



The Confession (The Body Work Trilogy Book 3)

By Sierra Kincade



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The hot and thrilling conclusion to the Body Work Trilogy, following The Masseuse and The Distraction

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Masseuse*

“Funny, sweet, suspenseful, and smoking hot! An indulgent escape from page one.”—Beth Kery, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Only for You*

About the Author

No Bio

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The Body Work Trilogy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One

It begins with an offering. I set the mood—dim the lights, start the music, tantalize you with scents that pull you to a different place, a thousand miles away from the office, or the traffic, or your family. I open my door, but you’re the one who strips. You’re the one who whimpers and begs. You’re the one who trusts.

In massage school they teach the technique of *effleurage*, how to increase blood flow to the muscles through a series of gentle touches with your fingertips or the palms of your hands. It’s the foreplay of a massage. The tease. The seduction.

It’s my specialty.

From there I locate the knots; it’s easy enough if you know where to feel. The body tells you just what it wants, guides you to that place of tension. Fights what it needs, until with a sigh or a groan, it accepts the inevitable. Submission.

Petrissage follows, where a deeper pressure is applied to the area. We’re not playing around anymore. We’re fucking. I’m working you with every trick I’ve got. I’m pushing you, pushing you, pushing you until you finally give me what I want.

Your pain.

Because that’s all I have room for now.

* * *

My hands made soft, feathering strokes over his trapezius, afterplay from the deep-tissue work I'd just finished. I didn't remember what his name was. It didn't matter. He'd gotten what he came for, and I'd given him my best.

Which, admittedly, wasn't stellar. Not that he'd noticed.

For the first time during our fifty-minute session, I took a good look at him. The thick muscles of his shoulders were well-defined and made a gradual slope down his back, beneath the sheet hiding what I guessed was a very nice ass. His arms rested, palms unfurled, at his sides, and his dark brown hair was a little too long. It curled where his collar would have landed. He'd requested a focus on his shoulders, and therefore hadn't turned chest-up during the session.

I think he'd told me he was a baseball player or something. Minor league, maybe? It seemed to me the pros probably had their own team massage therapy staff, and this guy had shown up at the salon on a referral from one of my regulars.

In any case, he looked like he could have been a professional baseball player. And as my gaze lingered on the cut muscles of his upper arms, my mind wandered.

Look how hard I am.

The voice in my head brought a sharp ache in the deepest part of my belly. I shuddered, blinking back the wavering image before my eyes. Placing my flattened hands on each side of the client's spine, I focused on his pale skin. It was smooth and cool, like polished marble. Too pale to trigger the familiar lust heating inside me.

You want me to fuck your mouth.

I withdrew my hands quickly, as if the coolness had burned me. My breath came in one hard rasp. The weight that had settled in my chest for the past two and a half months seemed to liquefy, sliding down through my breasts, making my nipples tighten and tingle.

The man moved. Just a slight adjustment, but it snapped my focus back in place. I returned my oiled hands to his slick back, moving lower, to where his waist tapered. I could feel another man's body now. Feel my nails digging into his back as he growled in my ear.

Push back and fuck yourself on my dick.

Okay, moving back up now. Up and up and up, until I reached his neck. Gently, I stretched his muscles and tipped his head from side to side. His hair brushed against the back of my knuckles.

I closed my eyes.

I could feel him inside of me. The fullness only he could give me. My hands around his neck, fingers spearing through his hair. He was rocking against me, touching places deep inside that felt so good I thought I might die if he stopped. His mouth drifted to my collarbone, his rough stubble scraping my sensitive skin.

I love you so much it fucking hurts.

The man groaned, and I was thrust back into the present—into the massage room at Rave with the scent of cinnamon to sharpen my senses.

I was pulling his hair.

Pulling it, like I did when Alec made me come.

Realizing my mistake, I released him slowly, then gave him another few pulls just to make sure the move looked deliberate. I checked the small clock on the counter by the oils. Thank God it was the end of the session.

“How do you feel?”

I didn’t care; I needed to get the hell out.

“Fucking awesome.” His voice was muffled through the headrest.

“Take your time getting up. I’ll get you some water and meet you outside the door when you’re dressed.”

He grunted a response. Maybe he said something else, I don’t know. I was out of there, door shut behind me, before I could take another breath.

In less than a minute I was in the bathroom. It smelled like the lobby—fresh with the natural products we used in all our services—and had a stack of rolled towels on a wooden tray beside the sink.

I turned to face the wall and pressed my cheek against the cool tile. I was feverish. Sick. I had to be sick. That’s why the perspiration had dewed across my forehead, why my whole body felt like it was on fire.

Touch yourself.

No.

I squeezed my eyes shut. My heart pounded against my ribs like a jackhammer. One hand flattened against the tiles, as I fought off the feel of him behind me, shoving me roughly against the wall. Pulling up this flimsy skirt I wore and tearing off my panties. He wouldn’t be gentle. Not after all this time.

Feel how deep I am.

The throb between my legs was insistent now. He’d see I didn’t need much warming up; I was already hot and slick for him. His fingers would slide right in to the knuckle. I pressed one open hand against my right breast, trying to still the need, but it only served to increase the pressure.

Let go, baby.

“Stop,” I said aloud. I pushed off the wall, gulping down air. Facing the mirror, I turned on the cold water and splashed my face. It stung; every inch of my body was burning.

“Stop it, Anna.” I stared at my reflection. The wet mascara dripped down my cheeks. Good thing it was the only makeup I’d put on this morning. It had been a while since I’d worn much more than that.

Alec and I were over. I hadn’t seen him since I’d said good-bye to him the night Trevor Marshall, aka William MacAfee, had tried to throw me off a bridge. Apart from the time I’d come home to find my things from his apartment on my front stoop, he’d attempted zero contact.

But it wasn’t like he’d disappeared. I heard his name on the news reports on the radio. I saw his face on

television and in the papers. Alec Flynn. Maxim Stein's body man. Key witness in the biggest white-collar trial since Bernie Madoff.

