there for my friend?” Matilda asked.

“It’s no problem—but you live right there, don’t you? Can’t you drop in a note yourself?”

“It’s complicated,” Matilda said. “I’m

really sorry to ask you.” If she tried to leave a note herself, Colin might find out that she had gone there. She couldn’t risk that, but sending Sylvie was safe.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a great kid and I’d love to help you out—but can’t you tell me what’s really going on?” Sylvie wheedled. “This guy is your boyfriend, isn’t he?”

“Kind of, I suppose,” Matilda allowed.

“But there are some obstacles in the way of us seeing each other right now.”

Sylvie’s eyes lit up, and she got the dreamy look of a woman who reads too many romance novels.

“Forbidden love,” she sighed.

“Well, I guess you could think of it that

way,” Matilda conceded. “If you could just take a note, I’d be grateful. I’d try around 7 or 8, but I don’t know exactly when...if he’s not there, go ahead and leave it with the bartender.”

“Glad to help, hon,” Sylvie said, looking as if she had been assigned the most essential task in the history of time.

As Matilda scribbled a note to Damian, she prayed deep within her soul that Damian would care enough to be there again that night. If not... if not, then it was truly over.

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The little flicker of hope burned within Matilda for the rest of the day. As a result, she was able to get through the work day with relative ease, and she was even faintly excited in the evening in the expectation that Damian might be receiving the note at that very second.

However, she was completely restless, unable to focus on anything, because she was so intent on knowing whether or not the note had been successful.

Had Sylvie delivered the note yet?

Had Damian got hold of it? Would he even turn up to the bar? Would he expect her to try to deliver some sort of message?

The questions running through her mind were endless, and she felt as if she was going mad. Why could she think of nothing else?

She powered up her laptop, wondering if there was anything online which could help distract her. After trawling through a few pages, she knew it was pointless. Slamming down the lid once more, she went to the window, wondering if she would be able to see anything going on in the street from there.

After a few minutes, she pulled back in frustration. Why was she even this tense? Even if Damian did get hold of the note, what did she expect him to do? She had never explained the full

situation to him—that she was a royal and that every move she made was being tracked by Colin and, by extension, the Royal Family. How could he possibly understand the situation she was in? At twenty years old, he would expect her to be independent enough to do whatever she wanted. He'd simply think she was stupid and weak.

This dark train of thoughts made the little fire of hope in her chest gutter and tremble. What had she expected to achieve? It was over, and the sooner she accepted that, the better.

Perhaps if she forgot all about Damian, Colin would forget about his threats. He would let her live her own life without

accompanying her at all times, and maybe eventually her father would trust her enough to live abroad—or anywhere she wanted—without a bodyguard.

But for that to ever happen, she would have to give up on Damian. That was the part that didn't compute. Somehow, her entire being yearned for him. Without him she felt desolate, incomplete. The happiness she had felt with him for that brief week was simply too addictive to throw away.

“I won't give up,” she said out loud, as if to resolve her decision once and for all. She only hoped that Damian would feel the same way.

Picking up a book, she tried to keep

herself distracted from thinking about him and about her predicament. She was barely a page in when she heard banging and shouting outside her apartment.

She sat up immediately, her first thought that someone was trying to break into the apartment complex. After a second of listening intently, she heard several voices shouting, and someone running. Opening the door of her apartment a crack, she could make out some of the voices.

“...call the police! This is trespassing.”

“Somebody stop him!”

“Matilda! Can you hear me? Matilda!”

Matilda's blood froze solid in her brains, then rushed to her face all at once

as she recognized the voice. It was Damian.

She was out of her apartment and halfway down the hall before she even had time to think.

“Damian!” she cried, pausing for a second to try and work out where his shouts were coming from. “Damian! I’m up here!”

She started to run towards the stairs, but before she could go so much as a step, she felt hard, vicious arms constricting her, preventing her from moving. The vice-like grip could only belong to one person.

“Colin, let go of me!” she cried out, struggling to break free. She twisted

violently, intent on getting out of his grasp, but he was resolutely pulling her backwards, carrying her as if she were nothing more than a rag doll.

“Get back in your apartment—and stay there,” he snarled, panting with the effort of dragging her. He pulled her through the door of her apartment, and she screamed out once more.

“Damian!”

She made a move to leave again as Colin let go, but he grabbed her by her wrists, so hard that it felt as if her arms would be crushed and broken in his grip, and shoved her backwards.

She fell, crashing to the ground with a cry of pain and surprise. Before she

could react, Colin had slammed the door, locking her in the apartment.

Matilda got up and ran to the door, trying to pull it open, but Colin had locked it from the outside. She heard footsteps come closer to where she was, and then there was a sudden, bone-chilling silence.

“You,” she heard Damian’s voice, strong and angry, and felt a thrill of delight go through her. “What have you done to her? You monster!”

“She is none of your business. You’d better stay away from her. I can have you arrested even just for this,” Colin said.

“You—you can’t keep her like this! She’s a grown woman, not an animal.

Who are you, anyway?”

“You don’t need to know, and you better not try to find out if you know what’s good for you—and for her,” Colin said, his voice cold and menacing.

“Like hell I’ll just leave her with you,” Damian said.

Matilda’s whole body filled with hope and joy as he said it, and she felt suddenly as if maybe there was a chance.

She heard a thud, a groan, and the sounds of fighting outside her door. She leapt back as the weight of two heavy male bodies slammed against the door, causing the whole apartment to tremble. She stood, unsure what to do, as she

heard Damian and Colin clearly fighting outside. She couldn't call the police in case they arrested Damian, and she couldn't intervene because she was locked inside the room. She hated the feeling of complete uselessness.

Before she had come to a decision, there was another thud against the door, and another. She gasped and stepped backwards as it burst open, sending the two men sprawling across the floor, their clothing torn and Colin's nose bloody.

“Matilda!” Damian gasped, disentangling himself from Colin and rushing to embrace her while his opponent was still dazed.

“Damian, oh god!” Matilda said, returning the hug with all her strength, drinking in his presence like a tonic for all the world’s ills. She had almost forgotten how delicious his bold, smoky scent was and how comforting his strong arms felt.

“I love you,” Damian said, talking rapidly, because they could both hear the sounds of voices coming up the stairs and knew it wouldn’t be long before Colin had regained his senses. “I love you so much, Matilda. I will find a way to see you—I promise you.”

“I’m so sorry,” Matilda said. “I’m so sorry about all of this.”

“It’s nothing, baby,” Damian said,

stroking her hair. “I’ll always come to you.”

Matilda wanted to say something else—wanted desperately to be able to stay in his embrace longer—but before she could do anything, the security guards from the building were pulling him away. He didn’t resist, but he gave her one last, longing look as they took him out of her sight.

“Are you alright, ma’am? Sir?” the chief of security asked. “We’re so sorry for the delay. He came with an accomplice and we had no idea he had managed to infiltrate the building until we heard fighting and noises from up here.”

“It’s no problem,” Colin said, standing

up straight and wiping his nose, managing to look dignified despite the huge tear in his jacket.

“Rest assured that he will be dealt with properly,” the security officer said.

“Wait, no! He’s innocent. I know him, please—don’t do anything to him,” Matilda begged.

“Well, we’ll see what he has to say for himself, but breaking into a residential building is a serious offence,” the man said.

“Thank you,” Colin said, and the security officer smiled and left them alone.

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Matilda didn't have long to dwell on Damian's words and appearance before Colin turned to her, his dark eyes like chips of black ice, his face a wall of fury. In an instant she went from confused and happy to terrified. She hadn't thought through this far. She had only been relieved and happy to see Damian again. What would Colin do now? Surely he wouldn't go so far as to—to—she couldn't even bring herself to form the words in her mind.

"That was not an acceptable scene," he said, his voice icy.

"I—I didn't know he would do that," Matilda said. "I didn't mean to make a

scene.”

“I’m trying to prevent this sort of thing from happening and you cause a huge scene on your front doorstep,” Colin said. “Do you want me to send those photos to your father?”

“No,” Matilda said emphatically. “I didn’t know he was going to come here. I haven’t seen him, I’ve done exactly what you wanted.” She hated begging, hated groveling for his approval, but the look in his eyes scared her. She couldn’t tell how far he would go when he was this angry.

“You didn’t seem to mind, though, did you?” Colin asked. “You ran right into his arms like a traitor.”

“I told you already,” Matilda said, her temper rising as he mocked her. “I love him. You’re the one keeping us apart for no good reason. Why shouldn’t I want to see him? I’m not a doll who you can play with. I’m a real woman with real feelings. Of course I was glad to see him. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You stupid girl,” Colin sneered. “Do you think what you have with that tramp is love?” A little fleck of spit was forming at the side of his mouth, and Matilda had to suppress the urge to back away.

“What would you know about love?” she asked.

“More than a little girl like you,” Colin

said, taking a step closer to her. Matilda stood her ground, not wanting to seem weak in front of him.

“You’ve lived in a castle in the clouds your whole life,” Colin continued, his face forming an ugly smirk. “You’ve been petted and coddled by your parents, your teachers and your friends. You’ve never been exposed to lust, to greed.

“Do you think that he loves you? Do you think that he came here because he cares about you?”

“He does,” Matilda said hotly.

Colin laughed, a mocking, unpleasant laugh.

“How sweet,” he said patronizingly.

“You think he came here because he

cares about you. Well, let me tell you the truth that you've been protected from all these years. Nobody loves you, princess. Everyone you've ever been around only wants your money, your status. Everyone wants a piece of the royal family—even if it is just an illegitimate almost royal.”

“He doesn't know I'm royal,” Matilda said. “He likes me for me.”

“The night you two met, I saw him looking at you. It wasn't like I saw in his face—it was lust, like an animal stalking his prey. He wanted to fuck you, princess. That was all. He wanted your pretty little white thighs wrapped around him as he screwed you. Didn't you hear me when I told you before? He admitted

it to me himself.”

Matilda sat silently. She knew it wasn't true. Colin was just trying to dominate her, to make her feel isolated and alone. She knew how much Damian cared—would he have risked coming here otherwise? Maybe he had just seen her as someone to have fun with at first, as she had with him, but now—he'd said he loved her. She believed it with all her heart. What else was in it for him?

“You still don't believe me?” Colin asked. “Well, let me tell you something else. When I saw him looking at you like a piece of meat I told him to back off.”

“You what!” It burst out of Matilda's mouth before she could stop it. It was

unbelievable how possessive and interfering he was. It was ten times worse than having her father breathing down her neck.

“Well, he didn’t want to back off—not because he wanted to get to know you, princess, but because he thought you were up for it—which you obviously were. He thought you were the kind of hussy he could get into bed. That’s it—and the fact that I opposed it only made the thrill better for him.”

Matilda didn’t respond. She knew he was only trying to provoke her and drive her away from Damian—but after hearing those little details she couldn’t help wondering if there was any truth in

what he had said. Had he really talked to Damian? What had Damian said to him?

“Ahh, I see that sweet doubt in your eyes,” smirked Colin. “Should I go on?”

Without waiting for her answer, he continued. “You want to know why he didn’t stop at just the one quick, easy fuck? You brought him back here.

“Any man with half a brain could see you were rich and connected looking around this place. A spacious apartment all to yourself in the center of Georgetown? Nobody but a millionaire could afford one of these places. He saw right away that you were as rich as cream and he thought he’d string you along a little and milk you for all you

were worth.”

“That’s a lie,” Matilda burst out. “He’s never asked for a penny from me.”

“And why would he need to when he could break in here?” Colin asked. “Do you really think he was coming up to see you? He knew it was over and he wanted his prize.

“What? You thought that he wanted you for your personality? He’s known you for a week. He knows less than nothing about you,” Colin continued relentlessly. “All he wanted was some easy booty and, if he could get it, some cash out of the deal.”

“He’s not like that,” Matilda said as it looked like Colin had finished his

monologue. “Colin, my father hired you to protect me from a bad element. I understand that, and I—I’m grateful for you looking out for me.” She almost choked on the words. “But if that’s all you’re worried about, then please, please give Damian a chance. Talk to him, let me see him just for a little bit. I’ll take the full blame if it ends badly, but please, please, just give him a chance.”

“Silly girl,” Colin said. “Do you really think I care if he is a good guy or not? He isn’t worthy of you, and I won’t let you see him.”

“But it’s what I want,” Matilda said, and she knew immediately that she’d made a

huge mistake. Colin's eyes narrowed. "You have no idea what you want," he said. "Why do you like him? Because he's handsome? Because he's filled your mind with unrealistic ideas and expectations?"

"The reality is that nobody gets what they want. You have to do what other people expect of you, and you have to watch the people around you enjoying themselves at your expense. Well not anymore. I'm going to take what I want for once, and you can forget about what you want."

He made a move towards her, and Matilda backed against the wall, putting her hands up over her head to protect

herself. She cringed backwards as she felt Colin's hands on her waist, stroking the material of her t-shirt, lingering on the curve of her waist.

"Stop, please," she begged him, trying to push his hands away.

"Why? It's what I want." He threw her words back at her in a mocking tone of voice. "Damian should be nothing to you—less than worthless. I'm right here. Your father trusts me, and if you don't obey me, I have the photos. It's in your best interest to learn how to want me back, princess."

"How could I ever want someone like you?" Matilda asked, lashing out and squirming out of his grasp. He grabbed

her easily and managed to pin her arms against the wall.

He put his face close to hers, so close that she could see the coarse pores on his nose and across his cheeks, and smell the hot, sour reek of his breath.

“Just sit quiet,” he whispered, sending gusts of his foul breath across her face. She turned away in disgust. “You’ll learn to like it.”

