

YOUNG ENOUGH

THE AGE BETWEEN US (BOOK 2)

CHARMAINE PAULS

Published by Charmaine Pauls

Montpellier, 34090, France

www.charmainepauls.com

Published in France

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording, information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Copyright © 2018 by Charmaine Pauls

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Kellie Dennis (www.bookcoverbydesign.co.uk)

ISBN: 978-2-9561031-5-8 (eBook)

ISBN: 978-1-7208118-4-8 (Paperback)

✿ Created with Vellum

Jane

Life is never just good or just bad. Mostly, it's a mix. My life is many kinds of wrongs, but it also has rights. A short while ago, my husband left me for his pregnant mistress. I lost my home in the process. I lost my stability and direction. I thought I'd lost everything, until a stranger broke into my property and ended up in my bed. He's not like any man I've met. When it comes to passion, he demands nothing less than the most extreme and forbidden corners of my fantasies. He gives light and awakens darkness. He gives darkness, and my light can't exist without it. It's the most explosive sex of my life, the most depraved and serenely beautiful acts I've committed.

Brian is everything I've ever wanted, the closest to happy I've been since my first love, Evan, died, which is why I'm ignoring that Brian is half my age. What we share is taboo. Which is why we're each other's secret. You could say I'm unlucky in love, like a fortuneteller recently told me when she gave a hair-raisingly accurate account of my life, but Brian makes me feel alive. He

makes me feel desired. I've mourned a lost love to death. I've been left for another woman. But right now, I'm being coveted by a beautiful, sexually skilled man. I'm too weak to walk away from an affair that has no future. I want him too much. I need to breathe him like air and drown in him like water. I trust him with the darker side of my lust like I trust him with my body, because he earned it. He proved to me he's worthy of both, so I continue with my perfect, imperfect life, playing our game of secret love affair.

While Abby is with Francois, Brian and I spend the weekend together. We have sex as often as we can, anywhere we can. We're both shameless, but there is no shame in honest lust. The days we work together make up for the nights we can't sleep next to each other. Sometimes, we sneak off during our lunch break to make love in his truck at the dead-end road in Midrand with our clothes on or naked, lying amongst the grass that grows taller as summer advances. We're careful. We don't slip away together too frequently or raise suspicion with our behavior.

Toby likes Brian's Bakers idea, and Bakers likes it even more. By the end of the month, we're running their collectable card campaign. It's a major hit. Sales fly. They have to increase production for Christmas, resulting in an unexpected bonus for Brian and myself.

Abby is caught up in her studies for the year-end exams. The move from the only house I've considered my home, soon to be home to my ex-husband's mistress, doesn't come at the best time, right before the grade eight finals, but if we want to secure the cottage Brian found for me, we don't have a choice. If I weren't so worn-out from the last sprint before the end of the year at the office, I would've said tough luck and looked for something else after Abby finished her exams, but places like those don't become available every day. I'm not happy that Abby doesn't like the cottage, but as my good friend, Dorothy, said, she'll come around.

We arranged for Abby to be with Francois on the weekend I

move. Brian assured me he'd take care of the furniture. I can count on him for something other than sex, and it warms my heart.

I'm offloading kitchen appliances at the cottage when his truck pulls up. A guy jumps from the passenger side and another from the back. Walking toward them with a greeting on my lips, I stop in my tracks. They're Brian's buddies from the pool.

"This is Jane Logan." Brian points at the slender one. "This is Eugene Prinsloo." He slaps the chubby one on the shoulder. "And this is Clive Claassen."

They both stare at me as if my clothes are on fire.

I'm the first to recover. "I think we got off on the wrong foot the first-time round. Shall we start over?"

Eugene gives me a lukewarm handshake. "Uh, nice to meet you?"

Clive keeps his arms at his sides. "Hi."

"I appreciate your help. I hope Brian didn't bully you into it."

Clive snorts.