Alec Flynn. The man that I loved.

Used to love. I didn't love him anymore. I refused to. He'd endangered my life, and the lives of the people I cared about. If Alec and I had never been together, I wouldn't have been kidnapped, carjacked, or nearly tossed off a bridge. My best friend, Amy, never would have been targeted to use against us, and her daughter, Paisley, never would have been in danger.

Alec Flynn was trouble, and I had moved on.

Which is why it really pissed me off to look in the mirror and see a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I was thinner than I'd ever been. My cheekbones were more severe, and I now wore a size six, something that would have at one time warranted a celebratory parade. I wasn't trying to lose weight—food was bland. My life was bland. I went through the motions from the time I woke up until the time I closed my eyes at night.

And punctuating that blandness were times like these. Times where I could still see him, or hear him saying my name. Times when I imagined us sitting together on my couch eating pizza. When I could almost feel him making love to me.

And times when I wondered what August felt like in Colorado. Or Alaska. Or fucking Greenland, because they surely needed masseuses there just like anywhere else.

I told myself those times would fade.

I was still waiting for that to happen.

Breathe.

I was at work. I had to get my client. Alec was off-limits. I'd promised myself I would be there for Amy and Paisley after learning they'd been abused by Amy's ex, and Alec had compromised that. Not by choice, but they'd been hurt because of us all the same. It would never happen again.

Besides, if he'd really wanted me, he would have fought for me.

I scrubbed the mascara from beneath my eyes, and emerged into the hallway. My client was leaning against the wall outside of the room wearing the black tracksuit he'd arrived in, and as the door closed behind me, his gaze lifted.

His smile was dazzling, I'm sure.

"Your water," I said, touching my forehead. "I'm so sorry. Let me get that for you."

"It's all right," he said, pushing off the wall. He was big enough to block my path. Tall—at least a head above me—and broad. Like a baseball player. Like Alec.

Not like Alec. Not everything in this whole goddamn world circled back to Alec Flynn.

“Well, make sure you keep up the fluids today,” I said. “Your body releases a lot of toxins during massage.”

He smirked, and my gaze lowered to his mouth. Nice lips. Some freckles on his nose. Friendly eyes. He was younger than me, but cute. All-American cute.

“Anna, right?”

I took a not-so-subtle step back, which he didn’t seem to notice.

“That’s right.”

“What are you doing tonight? We should go get”—he smirked again—“*fluids*.”

“Wow.” I grinned to offset my tone. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Naw.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, obviously expecting to get my number. “First time. How’d it go?”

“Really smooth.” I tried to angle us toward the exit. “And it’s a sweet offer, but I’m busy tonight.”

“How about tomorrow? We’re on a home stand until Friday.”

“I . . .” *should say yes. I should go out with him.* There was nothing holding me back except the huge lump in my throat.

I went for the lie. The truth was too unbelievable. What was I going to say? *Those guns you’re packing aren’t even close to big enough to carry my baggage.*

“I’m sort of seeing someone right now.”

I watched my tip go up in smoke as the hand holding his phone lowered to his side.

“That doesn’t sound too serious.” He leaned forward, as if we weren’t the only ones in the hallway. I breathed in a cologne, something spicy that blended with the cinnamon oil he’d chosen for the massage. “Like I said, I’m gone on Friday.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“Now *that*,” I said, “was *really* smooth.”

He slouched as I led him to the door. He’d actually expected that proposition to work. And maybe it would have, if I wasn’t swearing off men for the rest of eternity.

Before he left, I placed my hand on his biceps, but though it was firm and I liked hard muscles, it didn’t do a thing for my pulse.

“Thanks for the offer . . .” *Name?* I couldn’t remember. “Now’s just not a good time.”

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but the next moment Amy swept in through the door, wearing a black smock accented at every available location by silver hair clips. Her platinum blond hair was down today, falling in a severe line just below her chin, and her bangs were swept across her forehead. She took one look at the baseball player and waggled her eyebrows at me.

“Hi, there,” he said to her, with that same twinkle in his eyes.

I snorted. He didn’t waste any time.

After escorting him back to the front desk, I returned to the massage room to clean up. Amy was already there, sniffing the sheets.

“Oh my God, he even smells good,” she said.

“So you go out with him,” I said. “He’s leaving town Friday.” I gave her an exaggerated wink.

We both knew she wouldn’t. She was secretly holding out for Mike, Alec’s best friend.

“He actually said that?” She laughed. “At least he’s honest.”

She helped me strip the table and toss the crumpled sheets into a pile on the floor.

“You could totally hit that, you know,” she said.

“*Hit that?* What are we, sixteen-year-old boys?”

She giggled. “I’m just sayin’. He’s hot. You’re hot. He’s not looking for serious. You’re . . .”

An all-too-familiar silence settled between us.

“Definitely not looking for serious,” I finished quietly. “Or anything, for that matter.”

She picked up the pile of sheets while I wiped down the counter and replaced the bottles of lotion and oils.

“Maybe something casual is just what you need.” She didn’t look up.

My jaw clenched, and I forced it to relax. Once, casual was all I did. No one got too close—romantic or otherwise. Now the idea seemed incomprehensible. Alec Flynn had made everything in my life dead serious.

I smiled, because the last thing I wanted was for Amy to feel guilty over my breakup. Not after everything she’d been through.

“I have everything I need. You and Paisley and my new, favorite roommate.”

After Alec and I had broken up, I’d finally told my dad everything that had happened with Trevor and his hit man, Reznik, on the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. He’d listened quietly, expressing only minimal concern. I thought I’d dodged a bullet until he showed up on my doorstep the next morning, complete with his Great Dane, Mug, and no plans of ever letting me leave his sight again.

Amy chuckled. “He might as well just get a place here.”

“But how would he keep tabs on me twenty-four/seven that way?”

“True.” She sighed. “I guess you’ll just have to get a bigger house and live out your days as a spinster dog lady.”

“There’s just one dog.”

“So far,” she said. “Just you wait.”

