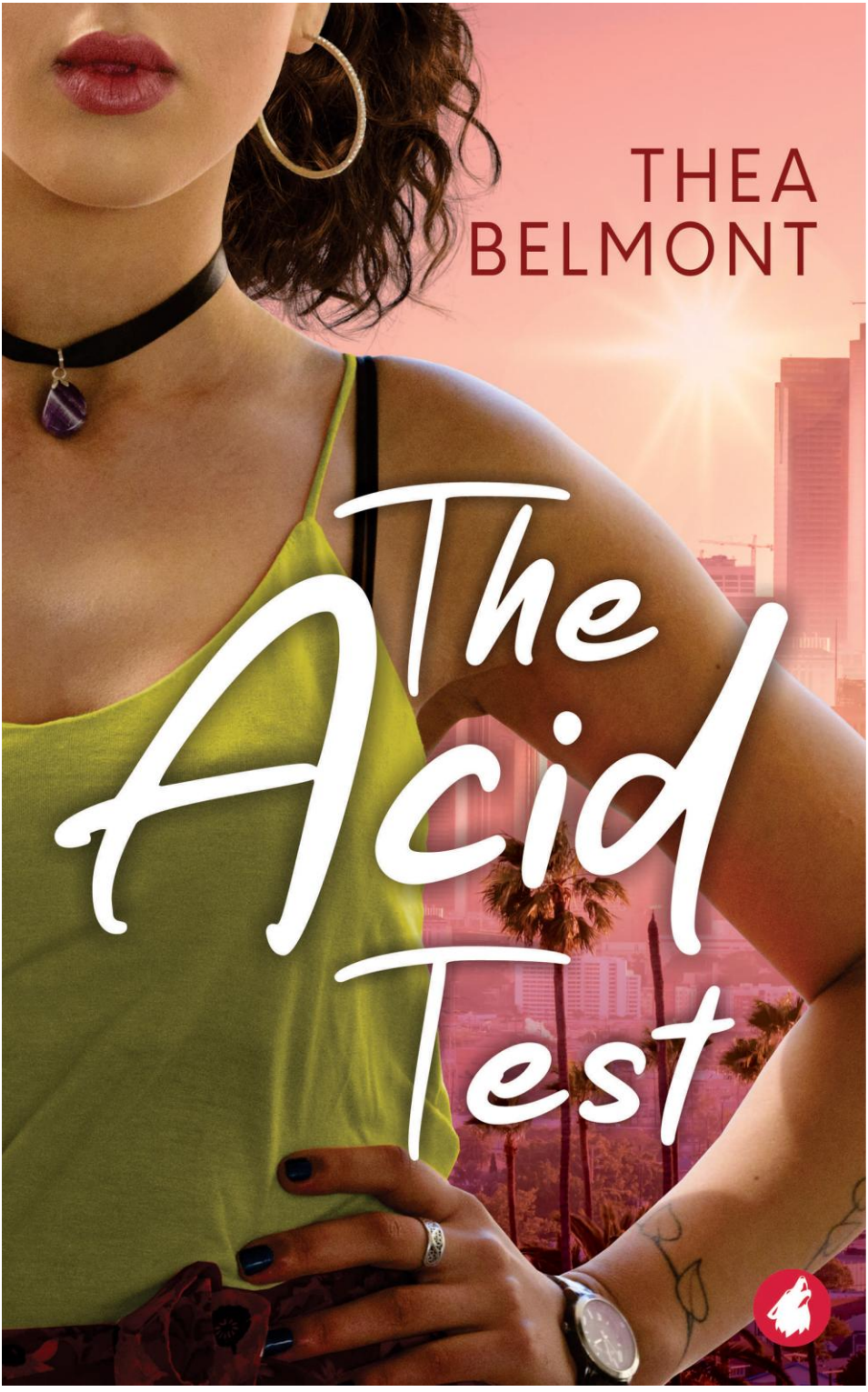

THEA
BELMONT
The Acid Test

Chapter 1

Jen picked up the glass of pinot grigio from the hotel bartender and returned to her seat by the open window, looking over the passing city life from the hotel's twentieth floor.

She took a sip, and the tartness ran over her tongue. It was better than the wine she'd had on the plane, but it still tasted more acidic than it should have for ten dollars a glass.