He captured her lips with his, and they were cold and slimy like slugs crawling on her, clammy and disgusting.

She pressed her lips together tightly, fighting to drag her head to one side in order to resist his advances. His lips on her skin made her want to scream, as if

dead things were crawling on her. She tried to picture Damian, to picture herself safe and happy, but Colin's unwanted body pressing against her was too much.

"Stop," she screamed. "Colin, stop!"

"Ssh, princess," he whispered against her cheek, causing her to shudder in revulsion. "I'm going to make you feel just the way he makes you feel. It's just flesh. I'm going to make you forget him. I'm the only one, princess. There's no one else—just me."

Matilda hated to be weak, but she couldn't stop the hot tears from seeping down her cheeks. She was trembling, trying to hold in the sobs as Colin's

cold, clammy fingers slipped under her shirt, violating her soft skin—skin that only belonged to Damian’s warm, kind fingers.

“Doesn’t it feel good?” Colin whispered.

“No, no, please,” Matilda sobbed.

“Stop, stop.”

“Shut up!” Colin slammed his fist into the wall, causing her to cringe back even further. “You’re going to enjoy this. Say it to me! I am going to enjoy this.” He said the words slowly, his face firm and uncompromising. “Say it!”

“I can’t,” Matilda said, her sobs uncontrollable. “You disgust me.”

“Shit!” Colin let go of her, shoving her

hard so that she fell onto the ground.

“You’re not even pretty any more, crying and sobbing like a child. I don’t even want you when you’re like that. I want you to get aroused for me.”

That was never going to happen, Matilda thought resolutely, curling into a thankful ball, glad that his assault had stopped if even for a moment. She could still feel his clammy touch on her skin like a poison, and all she wanted to do was step into a scalding shower and scrub until her skin burned.

“I want you to scream for me like you do for that stupid hippie,” Colin continued.

“You’d better learn how to accept me, princess, because I’m the only one left

for you. If you contact Damian ever again, I'll send your father those photographs. If you try to tell anyone about this, I'll send him the photographs. If you do anything I don't like ever again, you can kiss your reputation goodbye."

Matilda was so burnt out that she couldn't even reply. She just sat and cried, begging internally for him to leave.

"I'm not a monster," Colin said, a little more gently. "I won't force you, not now. I'll give you one more chance. I'll give you a little more time to realize that I'm the only man you will ever be able to be with. Just me—no one else. Who

else would want a cheap slut like you?
“I’ll give you one week to completely
get in line with what I expect from you.
After that, I won’t care whether you
want it or not.”

With those parting words, Colin turned
around and strode out of the room,
slamming the door shut behind him.

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As soon as she heard the door slam, Matilda jumped to her feet and ran to the door, turning the deadbolt behind him so that there was no way he could get back in. Then, she stumbled towards the bathroom, making straight for the shower. It was a beautiful shower, with a wide head and a powerful stream of water which felt like you were immersing yourself in a waterfall. She fumbled with the dials until the water coming out was scalding hot to touch and the steam was thick and heavy in the little shower stall. Shedding her clothing, she climbed in, flinching as the water burned her skin.

She stood under the spray, gasping, trying to wash away all memory of the last twenty minutes. Grabbing her loofah, she lathered it with sweet, cherry-scented soap and scrubbed hard at her skin until it was angry and red. She relished the burn on her skin as she scrubbed it repeatedly. Anything felt better than Colin's foul fingers, his damp, fetid breath. She renewed her efforts until her nostrils couldn't detect even a hint of him. Once she was finished, she dropped the loofah and simply stood there, letting the hot water envelop her, hammering down on her neck and shoulders.

She watched the water droplets on her

lobster red skin with a strange fascination. She felt broken and disjointed, as if all her emotions had somehow leaked out and washed down the drain with the soap suds. The memory of Damian coming to her apartment, of Colin threatening her, trying to seduce her, were all distant, disassociated from her. It felt as if they had happened to someone else—as if she had just watched a particularly traumatizing movie.

Looking at her hands, she could see the purple bruises already blossoming on her wrists from where he had grabbed her. It had really happened, so why couldn't she feel it?

She must be in shock, she realized, and accepted the fact easily, her emotions not currently accepting new input. Well, that was the best time to think this through logically.

But she couldn't. Her mind was too dazed. All she could think was that no matter what, she had to talk to Damian. Somehow, that would make it all better. Just being with him, away from Colin, would make the whole problem go away.

It must have been at least an hour before she finally turned off the shower and stepped into a warm flannel bathrobe. Her skin was wrinkled and red from the water and heat, and the entire bathroom

was a whirl of steam. She cracked the window to allow the steam to escape, and padded to her bedroom, where she got out a notepad and pen.

She wanted to cushion her mind from all the terror and unhappiness which had touched it over the past few weeks. She wanted to be alone with Damian, in a safe, comforting embrace where nothing bad could touch her.

Taking a deep breath, she wrote a title in the notepad, forming the letters carefully, then looking at them, inspecting their appropriateness:

The First Time I Met Damian

She nodded in satisfaction, and let the memories of that first night envelope

her—how she had felt, Damian's face, the things they had talked about. She let it pour from her pen onto the creamy white paper, barricading her mind from anything unpleasant or upsetting. She wrote and wrote, reliving the happiness and excitement.

Even though he wasn't there, she let Damian protect her from all fear and harm.

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Matilda went into work the next day pale and resolute, wearing concealing clothes to cover the bruises Colin had left all over her body. She had spent the previous evening wallowing in memories of her brief, beautiful time with Damian, but as soon as she had closed her eyes, darkness had descended and she had been bombarded by the truth.

Everything inside her felt irreparably broken, but somewhere within her she had found a small amount of determination. She knew that she had to be strong and not depend on anyone else. After talking to the guards in her

building and reassuring herself that no charges had been brought up against Damian, she had left for work as usual, trying to keep her face free from the troubles eating away at her on the inside. She thought about the letter in her purse. She had woken up early that morning after very little sleep and thought hard about what exactly to write. The words were difficult and it took her a while to find exactly the right ones. The contents of the letter were like a cold, hard rock which had settled in her heart, but she knew that she had made the right choice.

Dear Damian, the letter read,

I'm sorry about what happened last night. I never wanted to hurt you or get

you into trouble. Being with you has been like coming alive. I've cherished every minute of our time together, but it was never anything more than a dream.

I know that you said you'd try to find a way to see me, but I want you to give up on it. I can't be together with someone like you. I'm not as strong as you think I am and it would never work out between us.

*Good luck on your travels and stay safe. Your friend,
Matilda*

She had read and reread the words so many times that she could recite them out loud. She hated the feeling of weakness

and finality which accompanied the letter, but she also knew that there was no other way. It was too dangerous to see him again. She didn't know what Colin might do, but she knew that the only way to keep him away from her was to stay away from Damian. Maybe then he might not be so driven to try and force himself on her. She might be able to play along for a little while, say that if he gave her more time maybe there was a future for them.

The idea made her sick, but it wasn't like she had another option. With the blackmail and the threat of him forcing himself on her, the only thing she could do to protect herself was to play along

with him until she came up with a better idea for how to save herself.

Strangely, it wasn't the fear of Colin which was foremost in her feeling of misery and helplessness. Instead, it was the thought that her short-lived romance had already come to an end.

She couldn't believe how fast her feeling that she was the luckiest person in the world had turned into this, a situation which made her want to break down and cry. How could fate be so cruel as to introduce her to someone who made her feel the way Damian made her feel, only to take it away again and replace it with betrayal, blackmail and a bleak, desperate future?

She hated herself, because a large part of her wanted to ask Damian for help, ask him to fix the situation for her and make everything better—but she couldn't do it. There was no way that she could be that weak, helpless person. How could he love or even respect her if she depended on him entirely to be saved? Matilda thought bitterly about how she had used to pride herself on how strong and independent she was. Unlike her sister, she had branched out, broken away from her father's expectations to chase her dreams. She had travelled alone to a foreign country to discover herself and fulfil her dreams. She had found her own prince, instead of

marrying someone for convenience on her father's orders.

Now, she felt worse than useless, a weak mockery of a human being. Asking Damian to save her would be the final straw. Even if she was weak and useless, she didn't want Damian to know just how weak she really was. It was better for him to accept the fact that it simply wouldn't work out. He didn't have to know that she had gotten herself into this mess, being abused and blackmailed by the lowest possible form of humanity.

Resolved to end things with Damian, even if it meant giving up the only thing she had ever truly wanted and been

happy about, she stepped into the office, hoping to catch Sylvie alone for a few minutes.

She didn't even have to hope. Sylvie made a beeline for her as soon as she entered the building, alive with curiosity about the mysterious note from the day before and who the tall, dark and smoking stranger she had given it to was.

"I've gotta say, you've got great taste in men. He was an absolute muffin," Sylvie gushed as soon as she caught up with Matilda. "Those long legs just went on forever, and his eyes! My heart hasn't beat that fast since my wedding day!"

"You saw him?" Matilda was instantly intrigued, glad of any new information

and details about Damian. “Did he say anything to you?”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you exactly what happened. I went to the bar you told me about at about 7. I grabbed a bite to eat first, and I thought that it was as good a chance as any to sit and catch my breath, so I ordered a glass of wine and sat down at the bar.

“I noticed a guy sitting a few seats down from me—tall, dark and delicious, with a tan which made me weak at the knees and eyes like a thunderstorm. He looked preoccupied, a little dark and moody. Somehow, I just got an inkling about who he was.

“Say, would you happen to be

Matilda's man?' I asked him. He looked around at me as if he'd been electrocuted. That boy has it bad for you, hon."

"What did he say?" Matilda asked breathlessly.

"All sorts that was over my head. He asked if you were OK, why you hadn't come to meet him. He seemed to think that someone was stopping you. I told him don't be so silly—she's a grown girl who knows her own mind, and she's been down in the dumps about you all week."

"Did you give him the note?" Matilda asked.

"Yes, I did," Sylvie said proudly. "And

whatever was in it, it set him right off. His eyes looked like they were on fire and he ran out of the bar as if demons were chasing him. I had to order another glass of wine to calm my nerves. What was that all about, hmm?”

Sylvie gave Matilda a curious look, but Matilda was barely paying any attention. Her mind was racing, replaying the words which Sylvie had spoken to her. From her description, it sounded as if Damian had gone to the bar every day, waiting for her to show up. He must truly love her, then. Colin's words really had been nothing more than poisonous lies. It made her heart break, thinking of him sitting and waiting for her. She wanted

so badly to tell him the truth—but she just couldn't.

“I—could I ask you to do me one more favor?” Matilda asked.

“Sure, but could you trust me with whatever is going on? The curiosity is driving me to distraction. He's your boyfriend, isn't he?”

Matilda hesitated. She didn't want this to become gossip, but she guessed that she owed Sylvie that much at least.

“He's the guy I've been seeing for the past few weeks,” she confessed. “I'm crazy about him, but my family doesn't approve. One of my—my uncles came with me to America and he won't let me see Damian. I—I'm going to finish with

him. I don't want him waiting around for me anymore."

"Oh my," Sylvie said, her eyes sparking with enthusiasm. "That's awful. Well, I'll tell you right now that he's a boy worth keeping. He cares deeply for you, hon; that's not something you should give up no matter what anyone thinks. Besides, they don't make them with bodies like that too often."

"I don't have a choice," confessed Matilda. "Please, please just deliver the note for me?"

"Well, I'll do it, since it's you and you ask so nicely, but I'm telling you—you're making a mistake."

"I know," whispered Matilda, so quietly

that Sylvie wouldn't be able to hear it. She thrust the note in her coworker's hand and turned away so she wouldn't see her tears.

"Hon, let me give you back this note for now. If you still feel the same way at the end of the day, I'll deliver it for you. If not, well, let's just say that I'm on your side, so I'll help you out as long as you want."

"Thanks," Matilda smiled gratefully.

As soon as Sylvie walked away, she ripped the note in two. She couldn't do it. She couldn't drive him away forever. Even if it had to be a secret for now, she had an ally. She could do it. Somehow, as long as Damian would wait for her,

she would make it work. Thinking fast, she wrote out a new note:

Damian,

I want to see you so badly but right now there's just no way I can manage it. Wait for me, and know that I'll find a way to see you soon. I love you,
Matilda

When she gave the new note to Sylvie, the older woman gave her a wide smile and a wink.

“That’s more like it,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’ll see the two of you together if it’s the last thing I do.”

Matilda smiled back, but deep down, she wondered if she would ever be able to feel any kind of happiness or security

ever again.

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Matilda lay in bed barely sleeping that night. She was still unsure whether or not she had made the right decision to try and find a way to see Damian. She knew that she was taking a huge risk and putting herself in a lot of danger, not only because of the risk of exposing the photos, but also because of what Colin might do to her if he found out that she was disobeying him.

However, she felt more hopeful than she had in the last few days, with the thought that she had someone on her side and a means of communication with Damian. Just the thought of being able to communicate with him made her feel

better. It was as if her secret communication was a talisman against harm.

She wondered whether Damian would send her a message back this time. Truthfully, she was a little disappointed that he had not written her a message after she had sent the first note, although the fact that he had tried to get up into her apartment to see her made her smile a little. It was just like him; impulsive and without any thought about the consequences. It had even been worth the repercussions to be able to physically see him.

She closed her eyes, trying to get to sleep. She wanted the next day to come,

eager for any communication from Damian.

She made it to dawn the long way, watching the sky slowly lighten outside her window, sleeplessly impatient to get to work.

Once she entered the building, her eyes carefully made up to hide the dark circles, she immediately spotted Sylvie, who looked just as excited as she felt.

“I saw him!” she told Matilda. “It was like he was waiting for me. The look on his face was exactly like yours. I wish I had a man that devoted to me.”