She followed me as I carried the sheets to the laundry room, just as she would accompany me to the front desk for my next client, and magically appear in the back room when it was time for my lunch break. I sometimes wondered if she thought she was being sneaky. Or if Marcos, the cop who’d been assigned to tail me three months ago, remembered the danger had left with Alec when he randomly sent me text reminders asking me to check in. At least my dad didn’t try to hide the fact that he was keeping an eye on me. He had practically reverted to holding my hand before I crossed the street.

“Why don’t you guys come over for dinner tonight,” she said. “I’ll make something glorious from a box. I might even get crazy and throw some corndogs in the microwave.”

I knew this wasn’t an idle threat. Amy’s freezer was always stocked with last-minute meals.

“As appealing as that sounds, Dad has a case he’s working on.” He’d already informed me he had some PI work tonight—he’d started taking on a few private clients after his recent retirement from the police force in Cincinnati. He’d even managed to snag a couple of cases since coming to Tampa last month.

Amy handed me the detergent after I shoved the sheets into the washing machine.

“Well you should come by yourself then.”

The truth was, I’d been looking forward to some time alone. Maintaining the “everything’s great” façade was exhausting.

“Actually, I . . .” I hunched over the washer. “You already knew he’d be busy, didn’t you?”

She inhaled, cheery as an ad for kids’ cereal, and acted as though she hadn’t heard me.

“When do you get off? Five?”

“Something tells me you already checked what time I get off.”

“You could be over by five thirty. I’ll rent a movie if your dad’s pulling a late one.”

“Amy.”

“All right.” She rubbed her hands together, avoiding my gaze. “Good talk. See ya at five thirty.”

“Amy.” I blocked her from leaving the room.

She stayed tense while I sighed.

“Anna, just let us,” she said quietly. “Just for a while.”

How long? I wanted to ask. They’d been doing it since the night on the bridge. Two and a half months of constant *support*. I’d left Alec so everyone could move on, unafraid, leaving the chaos he’d brought into our lives behind, but instead they’d put everything on hold to watch me like I was a ticking time bomb.

I should have been protecting Amy after everything that had happened, not the other way around.

But as she faced me, green eyes rounding even as her thin lips pursed, I knew there was no turning her down.

“I have a CASA thing at five thirty,” I said. “I’ll be over before seven.”

Two

The Children’s Museum ran a special program for foster kids after hours on Wednesday nights. This month they’d brought in local artists to give lessons. It wasn’t technically a Court-Appointed Special Advocate event, but it was a good chance for me to check in on Jacob, the first boy I’d been assigned to.

The parking garage was next to the main building, but I took a metered spot on the street. It wasn’t that I was afraid of the dark, but I wasn’t stupid. Parking garages were prime places for predators to attack, and I didn’t exactly have a great track record.

After putting my neon blue sewing machine of a car in park, my fingers grazed absently over the small button hidden beneath the center console. Alec had installed the “kill switch” days after he’d gotten out of prison. It had saved my life once. Now it was one of the few reminders I had left that he’d ever really cared about me.

Grabbing my purse, I left the car. The air was still muggy, the result of an afternoon shower, and immediately made my skin glisten. I had been told this was the hottest August in years, a slow burn in a relentless summer.

The traffic light turned green up ahead, and the cars zipped past, drawing my gaze across the street to the trendy restaurants that lined the block.

My heart thudded to a stop.

Behind the wall of windows making up the front of a tapas bar was a man, seated at one of the tables. He wore a baseball cap, but even from here I could see a hint of dark hair that curled out from beneath it. Though he was turned to the side, it was obvious his shoulders were broad by the thick girth of his upper arms. His legs were too long for the little table he sat at; his knees hit the underside, even with his feet stretched beneath the empty chair opposite him.

He was staring at me.

“Alec.”

Saying his name aloud made something in my chest twist even as it made my mouth water.

At the blare of a horn, I jumped back. I hadn’t realized I’d stepped into the street, but even as I backed into my car I felt the urge to lean forward again. There was a pull coming from inside that restaurant, like the whole building was magnetized.

When I looked again, Alec was gone.

I didn’t think about it. If I had, I would have told myself to go into the museum and say hi to the kids. Instead, I waited for a break in the traffic and raced across the lanes. Even as my hand gripped the door handle, I could feel my blood begin to buzz.

Alec was here. He’d seen me. He was close.

I jogged past the hostess without a word and turned the corner, but the table where Alec had sat was empty.

“Just one, ma’am?” The hostess caught up with me, and as she did, the sounds of the restaurant tumbled past the rushing in my ears. Clanking dishes. Silverware hitting the floor. Laughter and conversation.

My chest went cold.

“N-no, I’m fine,” I said. She continued to watch me as I scanned the main seating area. “There was a man sitting there a few minutes ago. Do you know where he went?”

Her brows lifted. “I haven’t seated anyone there since lunch.”

I looked again at the empty table, feeling the color rise up my neck. Great. I was hallucinating him everywhere now. And even if he *had* been real, what was my plan once I’d gotten here? *Hey Alec, how’ve you been? Anyone you know been tossed off a bridge lately?* This wasn’t a margarine commercial. We weren’t running to each other in slow motion across fields of daisies.

“Sorry,” I told her. “My mistake.”

I’d promised myself I would stay clear of him. For Amy and Paisley. For my own safety. I told myself this like he’d been incorrigible, unable to leave me alone.

That was most definitely *not* the case.

I hadn’t changed my number, and he hadn’t called once. I lived at the same apartment, worked at the same salon. He knew where to find me, and he hadn’t.

There was nothing quite as shitty as realizing you’re easy to get over.

It was time I got over Alec Flynn.

I crossed the street, the numbness descending back over my shoulders like the heavy air. I was grateful for it. It was easier to feel nothing than to be constantly aware of the empty pit he’d left inside of me.

The signs were easy enough to follow once I entered the building. The lobby was clean and painted by a rainbow of colors reflected through the stained glass windows. The dinosaur exhibit in the main room had been pushed aside to create more floor area and thirty or so kids sprawled out across plastic tarps, surrounded by stacks of newspapers.