"No worries, Ms. Logan," Eugene says.

"Jane, please."

It takes us the whole morning and three truckloads to move Abby's belongings and mine. Brian transfers the security equipment from the house to the cottage while I put the smaller pieces of furniture in place. With the big furniture arranged, Brian connects the dishwasher and washing machine, and test both to make sure they work. There's no space for a tumble dryer, but we have enough sun—even in winter—and a line outside to dry our clothes.

I'm knackered by the time we're done, but eager to tackle the boxes. I want to have everything unpacked before I fetch Abby on Sunday. A tidy environment will go a long way in easing the change.

Thanks to Brian's thoughtfulness, we have a cold six-pack to swallow my picnic food down with. I offer to pay Brian's friends,

but he refuses profusely on their behalf. He returns after dropping them off to help me unpack.

“I really appreciate your help.” I hug him from behind, placing a kiss on his broad back.

“You didn’t think I’d let you go through this alone, did you?” He turns to face me, his arms coming around me.

The hug is soft, but it’s not tender. It’s possessive and demanding.

One touch is all it takes. I gasp, burying my face in his chest.

“I want you, Jane.” His tone turns desperate. “What are you doing to me? I want you all the fucking time.”

“Then take me.”

“That’s the plan. On my terms.”

My insides flutter in anticipation and with that pinch of wild fear his promises always evoke. “I can handle you, Brian Michaels. Take what you want.”

His eyes darken. His whole body hardens against mine, every muscle drawing tight.

Lifting me, he carries me to the unmade bed and throws me on the mattress. Before my squeal has escaped, he’s already covering my lips with his, swallowing my sounds as his hand moves between our bodies.

Brian

IT’S BECOMING HARDER to leave Jane. I’m torn in two, wanting to spend the first night in her new place with her, but I can’t ask Clive to sleep over at my place after he’s sacrificed his day to help with Jane’s move. Finally, my responsibility wins over my desire. The result is a lingering ache in the hollow of my chest as I walk away from my woman at sunset with a bittersweet goodbye kiss.

After a hot day of strenuous work and fucking Jane twice, I

need a shower. I head straight for the bathroom when I get home, but as I pass Sam's room, I stop. She's sitting on the edge of her bed, staring at her toes. With a soft knock, I enter.

"Hey, piglet. What's up?"

She wiggles her toes on the worn thread of the carpet—I need to replace it sooner than later—but doesn't look at me. "Don't call me that."

"What?" I ask, baffled. "Piglet?"

She crosses her arms. "I'm not a pig."

Whoa. I've been calling her piglet since I can remember. It's because she loved Whinny the Poo so much.

I cross the floor and sit down next to her. "It's my way of expressing affection."

"It implies I'm fat."

"Where's this coming from?"

She turns her head to the side.

"Look at me, Sam."

Only her eyes turn toward me.

"Is it because I put you on a diet?" The last thing I want is to damage her self-esteem.

"It's the other girls," she admits meekly. "They say I'm fat."

My blood starts to heat. "The girls in your class?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you listen to them? You know better than to let someone whose opinion shouldn't matter upset you."

"They're my *friends*."

"Then you deserve better friends."

She jumps up. "You don't understand."

"Tell me." I hate seeing my kid sister like this.

"You *won't* understand." She pushes out her bottom lip. "You don't know what it's like."

"Try me."

Regarding me from under her lashes, she weighs my words.

Finally, she concedes with a theatrical sigh. "Lynette is having a party for her birthday."

"So?"

"So." She rolls her eyes, as if I should get the connection.

"Are you not invited?"

"Of course, I am."

"Then what's the problem?"

She slams a hand against her forehead. "Duh."

"Sam," I say sternly, "you're going to have to help me out here."

"I've got nothing to wear," she exclaims, "and even if I did, I'd just look fat."