Lifting the glass to the sun, she tilted it, watching it glimmer.

The sun was setting, casting the warm golden hour of light across the cityscape that made some old cogs in her brain think about advertisements for the city and how she'd use it in a tourism ad without ever using the words *New York City*.

The city skyline was enough to sell it, but with a glass of wine, she could set a promise for a vacation. It was easy to sell people on dreams. Even if the reality was a ten-dollar glass of wine that tasted like a bargain-bin find.

She hadn't done marketing for over five years, having been relieved to take a high-paid role as an executive assistant to her best friend, Anna Walters.

At least Anna respected her.

The hotel bar was quiet, which was unsurprising for a Tuesday evening in mid-March. But Anna had asked if she could visit the New York office for a meeting with her since Perry, their global head of sales, had broken his leg in a skiing incident. Given the meeting's importance—business speak for *financial risk*—Anna was taking over the meeting.

An all-expenses paid trip meant a break away from the monotony of routine—something Jen needed now and then.

It would be nicer for she and Anna to sit upstairs in a hotel room, drinking wine and watching trash TV on the company's card, but Anna

was flying in tomorrow morning so that she could spend an extra day with Rob and Lizzie.

All that meant was that Jen had to find her own entertainment—something she tended to only look for when far from home.

Scanning the room, she glanced over the few people there and thought about potential prospects.

There were mostly men in button-down shirts over slacks, chatting with each other, as well as a few women with their hair blown out, their make-up understated, and gold or silver jewelry kept simple, excluding a few chunky necklaces.

Jen wore a cobalt-blue blouse that brought out the red of her hair and the blue in her eyes. She had the shirt tucked into her knee-length pencil skirt. Even far from home, around strangers, she remained in her tall stiletto heels because she liked how they looked on her, despite how they pinched.

An ugly color caught her eye as a woman moved to lean against the bar in ridiculous, oversized jeans that sagged down her hips, exposing a rim of boxer briefs in a hideous acid-green color, only revealed because the khaki-colored T-shirt the woman wore had ridden up her back as she'd bent forward.

It was the kind of green that Jen had grown up with on Saturday-morning cartoons, whenever they referred to radioactive waste.

It was only when she moved her gaze from the underwear up to the woman's face that she realized her stare had been spotted.

The woman stared back, her aviator sunglasses pushing dark hair back from her face as she arched an eyebrow.

Jen returned to gazing out at the cityscape, sipping her wine and thinking about work. She shoved the ugly green underwear that had hugged the woman's hips far out of mind.

Tomorrow, she would be taking minutes at the making of a multimillion-dollar deal. The office was a five-minute drive from here, the client some "influencer" who spent their days playing dress-up, stirring make-believe cauldrons, and playing video games for younger generations on YouTube.

Jen reached to take another sip of her wine. Only drops remained. Setting it down, she pressed back against the armchair and tried to decide if getting another receipt was worth invoicing. Anna would approve it. Hell, Jen could buy a decent bottle of wine and Anna would sign off on it without a blink, but that wasn't the point.

The point was, was it worth the annoyance of *itemizing* and uploading the receipts?

"For you," came the familiar voice of the bartender. "From the woman at the bar."

Jen glanced at the glass.

The wine was straw-colored, more golden than her previous glass.

Taking it tentatively, she brought it closer and breathed in the bouquet before taking a sip. It was sweet, but not overpoweringly so. There was still a soft tartness to it before the cool, refreshing taste spilled over her tongue.

It was better than what she'd chosen earlier.

Jen looked to where the woman was still leaning against the bar—not sitting—as she sipped what looked like a glass of red wine. With its lighter ruby color, she'd bet on a pinot noir.

Glass in hand, Jen picked up her handbag and moved to sit next to the woman, setting her glass down loud enough to make a sharp *tink* noise.

The buyer of her wine didn't look up from where she was staring, but a smug smile tugged at her lips.

Here, this close, Jen could tell that the woman was at least a good decade and a half younger than herself. Maybe more than that.

"*Why* did you buy me a glass of wine?" Jen asked.

Only then did the woman tilt her face to look at her. Now, up close, she faced Jen with bright golden-brown eyes. "I saw you looking at my ass, so I thought I'd make the first move."

"I wasn't looking at your ass."

"Are you sure?"