It didn’t take long to find Jacob. He was the one with two fingers in his mouth, whistling loud enough to crack someone’s eardrums.

Making my way across the floor, I waved at his foster mom, chatting with a few other women on the far side of the room. Squares of newspaper immediately stuck to my shoes, a result of the paste that was being used to papier-mâché balloons.

Jacob’s black hair was sticking straight out on one side. He’d probably touched it with his pastey hands. He gave me a lopsided smile and pretended to throw his heavy balloon, smothered with newspaper, straight at me.

“Did you hear me whistle?” he asked.

“I’m pretty sure people in New York heard you whistle,” I answered, rubbing my ear. “I have a name, you know. People usually save whistling for dogs.”

He knelt back on the ground beside his little sister, six-year-old Sammy, who was making neat stacks of newspaper rather than attending to her balloon. Her kinky hair was in two puff balls on the top of her head, and her eyebrows were furrowed in concentration.

“Stanley showed me how,” he said.

Stanley was his foster father at the placement where I’d fought for him to live with his sister. I smiled. Maybe things were crap in my life, but knowing Jacob was happy, and that I’d played a part in that, took some of the weight off my shoulders.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“Hot air balloons,” he said. “Mr. Rodriguez is an artist. We’re making masks like that one.” He pointed to the front of the room, where an elderly man with a long, white beard was showing an intricate tiger mask to a young girl.

“Awesome,” I said. “So how’s everything going?”

He painted his balloon with enough white paste to drown a horse and then haphazardly stuck pieces of newspaper to it.

“Good,” he said. “Lucia and Stanley want to adopt us.”

I crouched beside him, finding a clear space that didn’t look completely sticky.

“I heard. What do you think about that?” Being adopted was a big deal. Knowing someone wanted you—really wanted you—was both enormously validating, and its own type of betrayal. I’d never felt like I’d let my birth mother down more than the day my dad said he wanted to make me his.

“It’s good,” he said. “My mom gave up custody.”

I knew that, too, but played dumb so he could tell me about it.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Lucia says we don’t have to see her again if we don’t want to.”

“And do you want to?”

Part of me wished I could see my birth mother again, if only for a few minutes. I’d forgiven her for loving the drugs more than me a long time ago, but sometimes I still wanted to ask her why she’d never tried harder to be my mom. Why she’d never fought for me.

Was I not worth fighting for?

“Nope,” said Jacob definitively. “She makes me and Sissy feel bad.”

I nodded. “Yeah. But I bet there was a time she didn’t make you feel bad. And if you’re ever thinking about that, and wondering what she’s like, you can talk to Lucia about seeing her.”

“I won’t.”

I’d probably said the same thing.

“Okay,” I said. “Should we celebrate the adoption?”

Jacob looked up. “Tacos?”

I snorted. “Sure. When it’s all done, let’s go get tacos.” I turned to Jacob’s sister. “Hey Sammy, nice stacking.”

She smiled at me, and I grinned back. She didn’t do that much, and I’d take what I could get. Glancing down, she picked up the newspaper on top and handed it to me.

“You wanna do craps with us?”

“She means crafts,” said Jacob.

“I would hope so,” I said. But before I could say yes, I looked down at the paper and stalled, because staring back at me was Alec’s face.

He was sitting in a courtroom, hands folded on the desk before him. His hair had grown out a little since I’d seen him, but was still kept smoothed back behind his ears. He was wearing a suit and tie, and looked like someone had died.

Key Witness Has Questionable Past said the caption beneath the photo. The rest of the article had been cut away. The date was still at the top, though. It was from four days ago—the first day of the trial.

Resentment at the quote surged through me before I remembered that he wasn’t mine to defend.

I’d known when the trial had begun of course. I’d counted down the days until it started, along with half of Tampa. But because of my ties to Alec, to Maxim, to all of it, I’d tried to steer clear as much as possible. I didn’t get the newspaper. I’d turned the Internet off on my phone. When I went to restaurants or the gym, I made sure to position myself as far away from the televisions as possible.

And yet Alec still landed right in my lap.

“You coming to the dinner?” Jacob asked. “Lucia says I gotta wear a tie.”

“I got a dress,” said Sammy. “It’s pink.”

“Nice,” I told her. The dinner Jacob was referring to was a formal CASA fund-raising event this Friday. The program was staffed by volunteers, but training and raising awareness didn’t come cheap. This was a chance to reach out to the donors with deep pockets and show them just how important the advocates were to the kids.

“ ‘Course I’m going to be there,” I said.

“You going to bring your *boyfriend*?”

I stiffened. “You don’t want to be my date?”

“Ew, gross. You’re, like, thirty.”

“Not quite,” I said. “But thanks.”

I’d actually asked Amy to come with me. It would have been nice to dress up for a date. Wear something long and pretty he could have peeled off at the end of the night. But I couldn’t picture anyone but Alec in that role, and well, no Alec.

Amy would have fun. She didn’t get a lot of chances to go to fancy events.

“Hey, you gotta meet Brendan,” said Jacob, pulling me from my thoughts. With that, he was up like a shot and weaving through the kids on the floor. Less than a minute later he was leading over a boy with sun-kissed hair, recently chopped short I’d guess, based on the tan line around his scalp. He took one look at me and his thin mouth fixed into a frown.

“This is Anna,” said Jacob. “She can help you out.”

“Jacob,” I said. “We talked about this.”

Since I’d spoken to the judge and helped Jacob get a placement with his sister, he was constantly trying to set me up with other kids who were in need of transfers.

“It’s okay,” said Jacob. “Brendan’s cool. He’s got a brother in Sarasota that needs to move here with him, though.”

I hummed and made room for the other boy, who sat no less than five feet away from me.

“It doesn’t exactly work that way,” I said. “A lot goes into a placement. You know that.”

“I told you,” I heard Brendan mumble. The newspaper made a crumpling sound as I clenched the edges of it. I wanted to find his file and see just what was going on with this brother in Sarasota.

