

My boss, the Dean of Earth Science division at the esteemed Vasco University, left me a message to meet him in his office. He mentioned it was urgent although to him, everything is, was, and has the potential.

I didn't plan on working because school was out. All of my paperwork was done. I threw on anything that was within reach and put it on, clean or not.

The thought going through my mind had to do with budget cuts and my department was at the top of his list. It was again, that time, and I always had the feeling he liked to pick my department to torture.

My budget was already down to the penny, so how can you cut that penny was the question going through my head. It made me think he liked watching Mr. Lincoln scream.

To be polite, I knocked, even though the door was open.

He smiled as he looked up from his desk, and I learned that was never a good sign. "Kit, I've been expecting you."

"You did leave me a message." Should I apologize for being sarcastic? "So how are you going to cut that penny you give me every semester?"

He laughed. I couldn't believe my eyes or my ears. He laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" He'd better not make me regret that question.

"I didn't call you here to talk about the budget. Kit, school's out and we're ready to play. This isn't about work. This is about something that's more important."

I breathed out all of the air I had in my lungs about my budget not being cut. I groaned when he mentioned this was about something that's more important though. My instincts told me to run and I should've listened to them rather than get comfortable.

“Alex, I’ll spend extra time going over ancient torture tools. I’ll even teach two semesters of beginning archeology if that’s what you want.” I stared out of that picture window behind him that should be in my office instead. I don’t even get a peephole.

“My wife feels she can improve on anything or anyone. I say there are people that don’t want to change. You have been over to my house countless times over the years and you intrigue her. You present a challenge she can’t back away from and won’t until that’s the last resort. She’s a strong woman with a gentle voice. Make me happy. That’s all I’ll say.”

There was that grin. That grin that stretched his face from ear to ear that didn’t make his eyes twinkle. A true smile had eyes that twinkled.

I had to find out. “Happy about what, Alex? I’d do anything for you. You know that, but going through with this is stretching that a bit.” That grin was still there. As a matter of fact, he leaned back in his chair.

I knew I wasn’t going to win this. “I might take a little while to get there. I’ll be there.”

He passed me a remote that I guessed was supposed to open something.

“That will open the front gate.” He still smiled, even wider I think.

I looked at him with a strong impulse to hurt him. I took a deep breath as I stood up, turned around, and walked away.

What I understood was that his wife ran the household even though he ran his department. If she’s happy that meant he’s happy which was always better for all of us. That also meant, he’ll continue to fight for my department and give us the big name funding we need.

He told me once, there was a reason why he kept his wife’s picture on his desk. It reminded him of the reason why he’s willing to fight battles. His eyes watered when he mentioned that.

In about the same conversation, he asked if I ever loved anyone. I guessed he wasn't questioning the gender issue as much as he probed for something. I didn't feel like going into great detail. I told him I've never been. He didn't reply. He stared at me while he played with a pen.

The way he spoke about his wife reminded me of how I felt about someone I loved once, a memory of a long time ago of a place not of this world.

After I shook myself back to this reality, I got home to shower.

I changed into a white camp shirt and dark denim pants. It was my multipurpose outfit to go along with my multipurpose footwear, ankle height, black leather boots were the way to go. They made me taller at the scrape your head while going through a doorway height. About twenty minutes later, I left my apartment in the direction of the golden hills of money.

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A deep breath in and out while I waited for the gates to open. It looked like the frame was made out of wood. Unless they used something that looked like wood, it wouldn't make sense because a gate is supposed to prevent intruders from coming in. A good fire would be all it would take to break down the barrier.

The black wrought iron decoration in the middle, gave it a regal look with the lion head in the middle surrounded by scrolls. There was a backing, clouded glass maybe or polyurethane of some sort perhaps.

I pulled up alongside the entrance of his mansion, with the house on the right and the prized heirloom red and white roses on the left.

I took the six steps one at a time. I wasn't in any hurry to go through with this. The front porch was clean and the potted plant looked alive. I guess I have to ring the doorbell, now that I'm here.

"Well hello, dear," Mrs. Edwards said, before she gave me the sort of kiss a mother would give her child. "Oh my. Pants. You are a lady and ladies need to dress properly. Why can't you ever wear a dress?"

At first glance, she looked like the grandmother of everybody's dreams. The one who would spend the morning baking cookies, go to church for quilt circle, and collect school supplies for the needy. If someone were to look at the curled hair styled against her head and the suits she wore, it contradicted the grandmother picture. Her small stature was a façade to the fierce personality.

She smiled at me. Why? I don't know.

"Being a lady is a state that's not me and pants are comfortable."

"Well. I suppose. Come outside with me and we'll have tea together."