"I was looking at the hideous green underwear," Jen corrected, her eyes flicking down to the woman's waist.

The oversized shirt had been fixed, covering the absurd green, but up close, Jen could the see the graphic T-shirt had some version of Cthulhu that was made to appear "cute," with a bulbous head, large eyes, and small wings above the words *Live, Laugh, Lovecraft*.

Ridiculous. Jen thought with utter disgust.

The woman laughed. "Not a fan of Cthulhu?" she asked, moving to grab her T-shirt and stretch it to ensure that Jen had the unpleasant view of seeing it without wrinkles.

"I'd rather see cosmic horrors beyond my understanding than some 'adorable' version of it."

The woman's face went from something smug and amused to surprised. "Fan of horror? Or just Lovecraft?"

Jen shook her head. Horror, with its love of blood and guts and shaming women? No. The occasional one stood out, and sure, yes, *that* she enjoyed. But it'd been a while since she'd sat and watched a good horror. These days, she avoided it.

"What do you like, then?" The woman asked, her head tilting.

"You're too young for me."

"Thirty-four is too young for you?" the woman said. "Are you worried my prefrontal cortex is taking *extra* time to develop? Or the fact that I graduated college over a decade ago means I haven't had enough real-life experience to understand what *consent* means?"

"Given your shirt and your love of the ugliest shade of green, the former seems likely."

The woman laughed again, the sound warm and bright. "What would be an acceptable color for an adult with a fully developed prefrontal cortex, then?"

"A nicer shade of green."

"Ohh. Like an emerald? Do you prefer your women in jewel tones?"

"I would have chosen something dark and rich to make the warmth of your eyes stand out."

The woman gave a short, pleased *ha* before she reached out a hand. "Camila."

"'Camila,'" Jen said, ignoring the outstretched hand. "Not 'Callie' or some other derivative?"

"Camila. Why, were you planning on calling me something else?"

"Nothing so crass." Jen's gaze passed over her body, and the way Camila stood, overconfident but still keeping to her own space. "Jennifer," she answered the unspoken question.

"'Jennifer,'" Camila quoted back, her eyes widening as if mocking her. "Did you want to get to know me, or did you want to see me out of these ugly green clothes, upstairs?"

She was confident in an obnoxious way that Jen found attractive. There was a safety in it. It would make it easier to leave in the morning

"Are you always this vulgar?"

"'Vulgar'?" Camila repeated. "Wow, Jennifer. This icy routine is a turn-on for me. So, if you're not interested, you're going to have to be explicit and spell it out for my underdeveloped frontal lobe."

"Then you're either a masochist or into some verbal humiliation thing."

"Take me upstairs and find out."

Jen let the offer sit for a beat. Whether it was the confidence, or the fact that Jen really just wanted a distraction for the evening, she ended up finishing the dregs of the remaining wine and looked to Camila. "Do you have a room, or are we going back to mine?"

Camila stood up, pulling out the hotel key card before leading Jen to the elevator.

It seemed like a bad idea, sleeping with the first person who annoyed her just enough to turn her on, but the two glasses of wine were sitting nicely inside of her, and from this distance, she could detect an expensive masculine scent.

Camila's room was a little larger than her own, the bed a king instead of a queen, but Jen barely noticed. Camila was looking at her, stepping forward with that annoying smug face as she reached up and brushed her thumb along Jen's jawline.

Jen stepped back before the kiss came. "Get undressed first. I am not kissing someone wearing *that* shirt."

Camila only smiled as she shrugged off the tee, revealing a sports bra with what looked like purple bubbles along the elastic band. The boxer briefs still sat high, matching.

Jen rolled her eyes and stepped forward, kissing her as she tried to ignore the underwear.

It became less noticeable when Camila pressed fingertips against Jen's hips, tugging her close as she kissed her deeply, taking her time to taste along her mouth.

Camila had been drinking a pinot, Jen confirmed, as her tongue brushed against her. A better choice than a white, from how she tasted.

"What do you like?" Camila asked, moving her mouth to kiss Jen's neck, reaching to undo the buttons of her white shirt.

"Do you need to be shown?" Jen bit out.

There was a warm laugh against her throat as Camila began to nip at her neck, kissing it softly as she dragged the shirt down Jen's arms before tossing it aside. "If you want to."