“Do you have a court-appointed advocate?” I asked Brendan. He shook his head without looking up.

I smoothed out Alec’s picture, unable to set it aside to be ripped and painted.

“Is your foster mom here?” I asked, but even as I did I wished I hadn’t. There was a reason I hadn’t taken any more cases on since Jacob. I’d been asked. Not just by kids Jacob had spoken to, but by social workers and other CASA volunteers I’d met.

I was finishing things out with Jacob, and when he and his sister were secure, and Amy and Paisley were back on their feet, I was moving on.

Three

I know I’d said I would go straight to Amy’s, but somehow I ended up a few blocks away from the Children’s Museum, at a park overlooking the Bay. It was quiet this time of night; only one other car took up a spot at the far end of the lot, but the occasional dog-walker and Rollerblader passed by on the path before me. The sun had burrowed into the clouds on the horizon, throwing splashes of pink and gold across the sky, and the water was flat and calm.

Stupid autopilot had led me here more than I cared to admit. The view was beautiful, but I'd known it would be even before I'd come here the first time. Behind me was Alec's high-rise apartment. This was *his* view. I was just renting it for a little while.

It wasn't like he could see me. Not that he'd be looking anyway.

I aimed all the air-conditioning vents in my direction and removed the square of newspaper with Alec's picture that I'd taken from arts and crafts. I traced my fingertip over his shoulder, remembering too well the feel of the hard muscles beneath this suit jacket. *Questionable Past*, the caption said. Bastards. They didn't even know him.

I turned the picture over, realizing a second later that I'd placed him facedown in my lap. The images came on before I could stop them, burning past the walls of my memory. His head nestled between my thighs. His thick, chocolate brown hair gripped in my fists. The feel of his tongue, gliding over my hidden places.

I love your sweet little cunt.

I snatched the paper, folded it, and tucked it into my wallet.

My phone beeped, and I knew it would be from Amy even before I picked it up. Sure enough, I was right, and shot back a quick response that I'd be there in ten.

Keeping my foot on the brake, I put the car in reverse, but found that I'd been boxed in by a white sedan. The windows were tinted, so I couldn't see who was behind the wheel. Probably some tourist—the car was too clean to be anything but a rental.

"Come on." I tapped my horn lightly, but the car didn't move.

A single drop of fear trickled down the back of my neck. I gripped the Mace on my key chain as my gaze shot around the parking lot. The closest car was half the length of a football field away. I couldn't tell if there was someone inside, but there was enough traffic on the road that ran between the park and Alec's apartment building to catch someone's attention.

I couldn't see through the windows, but I got the distinct impression someone was watching me.

"Five, four, three, two . . ." I laid on the horn. Five seconds was more than enough after all the time I'd given them.

The car jerked forward, as if it were a live thing and I'd just woken it from a deep slumber. Then, before I could get a read on the license plate, it made a tight loop and peeled out into traffic. A car swerved to avoid getting hit, and I could hear the driver's angry yells across the street.

The threat was gone, but a wariness remained in its wake. I didn't know what that was about, but I didn't have a good feeling about it.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later I was greeted by Amy, standing outside on her landing while I trudged up the stairs.

"You're late," she called to me.

"I decided to take that client up on his offer," I replied when I reached the second floor.

She tried to hide a laugh as she padded back inside, barefoot. “Either he’s really fast, or you’re really good.”

“I can’t believe it’s even a question,” I said. “What do you think they teach us in massage school?”

She spun back so hard her bangs swung over her eyes. “I knew it. Tell me everything.”

“For a price,” I offered.

“Hamburger Helper?”

“Sold.”

“Hi Anna.” Paisley kneeled on a seat at the kitchen table coloring a picture, but as I sat beside her, she met my gaze and smiled. It took a moment for me to respond. Six months ago Amy’s little five-year-old would barely acknowledge my presence; now she was making eye contact and initiating conversation. That therapy Amy and she had started a couple of months ago was really paying off.

She twirled a braid around her finger and passed me a purple crayon.

“Hi,” I said finally. “How was school today?”

“Fine,” she said. “I saw a frog. And then I saw a rabbit. And then I petted them.”

“Wow,” I said. “Way better than what I did at work.”

She smiled and returned to her artwork. She was drawing people, standing outside a purple house. A woman with yellow hair—her mom, I guessed. Two kids, and a man with a huge smile and biceps added onto his stick arms.

“Who’s this?” I asked, pointing to one of the kids.

“That’s me,” Paisley said. “And that’s Chloe. And that’s her daddy, Mike.”

“She’s just drawing people she knows,” Amy said, without turning around from the microwave. But I’d seen her go still, and knew she was surprised.

“Uh-huh,” I said.

Amy had a huge crush on Mike, though from what I understood, neither of them had taken a step forward since the bridge incident two months ago. His mother, Iris, lived upstairs and watched the girls sometimes. Apart from the occasional hello, they rarely spoke.

At least that’s what Amy had told me. I had a hard time believing Paisley would draw family pictures of a guy she only knew as her BFF’s father.

I set the table while Amy served up something that looked a little like high-sodium dog throw up with noodles, along with some microwaved green beans.

“So,” said Amy. “I ran into Alec. How was your CASA thing?”

I dropped my fork.

“You *what*?”

“Here.” Paisley had picked up my fork off the floor and stuck it back into my hand.

Amy cleared her throat. “Your foster kid, he’s good?”

“When?” I thought of how I’d seen Alec across the street from the Children’s Museum. It had been a mistake, the hostess had confirmed it. But it seemed weird that I’d been imagining him when he was actually with my best friend.

“A while ago.” Her gaze flicked to Paisley. She reached for a green bean with her fingers and began tearing it into pieces.

“How long’s a while ago?”

“A month . . . or . . . or maybe June . . . ish.”

This time I carefully set my fork down. I took a deep breath, but my fists were already clenched. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He, um . . . asked that I not.”