“Did he say anything?” Matilda asked eagerly.

“Better—he wrote you,” Sylvie said

gleefully. “I didn’t read it. Here.”

Sylvie handed her a folded piece of paper, and she opened it with shaking fingers. His writing was bold and masculine, and her heart jumped as she caught the faintest hint of his enticing scent—or maybe she just imagined it.

Matilda,

Follow your heart, babe. You need to make the choice to be with me. I’ll wait for you, but don’t make me wait too long. I love you,

Damian

She read and reread the words over and over, hearing them as if he was speaking them into her ear. It gave her a burst of hope and happiness to know that he was

waiting for her.

Just as suddenly as the happiness had come, it disappeared. Don't make me wait too long—did that mean that at some point he would give up on her and leave? She couldn't bear the thought. Now she had two deadlines to work on: Colin's ultimatum and now Damian's. On the one hand, she desperately wanted to be with Damian no matter what the consequences were. Sylvie was right. You only got the chance to be with someone you loved once in a hundred lifetimes, and she didn't want to give up on the feeling she had when she was with him. She knew that after Damian, she could never go back to England and

marry a man her father chose for her, like her sister was doing.

On the other hand, she knew that if she got out of Colin's grasp, he would show the photos to her family, or worse, send them to the media.

The one idea was bad enough. She couldn't bear the idea that her family might disown her. If the media found them, though... her entire family would be humiliated and the reputation of the royals would be in tatters. It would be a level of ridicule which would never be forgotten. They'd write about it in history books. She would have nowhere to run to where the consequences of those photos wouldn't follow her.

She felt like crying when she thought about it, but she didn't want to break down—not now and not ever. She had to be strong. Somehow, she had to find her way out of this. She had to find a way to be with Damian and make sure those photos never saw the light of day. But how? She needed advice. And she knew who she needed to ask: the most practical and level-headed person she knew.

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Matilda's hand lingered over the keyboard as she tried to talk herself out of confiding in her sister, Caroline. It was true that Caroline was one of the most capable people on the planet, but it was also true that Caroline would try hard to weasel out every secret Matilda had and make her feel guilty about it. It wasn't that Caroline was unkind – she just had the mindset that she was right about everything. Usually, she was correct, and this always drove Matilda crazy. In this case, however, she knew that she needed some good, sound advice in order to get out of the situation.

Ever since she had been small, Matilda had looked up to her older sister, who had always seemed to have everything together. Where Matilda had never been sure whether her duty to her family or her desire for freedom came first, Caroline had accepted her role as a royal princess without a fuss, performing it perfectly and making their father proud.

Matilda had always had trouble behaving the way she was supposed to. It wasn't that she did anything bad; she was just more stubborn and always wanted to do things which were too dangerous, or too public. She remembered one day at high school,

when her friends had convinced her that no one would ever know if they snuck down to the kitchens to get a late snack. Later, in the principal's office, she had been told by her father that Caroline never would have done anything so improper. Then again, she also remembered Caroline telling her later that night that she did it all the time; she just never got caught.

Bracing herself, Matilda hit the call button and waited for her sister to pick up. Whether she wanted it or not, she needed her sister's advice.

"What do you need?" was the first thing Caroline said to her.

"How do you know I need something?"

Matilda asked, hurt.

“Because you always need something when you call me,” Caroline laughed.

“So what’s wrong?”

“I need a bit of advice.” Matilda decided to cut to the chase. “Caroline, what do you do when... you have two conflicting interests?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific than that,” Caroline said. “I assume you’re talking about your responsibility as a royal and something inappropriate you want to do.”

“Something like that.” As expected, there was no possibility of fooling Caroline.

“Are you going to tell me?” Caroline

asked. “Is it something you’ve done or something you’re thinking of doing?”

“I—I just need to find a way to please everyone. There’s... this guy I want to talk to, but I don’t think daddy would approve of him and I know Colin doesn’t like him. But he’s a really good guy, Caroline. I just want to find a way to see him without disappointing everyone.”

It was close enough to the truth to satisfy Caroline without alarming her.

“Are you sure this guy is worth all the trouble?” Caroline sighed.

“I’m sure,” Matilda said fervently.

“Well, the best thing to do in that case is to compromise. You can’t expect to get

your own way unless there is a measure of trust involved. Do you remember Charles?”

“Our uncle?” asked Matilda.

“No, my boyfriend,” Caroline said. “I met him when I was 18, but I know you were away at school at the time.”

“I remember,” Matilda said, conjuring a vague picture of a stoic, respectable guy with a degree from Oxford.

“Well, daddy was really against me dating him—he was a college student for one thing, and for another, we always have to be careful who we date and who we are friends with because we’re royalty. There are lots of people out there who would jump at the chance to

take advantage of that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Matilda sighed. She’d heard that mantra thousands of times.

“Well, I wanted to date him, but father wasn’t too happy about it. He wanted to meet him first to make sure he was a good guy and serious about me.”

“I don’t remember that,” Matilda said, although she wasn’t surprised that their father had taken such a step.

“Yeah, well you were away, and for some reason he never made such a fuss when you dated guys.”

“Are you kidding?” Matilda scoffed.

“He traumatized practically every prospective boyfriend I ever had!”

“You have no idea how many guys he

scared away from me before Charles,” Caroline said darkly. “But anyway, Charles consented, and he told father he was serious about me. That way, I knew he liked me for me, and father knew that I was dating someone responsible.”

“So you think I should introduce this guy to father?” Matilda asked doubtfully.

“Why not?” Caroline asked. “If he runs away, he’s not worth it.”

“But I know father wouldn’t approve—and it’s not fair.”

“Well, either way, you need to earn trust to earn freedom. Sneaking around behind his back is no good. Sooner or later he’ll find out. Compromise is the best way to solve a problem.”

“What if... what if Colin isn’t being reasonable?” Matilda ventured. “Then there’s no way I can earn trust.”

“Of course he’ll be reasonable,” Caroline said. “All men are easy to handle if you know the right buttons to push. All you need to do is compromise—give him a reason to trust you and I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Thanks,” Matilda said. “I—I think I understand what you’re trying to say.”

“Well, be careful with this guy anyway. There are so many guys who are no good. It’s hard to find someone worth the while,” Caroline said. “Even Charles turned out not to be worth it. He broke up with me in the end, because he

didn't want the pressure of being with someone so famous."

"Hey... how did Charles make you feel?" Matilda asked.

"Hm? What sort of question is that?" Caroline asked.

"I'm just curious—what did you feel like when you're around him?"

"Just... normal, I guess. I was upset when we broke up, but there are always other guys out there."

"You didn't get dizzy when you're around him? Or feel butterflies in your stomach? Or feel like the entire world has disappeared except for the two of you?" Matilda asked.

"Don't be silly. That's just romantic

nonsense. Nobody really feels that way about anyone.”

“Is that why you’ve decided on an arranged marriage?” Matilda ventured.

“Exactly. It’s another compromise. I get married to someone suitable like daddy wants, but I get to say yes or no.”

“Don’t you worry that it will stop you being able to find the right person?” Matilda asked.

“There are plenty of suitable men. I’ll pick the best, and I’m sure we’ll get along just fine.”

“Is that enough?” Matilda couldn’t help asking.

“Of course,” Caroline said. “Anyway, Tilda, I have to get going. It’s late in

England.”

“OK. Well, I’ll talk to you soon,”

Matilda said.

“Be careful,” Caroline warned, and hung up.

Matilda sat back and thought about what her sister had said. Was it really possible just to feel OK about someone and think that you were in love with them? She had never felt the way she felt around Damian. Somehow she knew it was a once in a lifetime thing. He was special. She wanted to be with him. She didn’t want to throw that feeling away. According to Caroline, the only way she could date him was with compromise—exchanging trust for

privilege.

She thought about Colin. There was no way that trusting her would mean she could see Damian. He wanted her for himself, and he didn't want anyone else to have her.

But what if... a thought occurred to her which, while unpleasant, was somehow compelling. Caroline had said that all men were easy to handle if you knew which buttons to push...

She knew what Colin wanted. He wanted her. He wanted to have her. To sleep with her. If she slept with him, maybe—just maybe—she would be allowed to see Damian.

It was the only way, Matilda realized.

This was the only way to get out of her situation. She had to agree to have sex with Colin.

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Matilda wasn't sure if her resolution would last until the morning. Every time she remembered the feeling of Colin's presence near her it made her shudder. Would it even be possible for her to force herself to sleep with him? But she woke up resolute, knowing that it was the only solution in which she would have any power at all.

Would it really be so bad? After all, she could lie back and close her eyes, think hard about anything but what was happening, and it would be over before she knew it. The idea made her sick, but it would be worth it if she was able to see Damian freely. Who knew, maybe

Colin would get tired of her afterwards and leave her alone?

She had kept the door to her apartment locked and bolted since the last incident with Colin. Now, she unlocked the door, stepping confidently towards Colin's apartment in order to confront him. She had her entire speech prepared: she will sleep with him if, and only if, he agrees to her terms. He will allow her to see whoever she wants without showing the photos to anyone. If he refuses to go along with her offer, she will make sure that he never gets what he wants. There were some flaws in the plan, but she was hoping that the idea of her coming to her willingly would be enough for him to

accept the idea.

She knocked on the door, steeled for the conversation. Colin answered in his pajama pants, his stringy torso bare, and she forced herself not to shudder at the sight of him half naked.

“What a pleasant surprise,” he smiled.

“The princess has decided to come out of her castle.”

“Can I come in? I have something to discuss with you,” said Matilda, trying to stay strong even though part of her wanted to turn and leave. His physical presence intimidated her, not to mention the fact that just looking at him made her sick.

Nevertheless, when he held open the

door, she forced herself to enter, sitting down on his sofa and crossing her legs, trying to seem at ease and natural.

“So? Have you seen sense?” Colin asked cockily. “Or was there something else?”

“I have a proposition for you,” Matilda said. “I have something you want, right? You want me: my body.”

“I can’t lie,” Colin shrugged, eyeing her breasts appreciatively. “You’ve got a sexy body and I want it. What’s your point?”

“But you don’t just want it—I mean, you don’t want to take it. You want me to give it to you. Isn’t that right?”

“I don’t have a problem taking what I

deserve,” Colin said, “but if you were willing to cooperate it would be a lot easier.”

“Right,” Matilda said, trying not to let her disgust show on her face. “So I have a proposition. I give you what you want—me, willing to sleep with you—but only in return for what I want.”

“Oh?” Colin said, leaning forward with guarded interest in his face. “And what’s that?”

“If I agree to sleep with you, I want you to let me see Damian,” she said in a rush. “It’s a fair exchange.”

Colin appeared to think about it for a few moments. Then, he burst out laughing. First Matilda was startled, then

she began to feel indignant.

“I get what I want and you get what you want,” she said.

“You’re so naïve, princess,” Colin mocked. “What made you think that what you want ever factored into it at all? I have all the power—all of it. You have nothing to negotiate with. Your body? It’s a sweet offer, but I think I’d like it all to myself, thanks. I don’t want Damian or any other man getting to use my property.

“Just because I’ve been lenient so far doesn’t mean that I’ll continue to be so. I can have you whenever I like whether you want it or not. Why would I agree to share you with that man?”

“So you’d rather rape me than give me one small thing which would make me come to you willingly?” Matilda said. Colin frowned.

“I never said rape,” he said. “I’d only be taking what I deserve. What gives you the right to reject me? Because you’re royalty? Does that make you too good for the likes of me? I’ve got money. I own a car and property. I could make a good husband for you, Matilda.”

“It’s called being a human being,” Matilda said, trying to ignore the bad taste in her mouth as the word ‘husband’ and the word ‘Colin’ both mixed together in her head. “By rights I should have the freedom to choose who I sleep

with—not only that but where I go and what I do, especially who I marry. What you are doing is rape and blackmail. If you can't bear to face the facts, you shouldn't be committing the crimes.”

Her words seemed to have an effect on Colin. In his mind, she was sure that he was the hero of the piece, entitled to what he wanted and clever for finding a way to achieve it. He seemed to truly believe that he was justified in what he was doing. If she could somehow manage to impress on him that he was not only hurting her but also breaking the law, then maybe she could get out of this. Maybe Caroline had been right; she only needed to find the right buttons to

press.

But she was too hopeful, too soon. The look of doubt faded from Colin's face.

"Tell you what, princess, I'll think about it—is that good enough? But I promise nothing. I really don't like to share," he said.

"Thank you," Matilda said. She could tell from his face that pressing her case would only make him angry. Instead, she left the room silently, hoping that somehow he would agree to her request. It was ironic that she was hopeful that even this bleak request would be fulfilled, when in reality, he won either way. Either way, she lost herself to him.

Matilda lay in bed that night with a new thought that she had not considered before. What if she went home?

It was a tantalizing thought. If she went home, it would be like wiping the slate clean. She would be able to rid herself of Colin completely. She could get a job fitting for a royal princess, and work quietly, like her sister, without drawing attention to herself. It would be what her father wanted, and it would mean getting away from all the mistakes she had made here.

Somehow, though, she couldn't face it. It was clear to her why she hadn't thought of the solution before. Going home

would be like losing the battle. It would be like giving up and admitting defeat. If she went home, she would have traded in her last chance to be someone.

Instead, she would have to resign herself to being the media's darling and her father's instrument. She might even have to do the same as Caroline and accept a suitable husband, one of her father's choosing. That would hardly be any better than submitting to Colin!

Besides, even if she went home, those photos of her would not disappear. Who knows what would happen to her or when they might surface? She would have to live in fear of them for the rest of her life.