Ah ha. For a minute I was working myself up, thinking it was something they'd done to her, because, let's face it, those girls may be young, but they're bitches in the making. I've seen how jealous they are of each other, how they gossip and tease with the intent to hurt and belittle.

The controlling part of me wants to forbid her to mingle with them. The protective part of me wants to refuse her permission to go to the party, but it'll only be a medicine to disguise a pain. It won't be a cure that heals the ailment. She needs to know how to stand up for herself. This will be a good learning curve for the future, because bullies are not limited to classrooms. My thoughts drift unwillingly to Monkey.

"You're not saying anything," she complains. "That means you agree. I'm going to look like the fat little pig."

"First of all, you're not fat." She has an extra bit of flab, which is my fault. I cooked too much pasta, but that's a thing of the past. "You're healthy and beautiful. Secondly, I didn't raise you to have such a low self-image. You're a bright, talented, and strong girl. You should act it, rather than brood over an image some bitchy girl from class put into your head."

She opens her mouth, but I hold up a hand.

"Lastly, since when do you care what others think? Whose opinion is the only one that matters?"

“Mine,” she admits begrudgingly.

“Now that all that’s out of the way, let’s start over. You have a party to go to, right?”

“Right.”

“I don’t remember you asking permission.”

“Briaaaaaan.”

“Sam.”

The next sigh she utters signifies the world rests on her little shoulders. “May I please go to Lynette’s birthday party?”

“When? Where? What kind of party?”

“Saturday before school ends. It’s from six to ten.”

“Whoa. At night?”

“It’s at her parents’ house, so don’t sweat it. There will be supervision. We’re going to have pizzas and play board games.”

“Who’s all going to be there?”

“Just about the whole class.”

“Boys and girls?”

“Yeah,” she says again, as if I should’ve known.

“I want her mother’s number.”

She narrows her eyes in suspicion. “What for?”

“To check if they’ll be around all the time.”

“Brian! You’ll embarrass me.”

“Plus,” I hold up a finger, “in case of an emergency, I’d like to know she can get hold of me. That’s the condition.”

Her mouth falls open, and her arms drop to her sides. “Seriously?”

“Yes, Sam.”

She throws up her hands, but nods with another eye-roll. “Fine.”

I cup my ear. “I don’t hear you.”

“Thank you,” she mumbles.

“That’s better. Now that permission for the party’s out of the way, we can move to the next problem.”

“What to wear?”

Sam doesn't have much. She doesn't own pretty shoes or make-up and all the stuff girls like. It didn't matter as much when she was younger, but she's growing up.

"We'll sort it, okay?"

"Really?" Her face lifts. "You mean I can get a new dress?"

"I think you deserve a new dress. Shoes and all."

She squeals and starts bouncing. "Really? Really?"

"If you stop hopping like a kangaroo."

She stills immediately. "I'll set the table every night, I swear. I'll even take out the garbage."

I get to my feet. "You don't have to do any of that for a dress. It's not an exchange. But—"

"I knew there was a but."

"It doesn't mean you don't have to do your chores."

"Thank you, Brian." She throws her arms around me, almost knocking me off my feet.

"You're welcome. By the way, did Tron check in on you?"

"He's been in and out a couple of times. Mom made him a cup of tea."

It's time to start dinner. My shower will have to wait. "Go have your shower. Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

She skips to the door. "Anything you say."

Before going to the kitchen, I look in on my mom. She's passed out on her bed. I cover her with a light blanket before turning my attention to our dinner menu. As I'm going through the fridge, Clive walks in.

"Beer?" I ask.

"No thanks."

I pull my head out of the refrigerator to look at him. Clive refusing a beer is like a snowstorm on the Magaliesberg Mountains in the middle of summer. I study him. His shoulders are tense and his arms rigid at his sides. He reminds me of a tightly wound top ready to spin.

"What's going on?" I ask carefully.

“You tell me.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What’s Jane to you?”