"Given the vile underwear, I assume you will need a step-by-step instruction guide. Shall I find pictures for you to follow along?"

The woman's hands slid over her waist, her teeth on Jen's shoulder as she managed to hit a sensitive spot that had Jen sucking in a breath, biting back the moan.

"I'm very good at following instructions, *Jennifer*," Camila said, saying her name like an epithet.

Was Camila poking fun at her?

When the woman lifted her head up to kiss her mouth again, Jen bit her lip hard enough to expect a gasp—instead she got a low moan before Camila began kissing her harder, until they were both stumbling toward the bed.

Her skirt was unzipped and shoved down her thighs before she was pushed onto the bed. Camila stood before her, taking off the sports bra and boxer briefs, revealing her warm, toned body before she straddled Jen's thigh and pressed her shoulders to the bed.

Camila pressed a knee against the black lace of her underwear, simultaneously undoing Jen's bra and throwing it away. Her breath was hot against her as she kissed Jen over and over, a hand combing through her hair while the other held her hips, encouraging Jen to rock against the knee pressed between her thighs. This would have been easier if Jen couldn't feel the deliciously wet movement of Camila rubbing against her thigh.

"You know *Jennifer*," Camila said, the name still used teasingly—though the rocking of her hips against the lace was somehow doing exactly what Jen needed. "I expected some snarky commentary from you. But now you're just a beautiful puddle of a woman, letting me ride your thigh as you moan beneath me."

"Do you need commentary to get off?" Jen's voice was already shaking at the effort of holding back moans. "Are you one of those types of people who needs to be told what a *good job* they're doing?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I know I'm doing a good job." Camila grinned as she hovered above her, one hand cupping Jen's face as she dragged her thumb against Jen's bottom lip. "I can feel your legs clenching and shaking." As if to prove her point, Camila hooked a hand underneath the bare thigh she wasn't riding and lifted it up so that Jen's leg was propped in the air, pressed against Camila's waist.

Somehow, this put her at a better angle, and Jen's hands clenched at the cover beneath her, her back arching as her body began to squeeze urgently.

The woman was a *menace*.

"There's a lovely flush spilling down your neck and chest…" Camila said, running her fingertips down Jen's throat to her clavicle.

For one moment, when Camila's hand was against her throat, Jen almost arched into it but then stopped herself. It would have been embarrassing to let that much of herself show.

"I can see you swallowing back the noises you want to make. Are you worried that I might get too full of myself if I hear them? Or are you just embarrassed about how loud you can be?"

"God, you're insufferable." Jen's eyes squeezed shut.

Camila's hips were still rocking as she bent forward, kissing her again, allowing her own moans to roll against Jen's tongue as if to show her how easy it was to let go.

Jen's leg shook in the woman's hand as a loud, high-pitched moan slipping out as she arched against her, feeling the orgasm shake at her as she pressed against the heat of Camila's body.

Camila had the audacity to give a warm, throaty noise as she kissed her, until Jen relaxed against the bedding and slowly blinked up at the ceiling.

There was only the pause of Camila's mouth gently kissing her shoulder, kissing down her collarbone, before she adjusted to moving in between Jen's thighs.

"Wait, you didn't—" Jen tried to say, as her underwear began to be dragged down her thighs, but Camila sat up, kissing her dispute silent.

"Soon. I want to see how you taste after I've made you come."

Jen thought about arguing, but the woman's tongue was soft and quick, and she forgot about whatever words were in her throat, instead finding herself clutching at the woman's shoulder as hips rocked against Camila's face.

It was frustrating to find out that the woman who wore a horrendous shade of green and an ugly graphic T-shirt was as good with her tongue as she was with other body parts.

The second time around, it was harder for Jen to keep her moans quiet.

Chapter 2

Jen had returned to her own room at some god-awful hour and managed to get herself into the shower and into bed long enough to squeeze in a few hours before she had to wake up and do her hair and make-up.

"VileHag"—aka "Mildred," the potential new brand ambassador—was some top-rated content creator who'd been on YouTube and the like for over a decade, playing games and making bizarre videos in which she pretended to be a witch.

However, the important marketing point was that VileHag had over sixty million subscribers on YouTube alone. She was especially big with both the European and South American market, and Pluto was looking to grow its market in those areas.