She supposed it was still possible to come clean and tell her father, but she knew how he would react. He would never truly respect her again. He could never understand the strength of her feelings towards Damian. It was as if she didn't even have full control of her own actions. She was so intoxicated by him that to have stopped herself would have been a crime against her nature. How could a strict man who never did anything for pleasure ever understand that?

No matter how she looked at it, she knew that she had to play it out here. Damian was worth that. She would not give up on the best thing ever to happen

to her. No way!

When she thought about Damian, the way he made her feel was still as potent as ever. She could feel his lips on her neck, the soft brush of his fingertips against her breasts.

She gasped as she remembered the sensation, as if it was real and happening right at that moment. She teased her skin lightly, imagining that it was Damian's hand tracing soft patterns on her ribcage.

She let her hand slide upwards, tweaking one nipple with her fingers. Her breathing hitched, and she could see Damian's smirking face on the insides of her eyelids.

Her other hand crept downwards as she teased her breasts, feeling the warm strength of Damian's fingers instead of her own small, delicate hands. Her right hand crept beneath the waist of her panties, and she groaned at the warm, wet slickness which met her.

She found her clit, pressing it gently, bathing in the image of Damian's clever tongue, licking and flicking her into arousal.

Working with two of her fingers pumping in and out of her pussy and her thumb caressing her clit, her breathing became more and more ragged. She wanted to feel Damian between her legs, his rock hard cock sliding into her,

thrusting with unbridled passion.

The pressure built, and she tugged and squeezed at her breasts as she pumped her fingers faster, working up a furious rhythm.

She came hard, and the sensation of Damian's presence dissipated as she came back to the dark bedroom and her desperate situation. The brief glow of pleasure disappeared as soon as it had come, like the flame of a candle being extinguished by a gust of cold air.

She couldn't believe that Damian could do that to her—take her away from everything. Even the thought of him reminded her of how good it had been. She couldn't give that up—no way!

But... the way she felt about Damian was so strong that it controlled her body. Would she really have to sleep with Colin just to see him? She knew she had no choice. It was either sleep with Colin and not see Damian, or possibly sleep with Colin and see Damian. Wasn't the second option better?

Try as she might, it seemed as though those were her only options. Colin was blackmailing her. He had an iron grip on her freedom and there was nothing she could do but be exposed and humiliated or obey him.

Unless... the thought struck her with the force of a truck, and she lay still for a few seconds, letting the possibility settle

in her mind.

Would it be possible to stop the blackmail at its source?

She was almost angry that it hadn't occurred to her before, but then again, she had been in a state of extreme panic after Colin had tried to force himself on her, so she hadn't been thinking clearly. But the more she thought about it, the better it seemed.

If she could only get those photographs back from Colin, there would be no need for any of this duplicity! She would be able to do what she liked and Colin would lose his power. The first thing she would have to do was ensure that her father got rid of him. He was a

dangerous man and she was frightened at the thought of what he might do if the power was taken away from him.

Nevertheless, she had to try. If she could get the photos back, she could destroy them and see Damian without being afraid of the consequences. She would have to tell her father this time around. If she didn't, it would open up the possibility of something else getting in their way. If she could get him to approve, or even if he didn't... the thought of being able to be with Damian just as they had been in that one beautiful week they had spent together was like a dream come true.

But first there was the matter of the

photographs. How would she get hold of them?

She knew that Colin worked more or less the same hours as her—as well as acting as her bodyguard, he did a lot of office work for her family. He was supposedly here on some important business, which kept him tied up downtown for a lot of the day.

She knew that he was very smart and not likely to cut any corners when it came to security. He would keep his door locked and the photographs safely hidden. But would he really have copies on him at all times? It seemed too paranoid even for him, and she thought it more likely that they were safely hidden in his

apartment. If that was the case, she could find them—and destroy them.

Matilda swallowed hard. What she was planning to do was technically breaking and entering. She might even need to break into a safe or break a lock. It seemed like it was part of some crime drama. How had her life turned into this? Perhaps it just wasn't in her destiny to live a simple, easy life. Nevertheless, she would have to do it if she ever wanted her freedom.

At that moment, she decided. She had to at least try. Her life couldn't exactly get much worse, could it?

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By the next morning, Matilda had her plan perfectly fine-tuned, or at least as finely tuned as it was possible to make such a dangerous and risky plan. She knew that Colin would probably find out almost immediately about the loss, and she would have to take the risk that he would try to hurt her. She had considered calling the police on him, but then she would have to show the photos as evidence of his blackmail, and there was no way she wanted them to ever get out!

In the end, she had decided to wait in her apartment while he discovered the loss and wait until he cooled down before

talking to him. She would tell him to resign his position and leave forever or she would tell the police. That way, she would be safe and he would be gone.

She decided to feign illness and leave work an hour early at the end of the day. That way, Colin would have no way of knowing about her plan. If she took the whole day off, it was likely that he would become suspicious and either follow her to see what she did or take the photos with him, suspecting what she was going to do.

If she had an hour extra, it would be plenty of time to search out the pictures and destroy them.

As planned, she gave Sylvie an excuse

and headed back home at 4, confident that she had plenty of time to get into Colin apartment, search for the photos and get out again.

She already had her entry way planned, but the execution was a little more daunting than the theory. She lived on the third floor of the small apartment building, with Colin directly beneath her on the second floor. Her balcony was directly above his, and she thought it would be an easy matter to drop down onto his balcony from hers.

Now that she looked down to Colin's balcony, slightly to the left of hers and therefore directly beneath her if she were to slide over the railings and drop

down, it seemed farther away than before. If only she had a spare key to his apartment as he did for hers!

Bracing herself, and thanking her lucky stars that she had thought to change into pants, she swung one leg over the railing of her balcony. Had her apartment always been so high up? She wondered if she should drop a pillow or something down first to soften her landing, or use a sheet tied to the bars of her balcony to gently climb down. However, she didn't want to lose her nerve—or the short amount of time remaining to her.

She swung the other foot over the balcony and looked down. Colin's balcony only protruded ever so slightly

to the left, so there was mostly just an expanse of cold, hard ground, far below her.

Taking a deep breath, Matilda readjusted her position so that her knees were poking through the bars and her hands were at the base of her balcony. This was it. Now all she had to do was swing down and land on Colin's balcony. If only she'd been more interested in gymnastics at school... Those singing lessons had been a stupid idea!

Closing her eyes wasn't a very good idea given the circumstances, but Matilda did it anyway. She unhooked her knees and extended her arms slowly, so

that her legs were dangling downwards, hovering above Colin's balcony. It was a good six foot drop still—if only she were taller! Her sister, if she ever chose to do anything so reckless, would have done far better. She was a good four inches taller than Matilda, who barely reached 5'3".

It was at this point that Matilda began to reconsider her master plan. She didn't dare to look down—the thought of dangling from such a height made her dizzy, and dizziness was the last thing that she needed right now. If only she'd been sensible and used a sheet or something to climb down. At least then there might have been the possibility of

climbing back up! As it was now, she was stuck. She couldn't get back up even if she wanted to—her thin arms wouldn't support her weight.

Her hands were beginning to ache from clinging to the ribbed metal. She knew that she had to do it soon. There was no getting out of it. She was either going to land on the balcony, or this was all going to be over much sooner than she had expected.

With a quick prayer to anyone who might have been listening, Matilda let go. For a moment she was suspended in mid-air, and she felt as if she had just jumped from the top of the cliff, falling down, down, until the grey sea came up to

swallow her. After just a moment, though, she hit solid ground with a bump. She fell on all fours like a cat on the comfortingly solid surface of the balcony below, and breathed out a long sigh of relief. She had done it! It was such a good feeling after the impending panic—almost as if she had just finished a marathon or saved a kitten from a burning building. The adrenaline pumping through her was like a drug, and she had to remind herself that she had important work to do.

Pulling herself together with a quick shake, she got up off the ground, brushing herself off before turning to assess her surroundings. Like her

balcony, Colin's had a sliding door which led into his apartment. She had a sudden nasty feeling that perhaps it was locked. After all, Colin was trained in security, so he was probably a little more careful than her about keeping his apartment impenetrable.

She gave the door a cautious tug, wondering what she would do if it was locked—she could hardly sit around on the balcony waiting for Colin to come back, unless she was some sort of glutton for punishment.

To her relief, though, the door clicked open easily. As she had thought: nobody ever locked their balcony door. What was the point when the only thing that

could reasonably break in was a highly skilled pigeon?

Had she just compared herself to a bird? Matilda shook her head, trying to pull herself together. This was an incredibly risky situation, and her entire future depended on it. It wasn't the time to be thinking such irrelevant thoughts.

She made a quick sweep of the room with her eyes. The balcony was off Colin's bedroom, and she had never been in here before, nor did she ever, ever want to be in here again. It was surprisingly disorderly for such a tidy man. There were clothes strewn over the floor, balled-up black socks tossed in the corner, and the bed was unmade. It

was fine for her—she was only 20—but for a grown man, it was a little gross that he lived in such a mess.

She cast a glance at the cabinets next to his messy bed. One drawer was slightly ajar, and the other was closed, but didn't look as though it had a lock of any kind. Could he keep the photos in his bedroom, next to his bed? The implications of this made Matilda shudder, and for a moment she was tempted not to even look—she didn't want to know what a man like Colin might keep in his bedside cabinets. She didn't have a choice, though. Tentatively, she pulled open the drawers and rifled through the contents: some

letters, a sleeping mask (she would have giggled if she wasn't so tense) and a bottle of pills—she didn't know what they were for, but they didn't really help her.

In the other drawer, she had similar luck—that was, no luck at all. A few chargers and adapters, but apart from that, nothing.

She knew that she had to be thorough in her search, so she quickly rifled through his clothes drawers, wishing that she had thought to bring rubber gloves. Aside from a perplexing number of turtlenecks, she didn't find anything which even hinted at the photographs.

Giving up on the bedroom, she went into

the living room with a slight edge of urgency to her step. It was now almost 4:40, and Colin would leave work at 5. She probably had another 30 minutes, 40 at most, until she had to get out of there. She started on the coffee table, although she didn't really think that he would leave the photos lying around in broad daylight. She did find a flash drive, which she slipped into her pocket to boot up later in order to check for the photos. Other than that, all she learnt was that Colin drank a lot of coffee, read extremely boring books and didn't clean his coffee table nearly often enough. Quickly checking under the sofa and on the bookshelf, Matilda satisfied herself

that the photos were not in the living room. She moved on to the room she thought most likely to hold the thing she wanted: the study.

She had avoided this room until now because she knew that it would be obvious if she had rifled through his things in the study, whereas she thought that so far her search had been pretty non-invasive. She entered the room, and wondered how he had generated such an enormous stack of papers in under a month of being there.

She approached the desk with caution, as if there might be some guardian creature underneath ready to attack anyone who entered without permission.

This was it. If the photos weren't here, then she would have failed in her mission, and her life would essentially be over.

She went straight for the desk drawers. The first one contained only the normal paraphernalia: stapler, pens, spare paper and a notepad with some passwords and other information scribbled in it.

She went down to the second drawer, hoping with all her strength that the photos would be there. She tugged the handle, but the door wouldn't budge!

A thrill of horror went through her as she realized that it was locked. This must be it—it had to be it! But where was the key?

If she was correct, then the key would probably be lingering somewhere nearby. It was only a small lock, and not many people bothered to keep the key somewhere secret. She remembered having a similar lock herself on her dresser back in England. Even though she kept her diary locked inside, the key could generally be found in one of the boxes on top.

Hoping that Colin was similarly careless—after all, he could hardly expect her to go so far as breaking into his apartment—she scoured the top of the desk for a key. There was nothing! Matilda was beginning to panic now. It was almost 5, and she needed to get out

of there—soon! She hovered for a moment, undecided, but finally came to a conclusion. Colin was going to know that she had broken into his apartment whether or not she got the photos, and she was positive that they must be in the drawer.

With all her strength, she wrenched at the drawer, causing the wood to splinter as the lock broke into pieces. Slightly dazed, and surprised by her own strength, Matilda rifled through the draw desperately, terrified that she wouldn't be able to locate the photos.

She almost cried with relief as she recognized the envelope Colin had shown her. Sighing in satisfaction, she

quickly opened it up to check that they were the right photos. It seemed like they were all there. She tucked the photos under her arm, and was about to leave when a flash of silver caught her eye. Under a document, there was a small camera, a basic digital one, neither expensive nor remarkable.

Matilda's heart skipped a beat. Could that be the camera he had used?!

She snatched up the camera and switched it on, searching through the photos saved on the camera. With a sickening lurch, she found herself looking at the photos of her and Damian. Mixed in with her anger was a tinge of regret as she saw how complete they

looked together. They looked contented, exulted; the perfect couple.

She had almost missed the camera—how stupid of her. Taking it with her, she was satisfied that she had all the evidence she needed. There was no way Colin would be paranoid enough to have more copies elsewhere, right? The only other place they could be was on his computer, and he had clearly taken it with him to work. She hoped against hope that he wouldn't have saved copies on his computer where anyone could see them.

Even if he had, there was nothing she could do now. Perhaps she could destroy the laptop if it came to that. With

her ill-gotten gains, Matilda checked the time—her heart leapt! Colin could be back any minute.

Without bothering to clean up—what was the point? —Matilda headed for the door, unlocking it from the inside and running upstairs to her own apartment. Only when the door was bolted behind her did she begin to feel better. Even so, her heart was thudding and she could hear her pulse in her ears. She had really done it now!

Immediately, Matilda set about destroying the photos. In a glass dish, she set fire to the envelope, watching as the photographs twisted and blackened. As soon as they were unrecognizable,

she grabbed the camera, selecting the ‘delete all’ option to make sure that every single photo was completely erased.