Her name on his tongue doesn’t sit right with me. It bothers me without any explicable reason. “I think you know.”

“You’re dipping your dick, aren’t you?”

Tension pulls my shoulder blades tight, my posture mirroring his. “Watch your mouth.”

“It’s serious?” he asks with disbelief.

Clive knows me well enough. I wouldn’t mind his foul mouth if it weren’t serious.

He nods several times, his look condescending. “You went back there, behind our backs.”

“I don’t need permission or approval from you for where I go.”

“Some friend you are.” He sneers. “You made me sleep here, taking care of your sister and mother so you could bang some uptown sugar mommy.”

My vision starts to get fuzzy around the edges. I back away from the fridge, the tension a coiled-up spring driving me forward. My feet are moving, but I’m not aware of executing the action. It’s like being in a dream where you float.

“You will watch your fucking mouth, or you’ll leave here with no teeth.”

He blinks, retracing his steps to the door. “Why did you lie, Brian?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Are we not good enough for your uppity-ass *girlfriend*?”

In a flash, I see an ugly shade of crimson. Before I know what I’m doing, I’m in Clive’s face, my fist punching the wall next to his head. Bits of flaking plaster fall on the floor. Pain explodes in my knuckles. It travels up my arm, all the way to my shoulder, but I push the sensory impulses aside. I can handle pain. I’ll deal. It also brings me back to earth, preventing me from taking his head clean off.

“What the fuck’s your issue?” I hiss.

“You’ll choose her over us?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our neighborhoods, they don’t mix. Tell me it’s just a fuck and—”

My fist collides with his jaw before he can form the next word. It’s not a hard punch, but enough to make him stumble two steps sideways. His eyes are cutting as he grabs his jaw, moving it from side to side.

“I warned you.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess you warned me from a while back. I just didn’t want to listen.”

“What’s your problem with Jane?”

“My problem? You’re asking what’s *my* problem? Dude, I hate to break it to you, but the problem’s all yours.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I saw you today, the way you look at her. You’re into her, as in deep.”

“I don’t see how that’s a problem, least of all why you feel you should stir.”

He laughs. “If you don’t see the problem, you’re as blind as a mole. She’s twice your age. It can never work. Not as in long-term. Look where she comes from, bro. Women like her don’t do boys from Harryville, not for serious. They do us to scratch an itch. It’s the pool or garden boy, because they’re bored. When they grow tired of the game, they chuck them out like old dishwashing water, because they can. That’s the first of your problems. Then there’s Monkey. Now that’s a problem I don’t wish on my enemy.”

My finger is in his face, my anger radiating from me like toxic vapor. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll put a cork in it.”

“Question is do you know what’s good for you?”

Lacing my fingers over my head, I tilt my face to the ceiling and move away from him. I want to smash his face in, but I can’t do it for the truth. He’s right about one thing. Monkey is a problem

that's not going away. The desperation of the situation only makes me feel fiercer about what I want.

Jane.

I'm sick without her, and I don't mean physically. I mean in my head. In my chest. In my mind. It's something that's been chewing on me for a while. I want her wholly and completely. These bits and scraps aren't enough any longer. My mind and heart don't care that Monkey stands between us. My feelings don't give a shit about what he's capable of, because she takes up everything I have, everything I feel. We can make this work. I told myself I wasn't going to become that needy guy who demands more, but I can't help myself. With her, I can't get enough. I want it all. Everything.

Clive's tone softens. "Forget about the chick. Do what Monkey wants. You can do a lot worse than Lindy. Most guys will kiss her old shoes for the business that comes with her. Do you know how much Monkey's worth?"

I breathe in calm and breathe out my pent-up frustration. "I'm not most guys, and Jane's not most women."

He laughs softly again, shaking his head. "You're such an idiot."

"Maybe, but Jane is *mine*. The rest of the world, that includes you, better stay away from her."

"Are you thinking about your mother? About Sam?"