More importantly, she was known to be a big drinker of energy drinks, having done multiple videos where she ranked them, using her witchy persona as a gimmick.

Absurd.

Jen could only imagine how weird the woman was going to be in person. On her YouTube videos, she usually wore a silver wig and painted her skin green, while wearing lavish contouring make-up.

Jen hoped that she wouldn't be attending the office meeting like that, but if she did, it'd at least be easy to get some free PR while they had lunch.

"Welcome, Ms. Green," the receptionist greeted Jen as she signed herself in. "Ms. Walters just came in and said to tell you that she'll meet you in the Hydra boardroom. It's on the twenty-third floor. Would you like me to send a coffee order up so it's ready for when you arrive?"

Anna had a meeting scheduled with their Hong Kong office yesterday. It'd likely been rescheduled to this morning for some reason.

"Latte, please. No sugar."

"Full cream milk?"

"Lactose-free."

The receptionist nodded before handing her a guest pass for the elevator.

She headed upstairs to the Hydra boardroom and introduced herself to the New York sales team one by one. All of them looked to be in their twenties. Some appeared a little older, but they were all dressed professionally.

Jen had met one or two before on other programs, but usually Anna worked on international projects. It was only due to the size of the brand deal and the fact that the head of marketing was recovering from his injuries that they were at this meeting.

Her coffee was handed off by the lovely staff, and then Anna entered the room, iced matcha latte in hand. As she set up the presentation, she spoke with the staff, reminding them that this was a large business opportunity.

Anna had her chin-length blonde hair pulled back from her face, and wore glasses perched on the end of her nose as she looked down at her screen. Her eyes met Jen's, and she wore a knowing grin and an arched eyebrow as she tapped at her neck.

Fuck's sake. Jen had carefully covered up the marks Camila had left, but clearly some of the make-up had rubbed off onto her collar.

Buttoning up the higher button, she stared at the presentation's first slide and frowned at the title *VileHag* with the subtitle *Brand Ambassador*.

There were three drinks set in the middle of the table: their original salmon pink with the classic logo—the word *Pluto* had a wave curled around the *O* and a larger wave behind it, their rainbow Pride limited-edition release, and the new ambassador flavor in its purple can that bore a sickening green apple embossed with a dripping poisonous appearing liquid over an apple.

Jen had a sudden sinking feeling as she stared at the last drink. She looked up to see Anna's questioning brow raise and resolved to ignore it.

She was overthinking the problem.

The door to the boardroom opened once again, and Jen watched as an all-too-familiar woman entered the room.

"Mildred!" Anna said, coming to shake her hand. "Good to see you again. Can I get you a coffee?"

Camila—apparently Mildred—held up a canned drink of Pluto and grinned. "I'm okay. Got my morning start." Her gaze dragged over the room, looking over everyone until she came eye to eye with Jen. She paused, her lips parting in soft surprise. She blinked it away and began walking into the room.

The sales team had carefully spread out so as not to set a divide between both sides of the room. Camila strode around the table, individually shaking hands with everyone before getting to Jen.

She stood there in a dark button-down shirt and tight black jeans, her shirt collar open enough that Jen could see the hint of cleavage as the woman loomed over her, the same expensive perfume washing over Jen once again.

All Jen could remember in that moment was her nose buried in the woman's neck as she curled into Camila and listened to her pant in her ear.

"Hi," Camila said.

"Jennifer Green," she greeted her, "executive assistant to Anna Walters." She took Camila's hand and shook it, trying not to remember the previous night, and where their hands had been, before she turned back to the laptop screen, her notes ready. She marked down only the beginning of the meeting and the names of the attendees while hoping her make-up hid how hot her face felt.

Anna was going to laugh at her.

The entire presentation felt like a blur. Camila sat across from her and was quiet as she dutifully listened to each and every person, facing them as they walked through the brand strategy and what that would mean, as well as explaining their vision for the company.

Then, at the end, arriving at the Q&A, Camila sat her drink down, looking over them as her blunt nails tapped against the table. "I don't mean to be rude, but you've marketed your idea as if I'm a streamer."

There was an awkward pause as people looked at her.

Camila gave a soft laugh and then looked down at her lap. "I don't expect everyone to understand, but you're telling me that in a multinational energy drink company whose room is skewed with twentysomethings, no one here knows the difference between a content creator and a streamer?"