I pushed back in my chair, wishing she’d just stab me with her butter knife rather than keep going. She’d seen Alec. He’d told her not to mention it to me.

She’d done as he asked.

I felt the sting of betrayal, but I wasn’t nearly as mad at her as I was at him. I’d ended things with him because Amy and Paisley had been dragged, unwillingly, into his world. And now he thought he could contact them? That he could continue to endanger them?

“He shouldn’t be talking to you. You need to stay away from him.”

“It’s okay,” said Amy, raising her hands now. I became aware of Paisley’s watchful eyes and lowered my voice.

“What did he want?”

“He wanted to know how we were.”

We. Not me. Amy and Paisley. I crossed my arms over my chest.

She fidgeted. “He sent someone over to install a security alarm.”

I remembered when that had happened. It was just a couple of weeks after the bridge incident. I hadn’t even thought to ask Amy whose idea it was to put in the alarm. I’d assumed she was just being more careful on account of what had happened.

“He . . .” She plastered a tight smile on her face. “He offered to pay for our therapy.”

“Why?” I asked. “He doesn’t have any money.” It was a stupid thing to say, but I was grasping at straws. He was trying to take care of my friends, but it wasn’t his place. It was *my* place. That’s why I’d left him.

She shrugged, looking sheepish.

“I told him I didn’t need help.”

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead in my hands. “He’s the reason all this happened. You wouldn’t need a security system if it wasn’t for him.”

It sounded like I was trying to convince her. I shouldn’t have had to; she was the victim, for God’s sake, and if anyone knew the signs of an unhealthy relationship it should have been her.

“But we’d still need therapy, you said so yourself. We like it, too, don’t we Pais?”

“Yeah,” said Paisley, spitting out a green bean in her napkin.

“He was really sorry,” Amy said quietly. “He just wanted to make sure we were okay.”

There was that *we* again. I wanted to be glad, but the thought of him looking out for them softened me, and that made me feel weak. It made me wonder if he’d asked about me. If he cared how I was doing. If he missed me like I missed him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before.” Amy reached for my forearm and gave it a light squeeze. “It’s been eating me up. I just saw you with that guy today and thought maybe you needed some closure. Before you, you know, got back out there.”

I didn’t recall telling her I was dying to get back in the dating game.

“I don’t need closure,” I said. “It’s over. I’m fine.”

“I said that, too, once,” she said. And it made me feel a hundred times worse because I didn’t like her comparing her abusive ex to Alec, no matter how crazy things had gotten.

“Are you still going to marry him?” asked Paisley.

Now it was Amy’s turn to drop a fork.

It took a second to figure out why she would ask this, but when she did, I slumped. At the beginning of summer Amy had thrown a picnic. It was the first time she and Mike had formally met, and sometime between tag and cheeseburgers, Alec had told Paisley and Chloe he was going to marry me.

It had been a joke, of course.

“That wasn’t for real,” I told Paisley. I looked up at Amy. “It was just something he said.”

She chewed on her lip, looking worried.

The knock at the door came with perfect timing.

“I’ll get it!” Paisley slid off her chair and bounded around the corner.

“Peephole!” Amy reminded her. There was a step stool beside the entryway so that Paisley could see out. Even before Trevor Marshall had kidnapped Amy, she’d been tough on safety, but now she was even more vigilant. She left early every morning now to walk Paisley all the way to her classroom, and had even sprung for a children’s cell phone to be added on her account.

Maybe that was Alec's idea, too.

"It's Chloe's daddy!" Paisley squealed.

Amy jolted out of her seat. A second later she combed her fingers through her hair, looking worried.

"You look good," I said.

She flashed her teeth at me.

"All clear."

With a grateful nod, she smoothed down the front of her T-shirt and went to open the door.

"She make it?" I heard Mike ask.

"Yes. Yeah, she's here right now," Amy whispered.

"You aren't talking about me, are you?" I called.

A second later, Mike popped his head around the corner. He grinned broadly, a flash of white teeth against his beautiful dark skin.

"Anna!"

I waved. "And yet you still look surprised to see me sitting here."

He crossed the kitchen and kissed me on the cheek. Amy frowned slightly behind him. She'd never say so, but it bothered her that he was so easygoing with me. He never even gave her a hug to say hello.

I imagined he thought he wouldn't be able to stop if he started things out that way, but of course Amy saw it as a lack of interest.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"All right," I said, and then sighed. "Amy was just telling me she ran into Alec the other day."

I only stumbled a little over his name. Smooth.

"A while ago," Amy corrected. "Several months ago."

I wasn't sure why she needed to make such a clear distinction, but she did.

Mike glanced at her, then back to me. His light brown eyes narrowed with concern.

"Yes," I said. "Contrary to popular belief, I don't turn rabid at the first mention of his name."

"My bad," he said. "I'm not sure he could say the same about you."

"Did you want something to eat?" Amy interrupted.

My gaze had lifted to Mike. "Did he ask about me?" I pretended to laugh. "Jesus, is this high school?"

Mike chewed his top lip, as if thinking of what to say.

“He’s always going to care about you.”

My breath came out in a huff. “Why does that sound like there should be a *but* . . . attached?” My heart felt like it was strung on a wire, waiting for him to fill me in. Had Alec gotten over me? Moved on? As sick as the thought made me, I couldn’t believe it was true. Not after what Mike had said about not being able to mention my name.

Mike turned back to Amy. “He’s just got a lot going on.”

Right. With the trial. Of course.

Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask.

“So how’s the trial going?”

Mike made a sound of disgust. “He hasn’t even testified yet and he’s taking a beating. Max Stein’s attorneys are using every opportunity to tear him up. Making him look like just another thug.” He shook his head. “They’ll bring out the pitchforks next.”

My chest ached. I couldn’t help the feeling that I should have been with him through this, standing beside him, offering what little comfort or distraction I could. The only reason he was there in court now was because he’d thought he’d needed to be a better man for me. I’d supported his decision to step into the fire, and then I’d left him there alone to burn.