Her last step was to boot up her computer to take a look at the flash drive. It was completely blank except for a folder marked ‘Colin1’. Just in case, Matilda clicked on the folder. It was just full of boring documents. She breathed a sigh of relief, but also felt slightly guilty for taking the flash drive which had turned out to be innocent. Now that she had destroyed the photos, Matilda felt mounting fear as well as some sense of relief. She was glad that the photos were gone—now she had the

power to take control of her life again—but she was afraid of what Colin might do when he found out. She considered leaving—that way he would have cooled down by the time she came back—but what if he still had a copy of the photos somewhere? She had to stay and find out.

Her mouth went dry as she heard a click downstairs. Colin must be home. Balling her hands into fists, Matilda tried to steel herself. She knew that he would come and confront her as soon as he discovered what she had done. She had to be strong, and she had to be prepared for the worst.

Still, she flinched a few minutes later as

she heard Colin's roar of anger, and his heavy footfalls on the stairs. Her door was barred, and she sat still, hoping that he would think she was out.

"I know you're in there. Open the door right now," Colin shouted from outside. Matilda knew that refusing would only make him angrier.

Matilda thought for a moment, and got out her phone. Slipping it into her back pocket, she pressed the record button. If anything happened to her, at least she would have some evidence which could get Colin convicted. Putting on a brave face, she got up and opened the door on his livid expression.

He lost no time in slapping her so hard

across the face that she bit her lip. She fell to the floor, her head spinning with the pain of the impact, and tasted the metallic tang of blood in her mouth. On impulse, she spat, sending the red liquid spattering across Colin's shoes.

He grabbed her by the hair, twisting viciously until she cried out.

"How dare you break into my flat?" he snarled. "I could call the police on you, you filthy little criminal."

Matilda prayed that her phone hadn't been damaged in the fall. She couldn't say anything, only whimper as Colin dragged her head back, intensifying the pain.

"Answer me," he yelled, shoving her

away from him so that she sprawled across the floor. “What were you doing in there? Trying to get the photos?”

“You were blackmailing me to have sex with you,” Matilda said. “Did you expect me to just take it?”

“It would have been better than trying to outsmart me,” Colin said. “Did you really think that I would just leave such valuable photos lying around? You’re naïve. Even if you did manage to find the prints and the camera, I still have them backed up. I have them in internet storage, so even if you destroyed my laptop, I could still access them. And guess what? They’re protected by the best security money can buy. I do work

for the royal family, after all.”

Matilda’s heart sank. So he had taken precautions, more than she even could have guessed. She cursed herself for being so stupid. Now she was in an even worse predicament.

“You’ll never be free from my power, no matter what you do,” Colin said.

“You’re under my control and you should get used to it. Maybe I’ve been too nice until now. You probably thought you could play me. You think I’m stupid.”

“I don’t,” Matilda protested. “I just wanted to be free to live my own life.”

“Well, you’re not. You’re not free, and now that I’ve seen what a manipulative

little bitch you are, I'm going to punish you."

Matilda's heart gave a lurch as she saw the anger and lust making friends in Colin's eyes. He wasn't reasonable. He was completely out of control. She knew that he was going to hurt her badly, probably rape her. She had to get out of there—and fast. She would not submit herself to this, not even to save her reputation or her family's.

If only she could get out of here now, she was sure that she had enough evidence on him to convict him. If that was the case, all she had to do was be one step ahead of him and call the police before he did. But that was provided that she

could get out. He was ten times stronger than her, and very clever.

She tried to get to her feet and dart out of the door, but Colin grabbed her easily, throwing her back down with a crash.

“Don’t try to run away, bitch,” he said.

“You’re going to lie there whimpering and I’m going to screw you senseless. I own you—don’t forget that. You think you can bargain with me and steal from me? Well guess what? You’re never seeing Damian again, and I will always be the only one you can turn to.

“I am the only one who will know the real you. Now quit complaining. I’m tired of waiting for something I can just take whenever I want.”

Matilda tried to back away across the floor as Colin advanced on her, but he was on her before she could get more than a few feet. He forced her hands over her head, and ripped at her t-shirt, exposing her blue lace bra.

“Nice,” he whispered. “Now lie back and enjoy this like a good princess.”

She whimpered, trying hard to squirm free, but he just slapped her across the face. He used one hand to undo the buttons on her jeans, and tugged them down over her hips. He was panting with the effort, because she was putting up as much fight as she could muster.

Amidst her panic, she remembered the provisions she had selected in case this

happened. She had a little bottle of pepper spray tucked into the pocket of her pants, but she couldn't reach it like this!

Struggling harder, she tried desperately to free her hands. If only she could get to that pocket.

Colin's free hand was brutally clawing at her soft flesh, squeezing and tugging until she was sobbing with pain and fear. He shifted slightly, trying to undo his own pants, and Matilda saw her chance. She kneed him with all her might in the groin, and he fell off her like a stunned spider, clenched in on himself with pain. Scrambling to her feet, Matilda grabbed the pepper spray and squirted him full in

the face.

He roared with agony, and Matilda knew that she had bought herself a precious few minutes. She had only one option now—to run. From that point, she knew that it was far too late to reason with him or to try and compromise. All she could do was flee—and hope that she would be able to outplay him. The die was cast. Now it was a war of wills.

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With her mind in a panic in case Colin came to his senses before she could get out of there, Matilda had no time to think about packing. Quickly straightening her clothing, she looked around for the things she needed. She at least had the presence of mind to grab her passport from where it lay on her desk, and shove the first few things which caught her eye into a backpack before running past Colin's groaning, prostate form and out the door.

Once she was out the front door of the apartment, her heart felt lighter, but she was still buzzed from the panic and the adrenaline. She was still in shock at

what Colin had tried to do, and even more in shock at having taken him down. She had been incredibly lucky, but it wasn't even close to being over yet. She hesitated a little at the front of the building. She felt as if Colin could come rushing out after her at any moment, and she wanted to get as far away from there as possible.

The phone recording burned in her pocket. She had evidence that Colin had tried to blackmail and rape her. Should she go straight to the police? That way, Colin would have no time to copy the photos or access them from the internet storage he had them in. She could let her father know and his security team could

discreetly get rid of them.

That was probably the smartest action to take, but Matilda's head was still reeling from the intense encounter. Where was the police station? Would they even believe her? Would Colin be there when they got there? What would he say to them? She was sure that he had something up his sleeve, and she dreaded the thought that the photos or her identity would be exposed. The last thing she wanted to do was to cause a huge media scandal.

No, the first thing she needed was to get away—far away from Colin, where he couldn't harm her. Then she needed... that was it! She needed to find Damian.

He was the only person she felt she could rely on. She felt safe at the thought of having him as a companion. He would know the best thing to do and help her through it. She would have to swallow her pride and confess to him what trouble she was in. She knew that he would be there to help her no matter what.

With that thought in mind, Matilda headed towards the bar where they had first met, hoping against hope that he was inside. It was only a small sliver of a chance—it wasn't even 6pm yet. There was a bubble of panic in her chest at the thought that maybe he wouldn't be there to support her.

She was about to burst into the bar without stopping to think about her appearance, when suddenly she remembered what she looked like right now. Her shirt was ripped from where Colin had tried to assault her, her bra exposed to the world and the flesh of her breast and ribs bruised and scratched. Her hair was all over the place from being grabbed by Colin and from running down the street. She must have looked a complete mess, and several passers-by were giving her looks of alarm as they went about their business.

Quickly she smoothed down her hair with her fingers and pulled a sweater out of her rucksack, covering the ripped t-

shirt. Giving herself a quick once-over, she decided that she looked passable enough, and entered the bar.

A few people looked up at the click of the door, curious to see who the newcomer was. She ignored them and scanned the room for Damian, her heart sinking as she didn't see his familiar face among the few people who were in there for an early drink. He might come in later, but it would be too late by then. This was probably the first place Colin would look. She'd just have to hide out somewhere. Maybe she could even call the police from her cell phone. All she knew was that she was on her own. She was about to turn and leave, unsure

where she was going to go, when,
“Matilda!”

She spun around at the sound of her name, spoken in that familiar voice which sent shivers down her spine. Her eyes scanned frantically over the crowd, wondering how she could have missed him. Finally, she lifted her eyes to the bar—and saw him behind it, his face a mask of astonishment.

“Damian!” She rushed across the room to where he stood, wearing a green bartender’s apron which did nothing to detract from his broad shoulders and handsome face.

“What happened? Are you OK?” he asked. “You look...” She saw him

scanning her carefully, trying to put his finger on what was wrong.

“I...are you working here?” she asked, momentarily distracted.

“Yeah.” Damian looked a little bashful.

“I knew that maybe you’d lost interest in me, but you’re just too special to give up on. I took a job here so that if you wanted to contact me, I’m right here.”

“That’s...” Matilda couldn’t even find the words. It was such a romantic, sweet gesture that it brought her close to tears to think that he would do that just for her.

“I’ve tended bar before, so it wasn’t so hard. But what’s happening with you? Can you see me now? Are you going to expl—”

Before Damian could go on, Matilda remembered why she was here, and a refreshed wave of anxiety went through her. She cut across him, her voice urgent.

“Damian, can you trust me for a little while? I need a favor and I need it now.”

“Something is wrong, isn’t it? What aren’t you telling me? Tell me, Matilda, please!” Damian said, looking into her eyes with such intensity that, even now, Matilda’s heart did a little flip in her chest.

“I will, just not here. Can we get out of here—please?”

“Of course, babe, but I’ll lose this job. I might not be able to stay here for you if I

leave now.”

“It doesn’t matter, Damian,” she said.

“I’m leaving that life behind me. I’ve decided: I want to run away with you!”

At those words, Damian’s entire face lit up. His worries seemed to clear up immediately in the face of this news. His eyes brightened, and he let out a boyish whoop of joy, before leaping bodily over the bar to embrace her.

Despite her surprise, the feeling of his warm, strong arms around her felt so good that she simply melted into the embrace, her entire body immediately relaxing as she was encompassed by his comforting hug.

His lips found hers and he kissed her,

right there in the bar, to the ragged cheers of the other occupants. She yielded her lips to him, her entire body tingling with the delicious sensation. The kiss was full of the pent-up passion for weeks. It was like the first cigarette in the morning for a chain smoker, or the first sip of water for a man in the desert for a week. How could one person make her feel so good?

He finally pulled away and tenderly brushed a lock of hair from her face—and frowned.

“Matilda, this is a serious bruise,” he said.

She started. She knew that Colin had hit her hard, but she hadn’t considered that

he had left marks.

“I—,” she started.

“It’s that man, isn’t it? He tried to hurt you.” Colin’s gray eyes darkened and she saw the anger kindle there.

“I don’t have time to explain right now,” she said. “Please, Damian. I’ll tell you everything, just—”

“OK, never mind that now. Let’s just get you out of here first,” Damian said. Even though he didn’t know what was going on, he was taking charge. His instincts had overridden everything else, and he seemed to know exactly what to do. Matilda let him take the lead, just glad to be by his side again.

“OK, so where to?” Damian asked her.

“I don’t know,” Matilda confessed. “Just somewhere that’s not here.”

“OK, we’re going to get in my car and drive a little, since being right here is obviously worrying you—then I need you to tell me what this is all about. Is that OK?”

Matilda looked up into Damian’s eyes. They were radiating sincerity and concern for her. She nodded, and he ushered her towards his car.

She felt an immediate sense of relief as he started the engine, and leaned back against the seat, closing her eyes and enjoying the feeling of safety and

contentment for the first time in weeks. Damian leaned across and took her hand, holding it tightly in his and squeezing it reassuringly.

“How are you doing?” he asked her, his voice gentle and filled with concern.

“Do you think you’re ready to tell me what’s going on?”

“Yeah,” she said. She needed to get it off her chest, and she needed to figure out what to do next. “We should stop somewhere first, though.”

“How about the zoo?” Damian asked. “If that man is looking for you, that’s probably the last place he’ll think of. Besides, I wanted to take you there before, and we never got to go.”

Matilda smiled at Damian's suggestion. She had forgotten how warm and quirky his sense of humor was, and how he was always full of ideas.

"I'd like that," she said.

"I've missed you so much, babe," Damian said. "It's been torture."

"You have no idea," she said. "But let's wait until we get to the zoo."

Half an hour later, they were sitting hand in hand next to the flamingos. It was a nice evening, but the zoo wasn't busy, and they had the area to themselves.

"So what's up?" Damian asked. "Is there someone I have to kill?" he said it jokingly, but his eyes were serious.

"Nobody hurts you and gets away with

it.”

“I...can you promise me that you won’t freak out?” asked Matilda.

“I won’t make that promise,” Damian said, his eyes burning, “but I promise I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

“I...you already know that Colin is very protective of me,” she said.

“I wouldn’t call it protective—I’d call it obsessive,” Damian said darkly.

“Whatever you like to call it, he was watching my every move and he got jealous of me dating you. He knew, even though I tried to keep it secret.

“I don’t like to think of myself as a weak person, but he lives below me, and—”
Matilda hesitated. She wasn’t sure that

she wanted to go over the whole thing—the blackmail, the threats and everything—she was tired and afraid, and it upset her even to think about it. She decided that for now, she'd give Damian the simplified version. There was no need to get him too involved. Hopefully, it was all over now.

“He made some threats,” she confessed. “I knew that there would be consequences if I tried to see you again. But tonight...”

“He hit you,” Damian said gently, brushing the lock of hair aside again so that he could look at the angry purple bruise across Matilda's forehead.

“Yes,” Matilda admitted. “I knew then

that I had to get out. There was no way that I could continue to live like that. But things were...complicated.”