On cue, my sister's voice speaks from the door. "What's that about me?"

"Hey, Sam," he says, but his eyes are on me.

"Want to have dinner with us?" Sam asks.

"I was just leaving." He backs up to the door. "I'll see you around, dude."

He disappears through the frame. The sound of his steps falls hard on the porch and down the stairs. A moment later, an engine starts up. The sputter tells me he's borrowed his old man's car.

"What was that all about?" Sam asks.

"Nothing." I rub the back of my neck. That's not true. I never lie to my sister if I can help it. "Just grown-up stuff."

Spaghetti is my specialty, but I'm learning to broaden my cooking skills. Pulling up the recipe for ratatouille on my phone, I slice the aubergines and salt them to sweat. Then I tackle the sweet peppers and baby marrows. It's not as easy as you'd think. The onions burn while I'm still halving the cherry tomatoes. The peppers are overcooked, and the aubergine slices tear into unrecognizable pieces that look suspiciously like slimy snail. I didn't manage to rinse off all the salt before frying them, and with the Kalamata olives the dish is too salty. There's also that lingering bitter of the burn. I top it with a bit of mozzarella to make it easier to go down.

Sam pulls up her nose, but she eats what I serve her, probably because she doesn't want to evoke my irk before the party. After serving my mother a bowl in bed, I clean the kitchen and watch a movie with Sam. When she's in bed, I call up the app on my phone to test the security system at Jane's cottage.

The cameras work fine. They're motion triggered, meaning when set they'll take a snapshot if the lasers detect movement in the room. Within a second, I'll receive not only an alarm signal, but also a photo of whoever breaches her security. Since I have full control, the technology allows me to get feeds when the alarm is not activated. All I have to do is tap a command. I can make sure she's fine to set myself at ease and still my longing.

I flick through the rooms until I find her. She's in her bedroom, getting undressed. The image is high resolution. It's like watching a television screen. I move to the edge of the sofa bed, my breathing speeding up and my cock hardening. First, she pulls off a T-shirt. Then she wiggles out of her shorts. Her toned body looks good in pink underwear. It makes her tan stand out. My mouth goes dry as she unhooks her bra. My hand goes to my zipper. God, I'm a prick. I can't help it. When she slips her panties over her hips, my cock is already in my hand.

Jane

NOTHING IS SAID about the coffee shop or Abby's birthday party when I pick Abby up on Sunday. From the haughty smile on Debbie's face, she looks as if she's scored a point. Several points, actually.

At our new home, things are not any better between Abby and me. She stops in the middle of her room, looking around. I've put daisies, her favorite, in a vase on her dresser and left the window open for the room to cool. A breeze moves the curtains, carrying the scent of jasmine inside.

"I hope you like it."

She walks to the dresser and runs her fingers over the flower petals. "Thanks for the flowers."

"You're welcome."

"I miss my own bathroom."

"You'll still have it when your father and Debbie move into the house."

"Only every second weekend. For most of the time, I'll have to make do with this." She waves her arm around.

"We were fortunate in Groenkloof. This is what I can afford," I remind her.

She turns to me slowly. "I know. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Country living is not my thing."

"This isn't exactly country living."

She moves to the French doors that open onto the deck and peers toward the dam. "Whatever."

"If we both make an effort—"

"Mom." She rests her chin on her shoulder, looking in my direction but not quite at me. "I'll try, okay?"

"Okay." When only silence follows, I ask, "Are you hungry? I made *melkkos* with cinnamon."

"I suppose I can eat." She offers me a watered-down smile.

At least she's making the effort I demanded. "You can freshen up if you like. I'll set the table. After dinner, I can help you with your revision for tomorrow's exam. We can do a test."

"Dad already did, but thanks."

She squeezes past me and goes down the hallway to the bathroom. When she comes back, I'm done setting the table. It's a beautiful evening. I open the French doors to enjoy the view and fresh air.