I followed her and thought things were going well, until she put the brakes on and turned around. "I don't know. You are a woman and should behave like one. A lady reacts, comments, and puts on her best dress for every occasion. Why don't you ever do that, dear?"

She walked ahead of me but turned her head to me every three steps. It became a regular rhythm.

I sat down on the patio chair opposite of her. I left the question alone to move the conversation along.

"We have a lot of work to do to make you presentable."

I forced myself to swallow the tea instead of spitting it out.

I needed something mundane something ordinary to look at, which is why I studied her back lawn. If I didn't, then the words I attempted to keep inside my head would come out and cause a bigger issue than it needed to be. I wanted to get this done and over with now.

The grass was green and low cut. The dogwood tree in the middle seemed to call attention as it sat all by itself in full bloom. More roses around the vast lawn, it formed a border alongside the walls. The air was a little thick that could be explained with high humidity. I think it was the potential battle that was about to come.

The branches were bare but birdsong came from somewhere. It sounded like birds pitched an argument.

The chirps got louder, more frequent, a final scream and one flew away from behind the wall.

A bird squawked. To me it sounded as if he was telling me to move it along and voice your feelings.

"Ma'am, I'm not sure what you're talking about. I'm doing just fine. No commitment other than to my students, because the way my lifestyle is, I can't afford to have a relationship with anyone."

"But, dear, you have to. Don't be unreasonable. Every woman needs a good man."

"Everyone makes choices based on what makes them happy." I thought that was a nice way of slipping out of the obvious. "I'm willing to pay the consequences for my actions. Whenever I dig for artifacts, I expect dirty hands and broken fingernails. When I'm under the sun, I expect to get hot."

"What does your mother say about this?"

I always avoided that question in the past by changing topics. Why should I answer now?

“My parents were killed in an accident.” I hate it when my mouth works before my brain yells stop. “I have no other family.” I finished the cup before I spoke again. My brain needed fuel.

“Mrs. Edwards, I don’t exactly have the lifestyle to have anyone in my life. I am sorry, but if this is what it’s about, I’ll be going now.”

“I suppose, but if you want to continue teaching, I do suggest you stay and listen.”

I glanced at her before I stood up and left. Direct or indirect, I don’t give in to threats. I listened to the heels of my boots clomp on the marble floor.

I didn’t hear her leave the back patio. I guessed that since she came around and stood in front of me with her hands on her hips, it had to have been after I got up. I lost my brain somewhere I think.

“I don’t understand it. I present something and you don’t scream or yell. It’s as if nothing happened.”

“Mrs. Edwards. . .”

“You simply can’t be human. That’s all there is to it. I simply don’t know. This has never happened to me in all my years. I have always been able to cultivate ladettes into ladies. Do you bleed?”

“Pardon?”

“Do you bleed?”

What is she getting at? “I’m as real as real can be. If you’ll excuse me. . .”

“Oh you can’t go yet. The ladies will be here for the luncheon soon.”

“Mrs. Edwards, chances are I won’t know any of the women that will be here. It’s best if I leave now.”

“Why must you be so difficult?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Why don’t you behave like a lady?”

“Who says I have to behave like a lady?” I haven’t behaved like a lady ever since I can remember.

“I know the ladies will know what to do about this. It would be the honorable thing to stay here and defend yourself.”

I didn’t stay to prolong the conversation, whatever you want to call it, to find out what she was talking about.

A man dressed in black slacks and a tuxedo shirt, appeared in the hallway and cleared his throat.

Clothed like that, he was the butler I think.

I left while she was preoccupied, jogged down the stairs, got back into my car, and stormed out of the gates. I looked back, thanked God the gates were still in one piece.

I stepped one foot inside my apartment and my cellphone vibrated. It was tossed on the countertop. The mood I was in, my end of the conversation would up as a string of cuss words anyway.

A beer in my hand, with thoughts of finishing the entire twelve pack, I contemplated why she even got to me. The dark sitting room was a good place to do this.

Alex came through the door. He’s lucky he wasn’t a stranger or he would’ve been maimed. My dagger sat on the side table in its scabbard. All I had to do was reach for it.

“Yes?”

He closed the door and turned around with a slouched posture, played with his fingers.

“Do you remember me asking you to make me happy? How my wife sees you as a challenge to change and mold? I’m sorry if I threw out the challenge to sound like something that’s unspeakable. That was not my intention. I only wanted to urge you to go. That’s all. With that being said . . . Did you have to make my wife cry? I won’t ask what happened. I won’t ask what was said. But did you have to make her cry?”

Make a note to tell Alex to keep his apologies simple. “I—”

“Rhetorical question.” He straightened up and took a step forward. “As your boss and friend for over ten years, Dr. Kit DiStefano, I am hereby ordering you to get cleaned up.” He turned on the light. “Put on a dress, and go back to have lunch even if it kills you.” He left.