“Your family, I know,” said Damian.

“You don’t want to disappoint them.”

“No,” Matilda shook her head.

“But your safety is more important than that. Surely your family can understand that?” Damian said.

“I don’t know,” Matilda confessed. “I think they might take his side.”

“But that’s awful. He assaulted you, Matilda. You could call the police on him.”

“I thought about it,” Matilda said. She thought about the photographs. He still had them. Even if she called the police

and had him arrested, he would have access to them via the internet. He could still expose her. She had thought about it on the way to the zoo, and she had come to the conclusion that involving the police was only going to make matters worse. If possible, she wanted to forget everything that had happened. She wanted to make it go away. She hated the idea of a huge scandal. If Colin was arrested, there would be a trial. The photos would be evidence, and they would inevitably leak out to the press. As it was, nobody knew of their existence but her and Colin—and she intended to keep it that way.

As soon as they had arrived at the zoo,

Matilda had gone into the ladies' bathroom. She knew that she had to stop Colin from spreading those photographs herself, and she finally had the means to do it.

She called his number, which thankfully went to voicemail. She played the recording of him threatening to rape her and confessing to blackmail back to him, grimacing as she heard his vicious words and her screams repeated back to her. But it was enough for him to know that he couldn't reveal the photos without being exposed as a blackmailer and would-be rapist.

At the end of the recording, she had said, "If you ever reveal those photos to

anyone, the whole world will know what you did to me.”

With that, she hung up. It was over. They were at a stalemate, and hopefully, the whole thing could be buried forever.

She went back outside to join Damian, and they walked hand in hand to the flamingo enclosure. As they walked, she felt relief that he never had to know what she had been through. They could just be happy together.

“Well? You should call the police,” Damian repeated, bringing her back to the present.

“I don’t want to cause any more trouble. I don’t want to deal with any of it,” Matilda admitted. “I just want to get out

of here and be with you.”

“Matilda...you know how I feel about you. The fact that you want to come with me and travel means a lot to me, but I need to know whether you’re doing it because you want to, or because you’re trying to run away from something.

“I’ll be on your side either way—god, I don’t even know why I’m saying this—I’d stay with you no matter what your motives are. I’m lucky just to be around you. But I want to know for your sake—can you really be happy with me?”

Matilda thought hard about what Damian had just said. It was true that there was a lot she was turning her back on—her family, for one thing. They would hear

sooner or later that she had run away with a man. The surge of guilt was strong enough for Matilda to experience a moment of self-doubt—but she was angry at her family for putting her in this situation in the first place. If it wasn't for her controlling father, she would never have been driven to the extreme of escaping from her guardian. She wouldn't have needed a guardian in the first place. If she thought that she could share the truth with them without being judged, she would have.

What right did her family have to expect her to be loyal to them or do as expected? If she had done as expected, she would have been raped and

blackmailed and completely dominated. Then there was the situation with Colin. What choice did she have other than to leave it all behind her? She didn't want to relive any of the last two weeks, and the best place to leave them was in the past, dead and buried.

She knew that what she wanted more than anything else in the world was to be free, to be with Damian without worrying about anything else. She wanted to see his face first thing in the morning, and feel his touch every night before she closed her eyes.

Was it so wrong to run away with him? For the first time in her life, she would truly be doing what she wanted, without

trying to fulfil anyone's expectations of her.

It was true that she would be sad to leave her job and Sylvie, but it couldn't be helped. She'd have to call in the morning and explain—there was no time for anything else, and she never wanted to be in the same city as Colin ever again.

"I'm not just with you because I'm running," she said.

"Matilda, you need to face up to the truth," Damian said. "Be honest with me."

"It's true that there are things I want to leave behind. There are things that I haven't told you about my past, and

about what happened. It's not because I don't trust you. It's because they're things that I find it impossible to talk about right now.

"Can you accept me as me, and not worry about those things?" Matilda pleaded.

"I will always love you," Damian said.

"You know that. I just want to know: am I just a convenient escape route for you?"

A pain went through Matilda's chest like an arrow piercing her soft, tender heart. After all she had gone through to be with Damian, how could he ask her that?

"Damian, you're everything to me," she said simply. "The only reason I decided

to break away from what my family wants and what I've been told to do is because of you. Just being around you changes the whole way I look at things.

“Until you came into my life, I was content just to do as I was told and do what was expected of me. Being with you has made me realize what else there is. I feel alive, animated—special.

“I've had to struggle harder than you would believe possible just to be able to see you. You have no idea how much I've been through—and it was all so I could be with you. So don't ask me whether I'm just using you to run away from something. It breaks my heart that you might think that.”

As Matilda finished her speech, Damian enveloped her in a fierce, protective hug.

“I love you,” he told her. “You’re so precious to me. I didn’t believe it. I know that you’re the most honest, pure person in the world, but sometimes it’s hard to believe that you want me, of all people.”

“Why is that so hard to believe?” asked Matilda, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Because you’re perfect,” he said, “and I’m just me.”

He kissed her, pouring all his passion and love into the embrace. Matilda could feel the emotion swirling around her, blasting through her body, invading

every cell. It was dizzying, but she returned the kiss with equal passion, relishing the feeling of his warm lips, the way his tongue felt entwined with hers. She pulled back, gasping, and blushed at the intensity of his gaze. His gray eyes were warm and alight with desire. It felt so incredible just to be near him again that she almost forgot her situation, wanting to milk every moment of their reunion.

They were in a public place, though, and she didn't want to be conspicuous, so she held herself back, contenting herself with the warm hand wrapped around her own.

“For now, can't we just enjoy our

evening together?” Matilda asked. “We can decide what to do and where to go afterwards.”

“OK. I just want to know that you’re safe, and that you’re with me because you want to be, and not because you are hiding from something.”

Matilda thought guiltily of all that had happened, and the weight of anxiety which was still pressing on her shoulders, but she waved it away, not wanting to think about it. She wanted to enjoy the present, here and now. She had been denied that simple pleasure for so long that she wanted to simply forget about everything else for now.

“Damian...can we save the tough

questions for tomorrow? There are a lot of things going on, it's true, and I haven't told you everything. But for now, I just want to be with you."

"If that's what you want, babe, then that's what I'll give you," Damian said, giving her a swift kiss on the lips.

"Now, where do you want to go first?"

As they made their way, hand in hand, through the different enclosures, Matilda felt a weird sense of disassociation from reality. A few hours ago, she had been beaten and nearly raped by a man who had been blackmailing her. Now, she was laughing as Damian, the man she loved, tried to coax a lion into roaring by doing his best impression.

It seemed almost too good to be true that life could suddenly be this simple. Perhaps it was, but Matilda couldn't bring herself to care. She watched as Damian tried once again to roar impressively at a very bored, disinterested lion, getting strange looks from everyone else in the vicinity. He looked back at her, a grin on his face, and she found her heart swelling with happiness. Once again, she felt like the luckiest person in the world.

“Did I ever tell you about the time when I was in Malawi?” asked Damian, as he finally gave up on his impossible task and came back to join Matilda.

“No,” Matilda said, settling back to

enjoy another of Damian's tales.

"It was a few years ago. I went over there as a volunteer and helped to build a school near the capital. You know that in Malawi they have monkeys which just run around all over the wild?"

"Nope, I didn't know that," Matilda said.

"It's fun—but those things are the worst criminals you'll ever meet," Damian said. "If you put a sandwich down for five seconds, one of them will run up and steal it—then eat it right in front of you. Either that, or it'll throw it right back to you in pieces as if you were the animal."

Matilda laughed, enjoying the idea of

Damian being pelted with bits of food by a monkey.

“I missed your laugh,” Damian said, and Matilda blushed, looking down at her hands. “It’s been so long since I heard it, I’d forgotten how beautiful it is.”

“I’d forgotten how to laugh without you,” Matilda confessed.

“Well, let’s make a promise never to be apart again. If we ever are, I promise that I will come and find you and make you laugh again. Do I have your promise?”

“I promise,” Matilda said. She shook his hand solemnly, and enjoyed the feeling of happiness welling inside her like an unquenchable spring.

“Come on, it’s getting late. We should head out,” Damian said.

Matilda’s heart sank as she thought about their next step. She had managed to bury her worries for a few blissful hours, but now they had to decide what to do.

She had no clothes or possessions apart from the few things she had thrown in her backpack, and she needed to contact her job, her family and even Colin, to reassure herself that he would be off her back.

Maybe, after all, she should even call the police—but then how could she explain that she had been enjoying herself at the zoo all afternoon instead of contacting them?

“Don’t worry, babe,” Damian said, as if he had read her mind. “I’ll figure out what we’ll do. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

“But—,” Matilda protested, then stopped. She could trust Damian. She didn’t need to worry herself about anything else just yet. She had time to sort all that out. For now, she would concentrate on her and Damian.

“Do you want to go back to your place and get some things?” Damian asked. “I’ll make sure nobody tries to stop you.”

“No,” Matilda said. “There’s nothing there I can’t replace. Just some clothes and things.”

“Right, well let’s go back to mine first then. I’ll pick up my stuff, and we can drive. You pick a direction—north, south, east or west—and we’ll drive until we find a place where we want to be.”

“Perfect,” smiled Matilda. She couldn’t believe that she was about to embark on this adventure with Damian.

They drove back from the zoo towards where Damian was staying. Matilda was curious, since she had never seen where he lived. She knew that he moved around a lot, so she had half imagined him living in the wild, or camping out under the stars.

Instead, he led her up the stairs to a

sparse but beautiful studio apartment. The windows were bright and open, and the pale wood floor was clean and made the space seem new and fresh. The walls were covered with artwork, and there was an easel set up in one corner.

The only furniture was a futon, faded but comfortable, and a desk, complete with a worn chair.

It was pleasant, the perfect place for an artist. Matilda was astonished by how much like a real home it felt, even though Damian had been there only a few weeks.

“The place belongs to a friend,” he told her, answering several of her questions. “He’s an artist, but he only comes here

when he's feeling blocked. It helps him think to have a small, simple place. The rest of the time, he lives in a huge house in the Hamptons."

"Wow," Matilda said. "How did you manage to meet him?"

"Long story," Damian said. "You meet a lot of people when you travel a lot."

"I'd like to hear it sometime," Matilda said. "He's an incredible artist."

"Yeah," Damian agreed. "I love this place."

"I'm sorry," Matilda said. "I don't want to force you to leave if you'd rather stay."

"No," Damian said forcefully. "I want to travel with you. There's so much I want

to show you.”

“Are you sure?” Matilda asked hesitantly.

“I’m sure. Have you picked a direction yet?” Damian asked with a warm smile.

“How about west?” Matilda asked.

“Good choice. That leaves the whole country open to us,” Damian grinned.

“And let’s—let’s go somewhere you haven’t been before,” Matilda suggested.

“I want us both to discover something new together.”

“That’ll be hard to find,” Damian teased, “but I’m sure we’ll manage.”

He started packing his bag; he only carried one small suitcase, obviously used to travelling with minimal

possessions.

“I have a tent and things in my car,” he explained, “but I don’t need too much in the way of material things.”

“Are you ready to go then?” Matilda asked. She was anxious to leave the place behind now. She had emailed Sylvie to explain that she would be leaving, and she’d decided to call her parents a little later. After all, provided Colin didn’t contact them—which he shouldn’t, with the knowledge that she could expose his many crimes—they wouldn’t know anything was amiss for a few days at least.

“I’m ready,” Damian said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms

around her. “Let’s start a new life together.”

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Once they were in the car, it was as if the whole world was in front of them.

As they moved away from the city, the road stretched, wide and endless, before them.

“Do you know where we’re going?”
Matilda asked.

“West,” Damian replied with a smile.

“Until we find somewhere new, where we’ve never been before.”

Matilda’s spirits were high, and the feeling of Damian’s hand wrapped around hers as the miles faded away behind them was like an anchor.

He talked about his family, and about the friends he had made during his travels.

He asked her questions about her life and family, and she tried to answer them as best she could without giving away the fact that she was a royal—somehow, she still clung to the fear that he would reject her if he knew. Tomorrow, she decided. Tomorrow she would tell him the whole truth. But for now, she just wanted to be happy. Wasn't it her turn to enjoy a little bit of freedom and happiness?

"It's getting dark," she pointed out, as the sky began to dim and the red sun sank behind the horizon.

"Do you want to stop?" Damian asked.

"No," Matilda said. "I never want this day to end."

“Me neither,” Damian said. “I don’t want to close my eyes and find that this was all a dream.”

They carried on along the road, until it slowly emptied of cars and turned into countryside on either side of the road.

“Where are we?” Matilda asked.

“Somewhere in the middle of Kentucky,” Damian replied.

“Ooh, fried chicken!” Matilda said enthusiastically; they had been so wrapped up in each other that they had completely forgotten to get food, and it was now around 3 in the morning.

Damian laughed. “Yeah, I guess they do pretty good fried chicken here,” he acknowledged, “but you really need to

go further south for the best.”

“I’ll settle for any kind,” Matilda said.

Damian smiled, and caressed her face.

“Let’s go and grab something, then, and maybe we’ll find a place to crash for the night.”

He pulled off the highway and drove down a series of smaller roads, all equally deserted. After about 15 minutes, he pulled over. Matilda sent him a quizzical look.

“I don’t think they have any fried chicken around here,” Damian confessed. “It looks like it really is the middle of nowhere.”

“Just you and me?” Matilda asked, an idea forming in her mind. Damian

glanced up at her and caught the mischief in her eyes. He grinned, catching on immediately.

“Lost in the wilderness,” he agreed, pulling her onto his lap, where she straddled him, eagerly wriggling into a comfortable position, her legs spread directly over his crotch.