"Tell me about your weekend," I say in a bright tone as we take our places by the table.

"I'm tired. Can we talk later?"

"Of course."

Our dinner goes down in silence. I wish I knew what to say to her or how to draw a reaction from her, but I respect that she's not in the mood for conversation. That's what I taught her. That it's all right to be quiet. It's all right to sometimes be sad. In all the years since Abby was born, I've been more sad than not, but I haven't practiced what I preached. I never showed it. Not to her as she grew. Not to Francois. Only to Dorothy, once a year. Now that sadness I thought would never lift is slowly dissipating, leaving room for happiness and peace. Leaving room for Brian or maybe he's the reason the suffocating pain is fading into nostalgic memories.

It's as if my recollection of the moments I spent with Evan is going through a filter. The hurtful ones are caught in the sieve while only the beautiful ones are distilled in my mind. A bit of hurt always slips through, but it makes the beauty bitter-sweet instead of unbearable. Even greater than the pretty of remembering is the thankfulness. The relief. God knows, I breathe better for it.

Abby is pushing the food around in her bowl. I frown, more concern settling over me. Like the flowers, this is one of her favorite dishes.

I'm about to ask what's the matter when Hilda knocks on the open doors and enters.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t want to interrupt your dinner. I just wanted to say welcome.”

“No worries.” I glance at Abby’s half-eaten food, now cold. “We’re just about done. Would you like to join us for dessert?”

“May I please be excused, Mom?”

“This is my daughter, Abigail,” I say to Hilda. “Abby, this is our landlady, Ms. Hilda Feldsmann.”

Hilda extends a hand. “Nice to meet you, Abigail. Please, call me Hilda.”

Abby stands and shakes the other woman’s hand. “Hi, Hilda.” She turns to me. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather turn in. Tomorrow’s a big day with the exam and all.”

“There’s sago pudding.” Also Abby’s favorite.

“Keep some for me for tomorrow. Good night, Hilda. Night, Mom.”

She climbs the three steps and disappears down the hallway.

Gathering the bowls, I ask, “Sago pudding?”

“No thanks. We’ve eaten.” Hilda follows me to the kitchen. “I’m sorry we weren’t here when you moved in, but we just got back from Namibia.”

“I didn’t expect a personal welcome,” I smile, “but thanks.”

“If you need anything, we’re only a short distance away.”

“That’s kind. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Will it be just you and Abby staying here?”

“Abby’s father and I are divorced.”

“I assumed your boyfriend was moving in, too.”

“Brian’s not...” For some reason, I can’t say it. I can’t say Brian is nothing to me except for good sex. “What gave you that idea?”

“I suppose it’s because he visited the cottage first.”

“It’s just Abby and me. For now.” I cross my arms. “Would a boyfriend be a problem?”

Her cheeks flush. “The cottage is big enough to handle three people. We don’t want hordes, though. Oh and no pets. I assume you read that in the contract.”

“Got it. No hordes. No pets.”

“Neither...indecency.”

“Indecency?”

She shrugs. “Loud parties, questionable individuals, a loose lifestyle.”

“Why would you think any of that would apply to me?”

I know exactly, but I want her to say it. I want her to hear what her hypocrisy sounds like when she tells me out loud I’m a *loose* person because I sleep with a younger guy.

“I don’t. Just giving you the same drill we give all our tenants.”

Right.

“Anyway, good night.” She waves and walks to the door. “As I said, you know where to find us if you need anything.”

I’m fuming when she’s gone. Pretoria is a big city, but in many ways it’s a small town where everyone knows everybody’s business and judgment is disguised as good moral values.

I spend an hour cleaning the kitchen, but my tension won’t ease. It’s this quiet discord between Abby and me, the move, the Monroe account, and everything Hilda has said. If Brian is not my boyfriend, he’s my lover.

Plain and simple.

Only, things between us aren’t that simple.

It hasn’t been for a while.