Shit, shit, double shit. I changed and once again, headed toward golden hell.

The butler pointed toward the back patio.

”Good afternoon, everyone.” I attempted to be polite, even though I felt anything but. “I apologize for being late. Would you mind if I joined—”

It was her. Cynthia. Not possible.

A time long ago, a place not of this world but of another, Camole, she was a lady I used to watch from my window.

It was the memory of the only woman I ever loved.

I was studying under Master Eldridge, the Wizard of Camole, at the time.

It was the front lawn of the palace. Deep green foliage surrounded us; green grass spanned the entire lawn.

I had dressed in the best dress I could find, with a little altering and patching here and there, it looked as good as new.



She was there in front of me, so close, it seemed like a dream.

Her golden hair shone under the sun. Her eyes twinkled when she smiled, as it always did.

A white canopy flapped in the breeze the ladies sat under. A black platform was placed in front of them. The sun shone down on me as if under a spotlight.

I stood in the middle with Master Eldridge by my side in case an energy burst turned in the wrong direction. Neither of us expected anything, but with magic, one could never predict with certainty that nothing would.

Master Eldridge poked me from behind. I guess I was staring too much.

I turned a lily into a dove. I brought a dead rabbit back to life. I threw an energy burst at a boulder the groundskeepers had been complaining about. I even made Master Eldridge's cap disappear. To me it was nothing. It was something that was seen daily, but all of the ladies' attention was transfixed on me as if it was something new and grand.

When I finished they clapped and I bowed. She patted the hand of the man that sat next to her before she stood up.

It was something a wife would do. It made me wonder and I suppose I should've asked. It would have prevented trouble in the end. She grabbed my hand and pulled me behind her to the back of the castle. It was a short distance, about the distance of two rooms back to back.

"I'm lady Cynthia of Telshire." She held out her hand. Her voice was soft and sweet.

"I'm Catherine, Master Eldridge's understudy, m'lady." I bowed and kissed her hand.

"That dress looks good on you."

"Thank you, m'lady."

She whispered in my ear to meet her in the same place later that night. I asked why, she laughed in response before she left.

As the day wore on, I looked out the window and watched the sun descend. The sky was a dark blue, the stars were bright, and the moon was full. I wiped the counter top, I scrubbed the pots, and I extinguished all but the fireplace. Master Eldridge was near asleep by the time I finished. I had to laugh, because he shooed me away as he told me to go on and stay away from trouble. I do not look for trouble, things sort of happen is all.

I met her as promised. It was a bright light that shone and the crickets played their music. I turned to face her when she came up to me.

“I wanted to give you this,” Lady Cynthia said. “This is my diary. Can you read?”

“I can read, yes. Master Eldridge has taught me many things. I wonder why you give me this. Your diary.”

“Read it and you will see. If anybody asks me, I met with Kit DiStefano not Catherine the understudy.” She ran away before I had a chance to ask. I could’ve conjured a spell to bring her back to find out more but I didn’t

Through the season and into the next, Lady Cynthia and I snuck off at various times to play, kiss, and make love to one another. I would read her diary. We laughed or cried because of her daily tales. She had my heart and soul I had hers as well.

Master Eldridge did warn me about consequences, any action that’s taken would always have a reaction good or bad. I didn’t listen.

I should’ve though.

I was supposed to meet her at our tree by the river, the one that runs in front of the castle. Our initials and the animals we loved marked the tree; hers was a dove and I a cat. Nobody ever

saw anyone or anything there because of the overgrowth. I heard footfalls and I stepped out from behind a boulder.

That man, the one she sat next to that day, he had her by the throat with a knife pointed over her heart. He didn't say anything, but the intent was in his eyes. He found out about the affair and he didn't want to let go of her. If he couldn't have her, nobody could.

I started to conjure a spell, a wind to blow him away to save her. I perfected that spell. It was supposed to work but something went wrong. It sucked all of us in and I was pulled away from her. I ended up in a cave at the top of a mountain in what's now Switzerland.

I didn't know the feeling of being cold until then. The wind, the cold, the emptiness I felt at the moment was a feeling I didn't want to know.

I had lost my love. I had lost my life. The life I had left behind me as I had tried to become accustomed to this new world.

I saw the hair shining under the sun. A bird called in the distance.

Back to the here and now the left side of her mouth lifted a little higher than the right. I saw the same twinkle in her eyes.

"Uhm. Nice dress?" She asked, with laughter in her voice.

"What? Oh. . .thank you, m'lady." I bowed. "I made this dress when I returned from a trip to Shangri-La."

"Wow. I bet that was exotic. About as exotic as I got was trip to Alaska. That was because I won a contest." She shook her head. "What's your name?"