“Nobody around,” Matilda whispered, leaning in for a kiss.

The kiss was lingering and intense, and the warmth of the contact travelled straight down to Matilda’s groin, awakening her arousal. Damian’s arms snaked around her to pull her body flush against his. She rubbed herself against him, delighting in the hard muscles of his

chest.

He groaned as she shifted on top of him, and she felt the evidence of his growing arousal pressing insistently against her pussy. She ground down on top of him, the friction sending bolts of arousal jolting through her even through the constricting material of her clothing.

Warm hands pushed up her t-shirt, and she pulled it over her head, secretly pleased that her pert, full breasts were level with Damian's face. He lavished attention on them, showering them with kisses, nuzzling the soft swell of her cleavage above her blue lace bra.

She popped open the bra, shrugging it off and tossing it into the back seat,

allowing Damian full access to her bare breasts.

She moaned and arched towards him, throwing her head back in ecstasy as he took her nipples into his mouth, one at a time, and bit down gently. She was floating on a sea of sensation as he worshipped her body. His warm hands rubbed up and down her back, and she could feel the moisture pooling in her panties as her arousal increased.

Not wanting to be outdone, Matilda grabbed Damian's cock through the material of his shorts, rubbing and teasing him to full attention. He was thrusting shallowly upwards against her hand, and she felt a rush of power as she

saw how aroused he was by her.

She tugged his t-shirt over his head, needing to feel his skin got against hers. As her breasts rubbed against the hard muscles of his torso, she felt her skin sizzling with the heat; her whole body was alive with the fire.

She was aching with desire by now, her pussy slick with juices and throbbing steadily with the need to be filled, stroked, thoroughly and roughly fucked by Damian. But she wanted to take this slow—wanted it to last as long as possible.

She explored the hard contours of Damian's body, enjoying the flex of his muscles as he ran his hands over her soft

curves. The way his broad shoulders and muscular arms felt beneath her delicate fingers was amazing, like the bold ripples of the ocean's waves.

She moved down to explore the toned flesh with her lips, leaving gentle butterfly kisses across the plane of his chest and trailing down to the line of hair above his pants.

Had there been space. She would have unzipped his pants and continued downwards, taking his straining member between her lips and sucking hard, but in the confines of the car, she had to content herself with shimmying back up to meet Damian's lips in a series of heated kisses.

“I want you,” Damian murmured in her ear as they broke apart, fighting for breath. “I want you so god damn much.” Matilda’s entire body was crying out for him, too. It was like they were both bewitched by the same spell, and nothing but each other’s bodies could calm the urge which was erupting within them with the force of a volcano.

Matilda wriggled out of her pants, holding her hot, wet pussy over Damian’s crotch, where she could feel the huge bulge of his erection aching to be free. She ground herself against him, too desperate for contact to wait, and gasped at the sensations which shot up through her body. She needed more, and

harder, but Damian held her still.

He moved his hand down between her legs, gently probing her moist heat, his fingers bathing in her juices as he stroked her enflamed lips.

She moaned, and arched closer, wanting his fingers to writhe and thrust inside her, but he was exploring slowly, teasingly. He ghosted over her clit, and she let out a startled cry as a flash of fire swept through her. It was too good. She needed more.

He slowly sank his fingers into her soft, wet heat, and she groaned at the sensation of his long digits caressing her walls.

He thrust once, twice, hooking his

fingers so that he grazed slowly down her slick walls, stimulating the flesh so that she was panting with desire.

Then he withdrew his fingers, coated in her juices, and she whimpered at the loss, feeling empty and almost wild with lust without his delicious contact. He met her hazy eyes with his own slate gray ones, his pupils dilated, and slowly took his coated fingers into his mouth, sucking slowly, swirling his tongue around to lap up every drop of her essence.

The gesture was both embarrassing and strangely erotic to Matilda, and she found herself both blushing and staring fixedly as Damian drank in her wetness.

As he finished finding every last ounce, he leaned forwards to kiss her, and she tasted herself on his tongue. She felt the heat sweep through her as the flavor of her own arousal hit her taste buds.

“You taste so delicious,” Damian murmured. “I didn’t want you to miss out.”

If Damian’s kiss hadn’t done it for her already, his words would have destroyed the last tiny particle of restraint that she still had left. She needed him inside her—now.

Unzipping his pants, she helped him to push them down over his thighs, exposing his large, eager erection to her greedy eyes.

She caressed the tip for a moment, admiring his thickness, before lifting her hips and impaling herself on his engorged cock.

Both of them gasped at the sudden sensation of completeness. It had been so long that Matilda's thighs were quivering, the feeling of him filling her almost too overwhelming.

He began to thrust up immediately, and the angle had Matilda reeling, clinging onto the thick muscles of his arms as the only way to anchor her body as her spirit soared. His thrusts were long and deep, and every nerve inside her cried out in delight as his cock hit exactly the right spot. Gooseflesh covered her arms and a

flush crept across her chest as shivers of ecstasy ran through her body. Her orgasm was so close, but she wanted it to last forever. She clenched her walls down on Damian's cock, engulfing him completely, trying to slow his thrusts, to make it last longer.

He let out a tortured groan, and lifted her bodily, slamming her entire fragile form back down on his eager cock again and again. She let out breathy screams as he thrust into her with all his force, bringing her orgasm closer with every thrust. Finally he pulled her down with all his strength, holding her tightly, filling her with his thick, white seed just as she came hard, her entire body shaking from

the power of her orgasm.

As her vision returned and her breathing came back to something resembling normal, she could still feel him inside her. His arms wrapped around her tightly and the scent of their sex filled the small car, their lust fogging the windows. The world, with all its drama, no longer existed to them as they held each other in the small vehicle, trying to keep that glowing aftermath going forever.

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Matilda didn't know how long they just sat there, holding each other and basking in their closeness, their bodies tired, sore and contented from their steamy lovemaking session, but when she was roused groggily from her light sleep, it was getting light and her skin was sticky, her joints aching from staying in the same position for so long.

“How long were we out?” she groaned, as she felt Damian shift and stretch beneath her. She made to move off him, but he grabbed her tightly, giving her a long, lingering, spine-tingling kiss before lifting her up and setting her down in the seat beside him. They both

began rummaging around for clothes, and Matilda had a struggle trying to fish her panties off the back seat whilst simultaneously trying to maintain her modesty.

“It’s around 7,” Damian said, peering out the window to check the position of the sun. “So only a few hours. Let’s try and get back on the road and find a restaurant or a diner or something—I’m starving.”

It only took them about 20 minutes to find a likely diner in a small town. After ordering enough food to leave an entire army lying on their backs and groaning, they settled into a small booth with their coffee, chatting about small things;

where to go next; what the strange creaking sound in the car might be; and where they might be able to go and shower.

The food arrived quickly, and Matilda's eyes went as wide as saucers as she took in the vast stacks of pancakes, the soft, buttery biscuits, the heaps of thick sausage gravy and the crispy bacon piled high at the side.

"Haven't you ever seen an American breakfast before?" Damian teased, taking a bite of bacon and crunching enthusiastically.

"Not like this," she admitted.

"What do you eat in England, anyway?" Damian asked curiously.

“Bacon and eggs, maybe baked beans,” Matilda said. “Our pancakes are thin, though, and we eat them with lemon and sugar. Anyway, most people just eat toast or cereal for breakfast.”

“Sounds terrible,” Damian said, giving a mock shudder. Matilda laughed and threw the bottle of syrup at him. He caught it deftly, and began slathering his pancakes with the sticky condiment, giving Matilda an incorrigible grin.

When the plates had been cleared away and their coffees refilled, Damian once again raised some of the subjects that needed to be discussed.

“So, are you ready to tell me everything that happened?” he asked her seriously.

“I guess,” Matilda said reluctantly. “I just...I don’t want you to hate me.”

“How could I ever hate you?” Damian asked, his handsome face frowning in concern. “Matilda, I can’t believe even for a moment that you could possibly do anything wrong.”

“Not on purpose,” Matilda confessed, “but I made a big mess of things. I did something stupid, and now we’re both paying for it.”

“Trust me,” Damian said sincerely, taking her hand and raising it to his lips for a gentle kiss. “I won’t judge you. Everyone makes mistakes. I just want to know what sort of demons you’re fighting.”

Matilda took a deep breath, thinking over everything which had happened over the last few weeks. It was true that she hadn't done anything wrong—or at least not anything she hadn't been forced to do—but she was still reluctant to share everything with Damian. He thought of her as such a pure person. Would he reject her if he knew the ugly truth?

She knew in her heart that she and Damian had a strong connection. She only hoped that it was strong enough for him to overcome the issues which were surrounding her.

“I told you about Colin—that he was threatening me,” she said dully.

“More than threatening—I can still see the bruise on your face,” Damian said, anger coloring his voice.

“Well, what I didn’t tell you was that it’s all my fault,” Matilda said, casting her eyes downwards. “I was too careless.”

“What do you mean?” asked Damian. “It’s never your fault if a jerk tries to beat you up.”

“He wanted me,” Matilda confessed. “Part of me knew it. He got jealous when I talked to you that first night; it was obvious even to me that he was attracted to me, and I just blew him off.”

“So what?” scoffed Damian. “That bastard is nowhere near in the same

league as you. He can want all he likes, but he can never have you.”

“But he couldn’t accept that, and I was too stupid to realize it,” Matilda confessed. “Damian—he followed us. Every time we met up that first week, he followed us. He took photos of us together to blackmail me with. He even—he even caught us together in the pool by the War Memorial.”

Damian’s face had turned darker and darker as he listened to her speech, and his hands were balled into fists on the table, his knuckles white as he tried not to smash something.

“How dare he?!” Damian exclaimed.

“How could he invade your privacy like

that. Matilda, you should call the police on this man—now!”

Damian’s expression was so fierce that Matilda was frightened for a moment, but she stood her ground, trying to get Damian to understand.

“He’s very trusted by my family, and if my family ever found out about those photos, they’d be sure to disown me. My father is very strict, and my family is very well known in England. If the photos went public, their reputation would be in tatters.”

Damian looked as if he was about to explode, and Matilda looked miserable down at her hands. She had really blown it now. He must know exactly how weak

she was.

“Why didn’t you tell me all of this?”

Damian asked.

“I don’t know,” Matilda admitted.

“When he first started blackmailing me, he made sure I couldn’t see you. After that, I guess I just wanted to fix it myself.”

“You’re so stubborn,” Damian said. “I’d have helped you out however I could.”

“Just knowing you were waiting for me was enough,” Matilda said. “The night I left—was it really only last night—I managed to get some evidence on him. Now if he ever tries to use the photos I can expose him as a blackmailer. If he knows what’s good for him he’ll forget

the whole thing and I'm free to be with you."

"That's good, at least," Damian said. He looked as if he wanted to ask what evidence she had, but the look on his face caused him to hold back. "But I still worry. Matilda, is this life really what you want? I don't stay in one place for long, and I like my life the way it is, but you have so much going for you. You're smart, attractive and you've got a lot of options out there ahead of you. Do you really want to give that up to be with me?"

"I don't know what I want out of life," admitted Matilda. "I used to think that I wanted to change the way the world

worked. I wanted to make government better, give people a stronger voice. Now, I know that world is full of people like Colin who are out to manipulate people like me. So I don't know. It's a difficult question.

“Above everything else, I've just wanted the freedom to make my own decisions. I like to take life as it comes and enjoy the opportunities which are out there without being forced to do something for someone else, the way I have my whole life.

“I guess that is what appeals to me about travelling with you. But it's more than that. Since I met you, my life changed. The way I see things has changed. Being

with you makes me feel complete. I think we could do amazing things together. I don't know what yet. All I know is that I want to be with you...that is, if you feel the same way."

"Of course I feel the same way. I sometimes can't believe my luck that I met you. Why would I give that up?" Damian said, sending her a crooked smile. "But what about your family? I know you said they're strict, but you love them, don't you? Do you want them to worry?"

"I'm scared," admitted Matilda. "You don't know my father. If he knew I'd run off with a man and planned to travel around America, he might force me to

come home right away.”

“In my experience, parents only want what is best for their children,” Damian said. “Besides, if you’re always running away from your father’s wishes, you’ll never be able to be truly happy.”

“That’s true,” Matilda said. “I think it would always be a small doubt in the back of my mind. But what else can I do?”

“You have to face up to him,” Damian said simply. “Just tell him the truth. You’re an adult, you’re mature and strong, and you have a good man who cares about you. That doesn’t mean you are a bad daughter. It just means you choose to go in your own direction.”

“What if he doesn’t understand?”

Matilda asked nervously.

“You can never know for sure unless you talk to him and tell him the truth,” said Damian. “You should at least talk to him, otherwise you’ll always be running.”

“You’re right,” Matilda agreed. “But what if he does force me home? What if we lose each other?”

Damian leaned forwards, stroking the hair out of her face and caressing her cheek gently. He looked deep into her eyes with his piercing grey ones, and gave her a warm smile which made her heart turn cartwheels.

“I promise that I will never let that

happen,” he said. “I’ll never let you go, Matilda. Not even your ogre of a father can keep us apart.”

He kissed her fiercely, as if claiming her for his own, and Matilda responded with equal passion, as if that kiss was the only thing shielding her from harm.

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They left the diner and got back in the car, enjoying their journey through the small town and down a series of winding country roads before heading back to the highway to continue their journey west.

“So, are you going to call them?”
Damian asked.

“I would, but I don’t have any internet connection here,” Matilda said. “I usually use Skype to call. I don’t even know if my phone can make a call to England.”