Brian

EXAMS ARE COMING UP. I can’t afford to fail. If I flunk, I’ll be kicked out of the course and lose my job at Orion. This is my only shot. I’ll never get another chance like this. I’m studying like a lunatic and making sure Sam knows her tables and grammar for her own exams while cooking and cleaning when Mom’s too trashed to do it. Every free minute is spent at Orion. I’m not seeing much of Jane

in a naked way, except for a few stolen moments every second weekend. It makes me feel like a caged lion. I've adopted the filthy habit of watching her more and more on the security feed, especially at night when I jack off, her name always a whisper on my lips as I climax.

We don't have time to fuck, never mind to talk, but when I walk into her office on a bright Monday morning, I know something's wrong from the tense set of her narrow shoulders and the way she rubs her forehead.

I close the door and round her desk. "What's wrong?"

She shakes her head. Her pained expression scares me. Gripping her shoulders gently, I start a firm massage.

"Brian, you shouldn't—" She moans. "Oh, God. That feels good."

"Here?" I work my thumb over a knot.

"Ouch. Damn. Yes, just there."

"Talk to me."

"It's been a difficult morning. That's all."

"What's difficult?"

"There's this tension between Abby and me."

"And?" I push her forward so I have access to the muscles flanking her spine.

She groans. "Ah. So good. Don't stop."

"And?" I won't give up until she tells me what's gotten her into such a spin.

"Toby rejected my Monroe proposal. For a second time."

My hands still.

She swivels her chair to face me. "I'm going to lose the account."

Shit. Her salary will take a knock—the agency pays on a performance basis—but it'll also kill her career. If she loses her biggest account, or God forbid she loses the client to a competitor, no one in the industry will hire her. Toby won't have a choice but to get rid of her.

I swallow away the dryness in my throat. "What did he say?" She worked damn hard on that proposal.

"He said a country-wide kindergarten campaign will take too long to roll out, and it'll take even longer to see the revenue. Two years. Maybe more."

I grip the armrests of her chair. "Freddy needs to go digital."

"No." She pushes me away and gets to her feet.

"Jane," I plead as she walks to the window.

We've had this discussion. I don't understand her resistance to keeping up with trends. "Why not?"

She flings around. "So mothers can shove a tablet or smartphone in their toddlers' hands? This is exactly what the brand is not about. It's about interaction, mother-child contact."

"Times have changed," I point out gently. "The brand needs to evolve. Mothers are busy. They work, cook, clean, do grocery shopping." I close the distance, stopping close to her. "I'm not disagreeing with what you say. Yes, human interaction is important. That's a good value, but some electronic intervention isn't all bad."

"It's not what the brand is about, Brian. I'm not tweaking the values, not even to save my own ass."

"It's not about tweaking anyone's values. It's about adapting. It's about redefining outdated values."

"I'm not discussing this with you anymore. You know my take on digital. Any other brand, yes, but not Freddy. Consumers buy Freddy for the *outdated* values it stands for."

Her voice has been rising consistently, her cheeks growing red with anger. Standing there with her sleek, short hair, expensive jewelry, and designer dress, she's a sight to behold. All lady. All fire. A combination of adrenalin from the argument and not having my dick inside her nearly enough makes arousal explode through my body. All the blood from my head must've gone straight to my cock, because I'm lightheaded with want.

"What?" she asks, taking a step backward as I advance.

Her blue eyes grow large when her back hits the window. She knows me. She can probably see the hunger in my eyes, because I can feel it humming in every cell of my body, begging for her taste, her smell, and her skin under my hands. Her wetness around my cock.

“Brian, this—”

One hand dips under her dress to move her panties aside and cup her sex. I’m not wasting time. The other fastens around her neck, not with pressure, but with dominance. Ownership. Jane is her own woman, but right now, she’s mine.

I trace the soft curve of her neck with my thumb. “You were saying?”