"I'm Kit DiStefano."

"I'm Candace Long. Candy for short and yes I do eat plenty of that. I say it's on the food pyramid."

“I suppose so.”

I felt everyone’s eyes and heard their giggles.

It felt like my knees were going to give.

“Dear, why don’t you sit down and tell us how you made such a beautiful dress.” Mrs. Edwards had the same grin Alex did earlier.

The tea was brown with an earthy quality. It was nice and cold. The ice clinked in the glass. The slice of lemon floated on top. Perfect ice and perfect slice of lemon, everything was perfect now.

“Dear. . .”

“Kit, I think Mrs. Edwards is trying to get your attention.” Cyn—I mean Candace pointed to Mrs. Edwards.

She’s not Cynthia. She can’t be. She would remember the name she gave me. Not ask.

I took half a sandwich and put it on my plate. “I made this dress. It’s nothing spectacular.”

“You never told me about this side of you.” Mrs. Edwards was still smiling.

“Is the sandwich beef or deviled ham?” I asked, as I looked between the slices of bread.

Candace laughed. “It’s deviled ham.”

“Candace,” a lady said.

“What. She asked a question and I answered and that’s that.”

I smiled as I bit into it. It was deviled ham.

Gasps around the table and all eyes turned toward Candace. She shrugged.

I continued eating the sandwich as I watched everybody watch each other. It felt like I was in the middle of a who’s going to make the next move play.

I finished everything on my plate and the tea. I bowed my head and left. They continued to watch each other so no one said a word when I left.

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I thought I got away clean because nobody called me the following day. I was in the clear.

No such luck when I answered the phone. It was Mrs. Edwards. Long conversation later, I was supposed to go back. It seemed as though several more questions came up about what wasn't elaborated. If I wanted to find out, I had to go back.

I dig up history, what happened centuries ago. Why would I be interested in the gossip of a group of little old ladies? The only answer I could think of was I don't know.

I made it over the hill and through the woods back to Mrs. Edwards in my Jeep this time.

She opened the door for me and I entered. I could see that question coming, but before she had a chance to ask, the butler whispered in her ear.

There was an important phone call she had to answer, so she left me sitting outside. I didn't complain about that because it was nice to sit alone.

This time, I heard the heels coming in my direction, the door made noise as it shut. "Oh Kit, I had no idea." It was her again, and she's back. "Did you suffer a childhood trauma by a man? Is that why you like . . . well . . . women?"

"Mrs. Edwards, I like women because I like women. It's as simple as that." So much for the idea of a good day. I tried to relax. It didn't work though.

"No, it's not that simple. It's not natural. It goes against what God said."

I stood up and pushed the chair in. I heard her behind me as she tried to match my steps. I put my hand on her doorknob about to leave, when she started in again.

“Where do you think you’re going young lady? We simply have to fix this.”

“Mrs. Edwards, there is nothing to fix. There is nothing to discuss. I’m not your daughter. I’m not the long lost child you wish you had. I’m not a project. I am who I am and nothing is going to change that.”

She stood there blinking and it’s a good thing she wasn’t holding anything. I think it would’ve fallen.

“You have to tell me.”

“Ma’am. There are some things a proper lady will never tells.”

“So you did suffer a trauma. I knew it.”

I continued on my way out of the house and back home.

I put on a pair of jeans, white tank, leather jacket and left to go to the local pool hall. I didn’t get drunk though.

Alex called me into his office again the next morning.

Kit, you’re fired rang through my head as I headed back to the university. Several difficult ways of ending that went through my head as well. None of them good.

The white adobe finish on his walls was nice. The picture of Geronimo still hung up there and still stared at me. I looked outside his window and the rain poured like a waterfall. The setting seemed perfect for what I thought would happen.

“Sorry about that,” Alex said, as he hung up the phone. “I was able to give you a bigger budget for next year. And. . .” He smiled. “I’m not sure how you did it and I’m not sure I want to know how you did it. But the wife seems to have settled a bit. She’s talking about visiting Ireland again.”

“Alex, I—”

Alexander held up his hand while he laughed. “That would be the reason why I fought to give you that extra penny. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t. For the record, I’m not a broken down car that needs to be fixed.” That was a hint, Alex.

“Amen to that.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I was her first project.”

I laughed. “I’m going home to enjoy a little downtime. I have a little while before classes start again.”

Alexander nodded.

I got home ready to enjoy homemade pizza, not hard to make if you have the patience. I already had the crust, add the sauce, spices, toppings, and pop it into the oven.

My doorbell rang. I wondered who it was since everybody I knew would walk in.

“Cynthia. Hi, I didn’t expect you. How did you find me?”

“You could never escape me, Catherine.”