“Hasn’t Stein run out of money yet? Last I heard, all his fancy lawyers were making him broke.”

One of his fancy lawyers—the same woman who’d covertly let Alec in on the little secret that he might just take control of the company if Maxim was convicted of fraud—had dropped that information on us.

“Not yet,” said Mike. “Alec said that he’s been chartering one of his private jets out to old oil company clients for money. It’s a plane he gifted his wife years ago, so she’s the one getting paid.”

“And in turn paying his legal bills.”

“Right,” said Mike. “She needs him to win so she doesn’t get screwed when she divorces him.”

Frankly, I was surprised Maxim’s wife, whoever she was, hadn’t already kicked him to the curb.

“Wish I had some friends who would rent *my* private plane for a little spending money,” said Amy.

“Can Chloe come over?” Paisley asked. She’d been quiet until now, and I’d almost forgotten she was here. I looked at her, big round eyes pointed up at Mike, and I remembered why Alec and I were apart.

I would never hurt her. And I would never hurt Amy.

I stood, and turned to my best friend. “Tomorrow night’s the fund-raiser. I’ll pick you up at six?”

“Tomorrow? No.” She shook her head. “Tomorrow’s Friday.”

“Right.” My stomach was starting to pitch. I needed to go outside, get some air.

She looked at Mike. “Tomorrow night’s the girls’ play at school. Shit. *Shoot*,” she corrected. “I thought . . . I honestly thought it was Saturday.” She raced to the refrigerator and snatched the invitation I’d given her.

“No,” she said. “No, no, no. I have an amazing dress.”

“Let’s hear about it,” said Mike.

She turned bright red from her scalp down.

“It’s all right,” I said. Air. Anytime now. I went for my purse, leaving my dinner barely touched on the kitchen table.

“Come to the play,” said Mike. “Ditch the fund-raiser. Hang out with us. Amy’s going to wear an amazing dress.”

“Can’t,” I told him. “I already told my client I’d be there. They’re bringing out all the kids the program has helped to give puppy dog eyes to the rich donors.”

Mike snorted. “You shouldn’t go by yourself.”

I snatched my purse, my chest constricting more by the second. “I’ll bring my dad. Thanks for dinner, Amy.”

“Let me walk you . . .”

“See you tomorrow,” I told Amy, cutting Mike off.

With that, I was out the door, swallowing huge gasps of humid night air as I jogged down the steps.

Yeah, I was fine talking about Alec. Totally and completely fine.

Four

I’d already gotten three texts from Amy asking if I was all right by the time I got back to my apartment. I stood in the threshold and texted that I was fine, and good luck with Mike, hoping that she saw my sudden exit as a setup and not a meltdown.

My place was small, and still sparsely decorated. I hadn’t bothered to put much up on the walls, and the boxes Alec had sent over from his place were still full, shoved into the corner of my bedroom.

Not much point in unpacking if I was just going to repack in a few weeks anyway. I didn’t know where I was going yet, but something would come to me. It always did. The only difference now was that the idea of moving was exhausting, where before it had always calmed me down.

It was probably a sign I’d stayed here too long.

A groaning came from the little couch against the wall, and I stepped into the living room to face my father, lying flat on his back, his socked feet dangling over the couch arm. He had a wet towel over his eyes, and a panting Great Dane under one hand on the floor.

“You all right?” I asked.

“I’m sick as a dog,” he said. “No offense, Mug.”

Mug lifted his big black head, as if just noticing for the first time that I was there, and then lay back down with a heavy sigh.

“You should have called me,” I said. “I thought you were on some big stakeout tonight.”

“Taking pictures of men cheating on their wives doesn’t exactly qualify as *big stakeout* material.”

“So says the hotshot detective.” I reached for the washcloth on this face, and, finding it warm, went to rinse it out in the kitchen sink.

“Retired detective,” he corrected. Slowly he sat up, and began to cough. I went stone still, hating the sound of it. My dad was quite literally my hero—he’d saved me after my birth mother had overdosed—and ever since my *real* mom had died of cancer, I’d become more and more aware of his mortality.

He was a thorn in my side sometimes, but he was steady, and I didn’t know what I’d do without him.

I filled up a glass of water, and brought both that and the washcloth back to him. Then I kneeled on the floor and began to unroll the air mattress he meticulously put away each morning to leave some walking space in this closet-sized living room.

“I’ve been thinking about getting a place here,” he said, after blowing his nose and throwing the tissue into a very full trash can beside him. “Maybe close by. Give you a little bit of space.”

I pictured him renting an apartment right next door to mine. I was sure that’s what he had in mind.

“Who says I’m staying here?” I asked, without looking up. He grunted a response. “You can stay in my living room as long as you like.”

“How’s Amy?” he asked.

“How do you know I wasn’t out on a date?”

He smirked. “Hotshot detective, remember?”

“Retired, I thought.”

Another storm of coughing took him, and I winced.

“Dying,” he said. “This is what a dying man looks like, Anna.” He sniffled, and then groaned.

“Want to go to urgent care?”

He scoffed at this. “Men don’t go to the doctor for colds. Men beat their chests and whine for their daughters to make them chicken noodle soup.”

I plugged in the mattress, and once it started filling, rose to fill his request.

“Men are such babies when they’re sick,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound worried. He rarely got colds. He was the strong one in our family. I sometimes wondered if he’d even tell me if he ever did get really sick. He’d probably just ride off into the sunset like in the old cowboy movies. He’d probably saddle up Mug. The dog

was big enough.

“Your mom used to say that,” he said. I stared at the pantry, missing the chicken soup that was right in front of my face for a good thirty seconds.

“She told me it was a good thing she’d gotten the cancer. If it had been me, everyone would have abandoned me on the roadside because they’d get so sick of my bellyaching.”

“She had a point,” I said.

“Your mom was the tough one,” he said. “She was always strong. Even in the end.”