“Not here,” she croaks. Her eyes dart toward the door. “Someone may walk in.”

Why do those words make me so angry? Why do they make me want to punish her? Pressing her harder against the window, I rub my thumb in circles over her clit. Her knees buckle a bit. The minute moisture leaks from her slit, I coat my middle finger and breach the tight barrier of her asshole. She jerks and gasps, her eyes growing bigger as she clamps both hands around my wrist in a futile attempt to move my fingers away from her hot cunt. The effort only earns her more pressure. On her clit, in her ass, around her neck.

Her hands shoot up to my other wrist, the one taking away her air. It’s not something we’ve played with yet, and I’m a bastard for not easing her into it gently, but I’m an exploding volcano. My lust and every possessive need that comes with it is boiling over. I can give. I can give her any fucking thing she wants. All the freedom in the world. Whatever she asks from me. As long as I know she’s mine where it matters, in body and mind.

As her ass clenches on my finger, she increases her struggles, but it’s hopeless. I’ve got her exactly where I want her. Close to coming. Her hips rock forward, and her eyes roll back in her head. A few more manipulations of my thumb, and she comes undone. I

ease up on her neck as her abdomen contracts. She gulps in air. Her pupils dilate. I stop rubbing her clit, but I keep my thumb there, making her ride the ecstasy until it cripples her, until she sags in my hold and her back slides down the window. I'm not gentle when I extract my fingers. The risk that I'll start fucking her all over again is too big. The sooner I get my hand off her pussy, the safer. Before she can hit the ground, I catch her around the waist, dragging her body hard against mine. I want to make her ride my cock just like that, but it's close to nine, and Candice will soon do the tea round.

Testing her balance, I let her go. She slumps against the window, her chest heaving and her pretty lips parted. Her hand goes to her neck, drawing my gaze to the marks my fingers have left. I shocked her, but she liked it. Her wetness and climaxes don't lie. It's as if she comes to life in the next second. She pulls down her dress, straightens her jacket, and smooths a hand over her hair.

Like nothing happened.

"Don't do that," I grit out.

"What the hell, Brian? Are you out of your mind?"

"Don't make like you didn't just come the hardest in your life."

"We're in my *office*," she says through gritted teeth, "and you need to leave it now. This is a limit for me. You know that."

That's it. That's exactly it. It's not about the thrill of getting off in the office or getting caught. It's about that itchy, niggly, fucking damn limit.

"I'm tired of this." I motion between us.

Her breath catches on a hitch. "This? Us?"

"I'm tired of hiding." I'm crowding her, not giving her space to move away. "I'm tired of being your dirty little secret. I want to be able to show my affection for you openly, no matter who the hell is watching."

She's quiet for a moment, her palms pressed flat on the window behind her. "Voyeurism isn't my thing. I know you said—"

"I don't mean it literally. I don't mean I want to fuck you with

my fingers no matter who walks through that door. I want to hold your hand in public. I want to sleep next to you and wake up with your face on my pillow.”

The weight of my statement drags me away from her. I take several steps back, giving her the distance she craved earlier. She remains plastered against the window, her face ashen.

Threading my fingers through my hair, I let my chest deflate, allowing the air to turn cold with the space between us. My voice is as despondent as the rest of me. “No more hiding.”

A tremble runs over her body. She speaks so softly I have to strain my ears to hear.

“Are you giving me an ultimatum?”

“No, Jane.” Defeated. I sound like what I feel, because there’s the truth for you. “I’ll take whatever you’re giving.” Stripped naked to the bone. “That’s how desperate I am for you.”

The seconds stretch on as we stare at each other, me vulnerable and her holding all the power. I’ve fucked her weak against the backdrop of everything she stands to lose, but I’m the one on my knees.

It’s not her words that pour into my questions and fill them up, it’s her silence.

Goddamn, it hurts.

I break first.

I’m the coward who walks away from the pain.