“Oh, well that is a problem,” Damian admitted. “How about we find an exit along the highway and hit up a hotel or

restaurant or something? They usually have wifi, and you can call your parents from there.”

“Just my dad, actually,” Matilda corrected him. “I never knew who my mother was; my dad was married to my stepmum when I was born, so my sister is really my half-sister.”

“Well, I’m sure she’ll be worried about you too,” Damian said. “We’ll pull over as soon as we find somewhere; it might be a few miles. In a place like this, there can be quite a long space between exits.”

“Well, there’s no rush,” Matilda smiled. “It’s nice just to get some time alone with you.”

“Maybe I should speak to your parents too? You know, to convince them that I’m not just some guy trying to whisk off their daughter into the sunset,” Damian teased.

“But you are trying to whisk me off into the sunset,” Matilda pointed out.

“Yes, but they don’t need to know that,” Damian laughed.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll be able to explain everything,” Matilda said.

At that moment, she caught sight of flashing lights in the mirror, and heard the wail of a siren.

“I wonder what happened.” Matilda mused.

“Damn it; they want me to pull over,”

Damian muttered.

“Were you speeding?” Matilda asked, confused.

“No. There shouldn’t be any trouble. Sometimes the police just like to hassle you,” Damian said.

“Oh,” Matilda said. There was a faint ache of worry in her stomach, but she trusted Damian. He wasn’t drunk or on drugs, and he was a sensible person. There wouldn’t be any reason for the police to bother them. Somehow, though, she couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something was horribly wrong.

She watched nervously as Damian opened the window for the approaching policeman.

“Good morning, officer,” he said politely. “Can I help you?”

“Do you own this vehicle, sir?”

“Yes, I do,” Damian confirmed.

“Can I see your license?”

Matilda bit her lip as Damian obligingly showed his license, followed by a sequence of other papers for the car and insurance. Was this normal? The policeman hadn’t even told Damian that he was doing anything wrong.

Finally, the policeman finished studying the papers and handed them back to Damian. He leaned down and peered over to the passenger seat, looking at Matilda.

“What’s your name, ma’am?” he asked.

“M-Matilda,” Matilda answered, her stomach knotting with anxiety. Why was he talking to her?

“Officer, is there a problem?” Damian interjected, obviously irritated that the policeman was trying to hassle her.

“Indeed there is,” he acknowledged.

“There’s an alert out across all the states for a vehicle with this registration.”

“An alert?” Damian sounded surprised.

“An alert about what?”

“Well, all I know is that I’m going to have to make a call to the station,” the policeman said. “Can I ask you to hand over the keys for the vehicle?”

Damian looked both confused and angry, but he handed over the keys; what else

could he do?

Matilda's fear was mounting by the second. What was going on? Was this because of her, or was there something else at work? Surely Colin wouldn't have made any moves knowing that she had such strong evidence against him. She found Damian's hand, holding it tightly, as if to communicate her worry through the contact.

"It'll be fine," he said soothingly. "We have nothing to worry about."

It was hard to relax when you know that a horde of policeman are on their way to interrogate you, and the next 20 minutes were tense and silent. Damian tried a few times to start a conversation, but

Matilda was too consumed with worry to carry it on for more than a minute or two.

“What if this is about Colin?” Matilda said after the conversation had foundered for the third time.

“Then you’ll just have to be brave and tell the truth,” Colin reassured her. “I won’t let anyone touch you, Matilda. I promise.”

At that moment, the original policeman came over to the car again and tapped on the window. Damian opened it, and the policeman peered in apologetically.

“Sorry about that. It turns out that nobody at the station knew anything, so we had to make a few phone calls.”

“So we’re free to go?” Matilda asked hopefully.

“I’m afraid not, ma’am. I’ll have to take you both down to the nearest station and hold you until you can be processed.”

“Processed? What does that mean? Can you please tell us what’s going on?” Damian asked, an edge of anger in his voice.

“All I know is that there’s a warrant issued for your arrest,” the policeman said to Damian, “and that this young lady is an illegal alien. She’ll likely be deported.”

“What?” Damian roared, causing the policeman to lean back a little in alarm.

“She’s not illegal—you’ve got a visa,

haven't you? Show him," Damian insisted.

"I—I have a work visa," Matilda stuttered. She had only just thought about it. If she was no longer working, her visa wouldn't be valid. "I quit the job..."

"Well, all I know is what I've been told," the policeman said with an air of finality. "Now, I have to drive you to the station, and from there I'll hand you over to whoever it was who ordered these warrants in the first place."

Mechanically, they got out of the car and into the back of the police car. They weren't handcuffed, but it still felt to Matilda as if she had been caught red-handed doing something wrong. And

maybe she had. If her visa had been revoked, she was illegal. But Damian arrested? What was going on?

There was a sick feeling in her stomach, a feeling she recognized. Whatever was happening, she was sure that it was Colin's doing. She held Damian's hand tightly for the entire journey. Somehow, his presence made her feel comforted. Even in this situation, she knew that if she could stay with Damian, everything would be OK. If they were separated... she wasn't sure if her heart could stand it.

Her mind was spinning with possibilities, and she was terrified that Colin might have talked to her father,

maybe even shown him the photos. But whatever happened, she had evidence against him. If only she had had the time to copy it onto something.

“Excuse me,” she spoke up.

“Yes, ma’am?” the policeman asked, as Damian glanced at her curiously.

“I think that there’s been some misunderstanding,” she said.

“That’ll all be sorted out down at the station.”

“I understand, but I have reason to believe that someone is trying to hurt me. I have evidence against that person, but I’m afraid he’ll try to destroy it.”

“You can talk to the people at the station about that,” the policeman repeated.

“You don’t understand,” Matilda said.
“It has to be now. Listen to this message!”

She got out her phone and found the message, hitting play. The car was filled with the sound of Colin’s assault on her, and his confession to blackmail and attempted rape was crystal clear.

As the message played out, Damian’s face turned white with anger, and he held her hand so tight that it almost hurt. As the recording came to its end, the silence which filled the car was almost solid.

“I just wanted a witness to hear that,” Matilda said into the thick silence. “I think this man is trying to get to me, and I

wanted there to be a witness to what he tried to do to me. Colin Astor tried to rape me, and he blackmailed me.”

“...you’ll have to sort this out at the station,” the policeman said uncomfortably. “I don’t know anything that’s going on here.”

“I just wanted someone else to hear the evidence,” Matilda said quietly.

“Matilda, I promise I won’t let him hurt you ever again,” Damian said, his entire voice laced with suppressed rage. “I’m so, so sorry that you had to go through that. We’ll sort this out. I give you my word.”

When they finally reached the station, a group of policemen were waiting for

them. To Matilda, with their guns strapped to their waists, they looked like a firing squad.

“Matilda Stuart? Come with us, please,” a burly policeman said, his voice a deep baritone.

“Not without Damian,” she said stubbornly. “Neither of us have done anything wrong and I’ll not be separated.”

“Don’t worry, for now we’re just going to hold Mr. Knight. We need to ask you a few questions,” the policeman reassured her.

Matilda looked desperately at Damian, but he nodded, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Just go along with it for now,” he said.
“Tell the truth and we’ll sort it out.”

Unable to protest, Matilda allowed herself to be taken along a stark corridor, ending in a security checking area, much as you would find at an airport.

“We’re going to do a search,” the deep-voiced policeman said. “Please put any electronics aside.”

“But—my phone—,” protested Matilda.
“It will be returned to you later,” the policeman reassured her, plucking it from her hand and placing it in a plastic tray.

“No! I have to keep it. It’s the only protection I have,” she insisted.

“Against what?” a familiar voice said. Matilda spun around and came face to face with Colin.

Matilda felt all the blood rush from her face. She felt light-headed and almost fainted. It was only the superior smirk on Colin’s face which made her fight back and pull herself together. How had he found her? Why was he here? Was he really going to try and win, with the evidence she had against him? She had thought that she was safe, protected against his malice, but here he was, trying to wrap his clammy fingers around her throat once again.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her voice much smaller than she wanted

it to be.

“My job,” Colin replied easily. “Your father sent me here to protect you. Now that you’ve run off with some irresponsible, unemployed wastrel, it was my duty to inform him.”

“You...” Matilda’s mouth went dry.

“Of course he contacted the government immediately, and your visa was revoked. Since you left your job anyway, you are, as of now, illegal in this country.”

“But...” Matilda didn’t know what to say. He had her there. With all the excitement of the past few days, she hadn’t thought this far ahead. What could she do now? Claim asylum? It seemed

ridiculous even in her head. All she knew was that she had to stay out of Colin's clutches no matter what.

"Look—this man is dangerous," Matilda said, directing her comment to the policeman. Don't believe what he says. Just give me my phone and I can prove it. Where is it?"

She looked into the evidence tray where she had placed it moments before, but it was gone. The policeman looked just as confused as her, but one look at Colin's face told her the answer. He must have taken it when nobody else was looking. That was it. That was the only piece of evidence she had to defend herself with.

"Matilda!" she spun around as she heard

Damian's voice behind her. Another policeman was escorting him down the corridor, obviously assuming they had moved on by now. "You!" Damian snarled as he saw Colin. "I'll kill you, I swear!"

"Now, now." Colin's crisp English accent sounded mocking and overstated in the small town police station. "No need to get violent in front of these upstanding officers of the law."

Damian just scowled, his face glowing with hatred.

"What have you told the police?" Matilda asked, her voice trembling even though she tried to keep it steady.

"The truth. That you are to be escorted

back home. Your father himself signed a statement to that effect.”

“You talked to my father?” Matilda knew that her voice contained all the horror that she felt, and Colin grinned a vampiric grin.

“I explained the situation to him. But don’t worry, all I used was words.”

Matilda knew that this meant he hadn’t shown her father the photos. In the end, he hadn’t needed to. She had run away, an act that, out of context, seemed reckless and irresponsible. She had played straight into his hands, and now he was able to reserve his blackmail for a later occasion, if he chose. She felt stupid, humiliated and angry.

“He doesn’t have the right to revoke her visa,” Damian protested. “It’s true that she quit her job, but can’t she get a tourist visa? It doesn’t seem fair to just drag her out of the country.”

“Ah, she never told you?” Colin’s eyes lit up gleefully. “You’re not looking at just anyone. You’re looking at a royal princess. Her father is a prince, so he’s allowed to do pretty much anything he likes.”

“What?” Damian blinked, looking at Matilda as if he had never really seen her before. “You’re what?”

“A princess,” Colin repeated helpfully. “Or at least the daughter of a prince. She’s a member of the British Royal

Family.”

“A royal?” Damian repeated, still looking into Matilda’s face. She looked into his eyes miserably, and saw the conflict there.

“I wanted to tell you,” she said. “I just didn’t want you to define me by who my family is.”

“But you lied to me,” Damian said. “A royal...”

“I’m still me,” Matilda tried.

“And you’re still coming home,” Colin said decidedly. “Your father has organized a private plane at the nearest airport. Unfortunately I can’t accompany you, but I’ll be sending all my best wishes.”

Matilda knew that there was no way to protest. She was illegal, and there was no way to stay here without breaking some extremely serious laws. She looked at Damian, who still had an expression as if he had been punched in the stomach. Her heart felt empty, as if all his love for her had suddenly been grabbed and pulled out.

“Damian?” she asked. He looked at her, but his gray eyes were vacant.

“Ah yes, now Mr. Knight,” gloated Colin. “I asked the police to arrange an arrest warrant when I thought the worst and feared that you had abducted our Royal Highness. Now, if that was the truth of the matter, I will press charges

and make sure you never see the light of day again.”

“It’s not true,” Matilda shouted out, fear grabbing her once more. “I went with him willingly. I love him!”

“Manipulated,” Colin said sadly.

“Anyway, princess, your father would never allow you to attend the trial. If, however,” he addressed Damian again, “this was all a tragic mistake, I’ll be lenient.

“All you have to do is agree never to try and lay a finger on our princess ever again, and you’ll walk free. What will it be?”

Matilda looked desperately from Damian to Colin. It was a terrible

ultimatum—prison or never being able to see each other again. Either way was hopeless, but even so, somewhere in her heart she hoped that Damian would pull out a trump card. He was her white knight. It was the time for him to save her.

Without so much as looking at her, Damian said, “I’ll go free.”

“Just like that? You won’t try and make trouble?” Colin asked.

“She lied to me. How can I trust a woman who lies?” Damian said. “You can take her.”

Matilda gasped. It was as if an iron fist had torn through her chest to grab her still-beating heart and crush it into a

gooey pulp. Hot tears ran down her cheeks as she heard those cruel words spoken in his voice.

Just a few hours ago, they had been planning a new life together. Now, suddenly, it had all been ripped apart. Damian did not love her. He had run at the first sign of danger, reluctant to be with a royal. Couldn't he understand why she had hidden it?

But it was too late to reason with him. Given the all-clear from Colin, the spokesman of an English prince, the policemen were letting Damian go. He walked away from their scene, his broad shoulders tight, not looking back. It was all Matilda could do to hold back her

sobs. Her reason for going on had turned his back on her. It was over.

The next few hours went in a blur. She was driven to the airport, her suitcase with all her stuff in it miraculously packed and sent off with her, and she was whisked onto a private jet, the only passenger apart from a few slightly baffled personnel who were wondering why the craft had suddenly been commandeered to fly a young, upset woman to England.

Colin waved her goodbye as she stepped onto the airplane. His entire face was a picture of triumph. Maybe he had never got to sleep with her, but he had managed to ruin her life, scupper her

hopes, and he still had one final trump card to play whenever he felt like it.

As the plane took off, sending her back to England to feel the wrath of her father, all Matilda could think about was the set of Damian's shoulders as he had walked away from her forever.

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