I blinked back the tears that had sprung up. I hated that she was gone. I missed her—how gentle she’d been, how she’d never once tried to pretend she was my birth mother, but proved she was my *real* mother by being a million times better in every way. But mostly I hated that she’d left my dad. He got on fine without her, but a piece of him was missing. He’d never be the same.

He’d never *want* to be the same.

Maybe it was shallow since Alec and I had had such limited time together, but I understood that now.

My dad’s cell phone rang, and I picked it up. The caller ID said UNAVAILABLE.

“Want me to answer?” I asked.

“No, I got it.” He motioned for the phone, and I tossed it to him.

“This is Ben,” he said, voice nasally. “Yep. She’s here. She’s . . .” I stuck my head around the corner. Was he talking to Amy? Mike? Unbelievable. Was my text not good enough?

Just let us, Amy had said. I pulled out a soup pot, not bothering to keep quiet as I banged it against the stove. A friend in therapy after an abduction, a kid who witnessed her father abusing her mother, a dad out sick on my couch, and who were they all worried about? Me.

“She’s doing well,” I heard my dad say.

“Who is that?” I tried not to sound snappy but wasn’t very effective.

Terry, he mouthed.

Oh. Terry Benitez. His friend on the Tampa Police Force. I’d been being paranoid. Stupid. Not everything was about me.

When my dad was settled, I retreated to my bedroom and kicked off my shoes. Still dressed, I lay down and stared up at the ceiling.

Mike’s voice echoed in my head. *He’s taking a beating. Max Stein’s attorneys are tearing him up.*

Maybe I’d been going about this wrong. Alec had been in touch with Amy, so it wasn’t like I was betraying her if I just checked in and offered my support.

I just wanted to tell him not to give up. He was doing the right thing.

Before I could think it through, I snatched my phone out of my bag and flipped to his number, still programmed as my first speed dial. It went straight to voice mail. It wasn't even his voice, just a recorded message. I turned off my phone, and with shaking hands flung it across the bed.

Weak.

Talking about my mom, hearing that Alec was hurting, even hearing that he'd tried to help Amy, it had all screwed with my head. I'd made a decision, now I had to live with it.

* * *

I slept in one-hour bursts, woken by the usual nightmares and my dad's coughing in the other room, and when the sun finally rose I was already dressed and ready for the day. Work went by uneventfully, apart from Amy asking me forty-seven times who I was bringing to the CASA fund-raiser, and five o'clock found me in her chair, getting my hair flatironed into a soft wave that kept swinging in front of my eyes every time I turned my head. It was annoying, but Amy called it mysterious, which of course was a perfect look for an event that supported foster care.

I'd started dreading the evening. It might have been all right with Amy, but without her dressing up, going out, smiling, and *pretending* . . . it all seemed like an excruciating amount of work. If I hadn't told Jacob I'd be there, I would have ditched.

Amy finally ducked out to go to the girls' play. I promised I'd follow her out, and was just about to get my stuff when I heard male voices in the break room.

I stuck my head inside the small kitchenette, lined on one wall with lockers, and grinned at the two men sitting at the metal table.

"Your hair's really long," said Marcos, crossing his arms over his white V-neck T-shirt disapprovingly. He'd let his dark hair grow out a little himself in the last couple of months. No more military buzz. No more polo shirts either. I couldn't help but think the second man at the table had something to do with that.

"She looks hot." Derrick, Rave's owner, was wearing a yellow tank top with black leather pants today. With his thick eyeliner and pouty lips, he looked like a runway model.

I pushed the smooth strands of hair back over my shoulder. "It just looks longer because it's straight." My hair was naturally wavy. Flat-ironing it had given it another three inches in length.

Marcos looked unconvinced. "You work at a barber's. You could get it cut, you know."

Derrick's eyes narrowed to slits. "*A barber? Excuse me?*"

"Whoops," I said. Marcos's comment didn't bother me. He'd practically been my big brother from the day he'd been assigned as my bodyguard. Saving my ass at the bridge had only served to solidify the role.

While Derrick educated Marcos on the difference between a barbershop and a salon, I grabbed my stuff.

"So, who's the lucky guy?" asked Derrick.

"What guy?" said Marcos.

Derrick laughed, and patted his cheek, which immediately had him blushing all the way to the tips of his

ears.

“You’re cute,” said Derrick. “A girl doesn’t get her hair done *that* nice unless she wants a man to mess it up.”

“Wait . . .” Marcos was frowning. “You didn’t tell me you were seeing someone.”

“I’m *not*,” I said, exasperated. “Not that I feel the need to run every little thing by you.”

“Then where are you going?” pressed Marcos. He did look handsome in his wrinkle-free white shirt, even with his serious mouth and thick eyebrows. They were sort of his trademark.

“A fund-raiser,” I said. “For CASA. Hey, what are you guys doing tonight?”

“Believe it or not, I own a business,” said Derrick. “Which I probably should be getting back to.”

I looked at Marcos. “Want to come to a fancy schmancy fund-raiser? It’s formal.” I might as well have told him they’d be serving rotten fish.

He glanced at Derrick, who smirked back at him. Wow. They were already to the silent-ask-for-permission phase.

“I’m not dancing,” said Marcos.

“I wouldn’t let you even if you wanted to,” I told him.

“Then yes,” he said. “What time? I’ll pick you up.”

“Pick me up in an hour,” I said. We were all standing now, and though Derrick had already announced his exit, he had yet to leave.

Marcos glanced between us, and then shifted his weight to the other foot.

“Are you waiting to kiss good-bye until I leave?” I asked. “That’s adorable.”

Marcos cleared his throat. “We weren’t . . .”

“Yes, we were.” With that, Derrick grabbed his boyfriend’s face between his well-manicured hands, and kissed him right on the lips. Marcos, still uncomfortable with the whole *out* thing, made a sound like he was dying.

And then started to melt.

I turned, just as his eyes drifted closed and his hands came beneath Derrick’s elbows. It was too intimate to watch, and even if I was a little jealous he had someone to sweep him off his feet, I was genuinely happy for him.

“An hour,” I called, as I cruised to the door.

Five

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robin Almeida:

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