Anna, ever diplomatic, leaned back in her seat. "My daughter loves you, and when I showed her this presentation, she warned me that it was too focused on your…MOBA platform?"

"MOBA stands for *multiplayer online battle arena*," Camila explained. "Usually battle royale style, or team vs team. I get a lot of recognition, good and bad, due to the type of fans in those games. But that's not what my channel is about. I do that to show women that they can enter male-dominated spaces."

The sales team began to look awkward, shuffling through their pages while Anna remained calm. "My daughter is fifteen, and she credits your work as critical satire for people to examine how they view women and society. Your trad-witch videos are a critique on the tradwife content that was flooding social media. To quote her."

Camila's bright smile that Jen had witnessed last night appeared for the first time since the meeting had started. "It is. A lot of people don't get that."

"She gets her critical thinking from her godmother," Anna said with a gesture toward Jen. "Tell you what. I have a reservation at the Turtle and Duck across the road for lunch. Why don't we head down there and chat over a glass of wine and some food?"

Camila's eyes darted again to Anna before she nodded. "The restaurant knows I'm celiac?"

"The restaurant is strictly gluten-free, so there's no risk of cross-contamination," Jen assured her.

"Are you celiac?"

"No. I do my research."

Camila blinked and then grinned. "I appreciate your research, Jennifer."

If the setting hadn't been corporate, Jen would have rolled her eyes. Instead, she finalized the meeting's minutes and set her laptop away in her handbag, pretending to be busy as she tried not to look at Camila for too long.

Because if she did, she'd start remembering last night and the way Camila had said *Jennifer* as she came against her tongue.

Jesus, how had this happened? An entire massive city and they both were at the same hotel at the same time?

What a fuckup.

They filed out of the room one by one until Anna grabbed her wrist, holding her back as the sales team took to the elevators.

"What's going on?" Anna asked, her eyes narrowed. "You're acting odd around our *potential* ambassador."

"After lunch."

Anna stared at her before she seemed satisfied and nodded, leading Jen out of the room toward the elevators.



Dim golden lights illuminated the restaurant. The host sat them down at a large table toward the back of the restaurant, where a partition broke the room up, dividing the larger and smaller seatings.

Jen took her seat on Anna's left, expecting Camila to sit on Anna's right or across from them. But, to her horror, Camila took her seat on Jen's other side. Her perfume, a warm scent of cedar and amber, filled the air around them.

Jesus, she felt like she was back in college again with the way her hormones were acting.

Ignoring the table conversation, Jen looked over the menu, deciding on a steak as Anna ordered two bottles of wine for the table.

It was only when she was nudged that Jen tuned in to the sales team chatter and tried her best to be polite without engaging with Camila. Then, halfway through the meal, with a glass of shiraz in hand, the woman asked her, "Do you play any games?"

Jen took a sip of her wine and turned to face her. "No," she said. And then she felt Anna's foot strike her. "I had an Atari growing up. And Lizzie has convinced me to play some party games on her…Nintendo?" She glanced at Anna, who nodded.

"Lizzie is the only one that can bully Jen into playing a game."

"Is that so?" Camila asked. "Fighting games?"

"Fighting, tennis…" Jen sighed, trying to remember. It'd been a little while since she'd had dinner at Anna's. Lizzie was also getting to an age where she went out to the movies with her friends more regularly in the evenings. "Some trivia ones."

Camila's expression was familiar, her mouth a wide smile as her eyebrow quirked. "So, no mobile-app games?"

"No."

"Not even sudoku? Crosswords?"

"No. Is there a problem with that?"

Anna's foot kicked her again, and Jen was starkly reminded of where she was, having become wrapped up in how annoyingly smug Camila was being.

"It's refreshing," Camila said. "Nice not to be around an echo chamber. But tell me, Jennifer,"—and there again was that annoying, sharp inflection over her name, like she was making fun of her—"did I hear you correctly when you introduced yourself to me that your name is *Jenny Green*?"

"Jennifer Green."

Camila's smile went wide. "Jenny Greenteeth."

Uncertain what that meant Jen was becoming more and more annoyed by how Camila looked at her, like there was a secret message in her words. "What are you getting at?" Was this a childish joke from the nineties that had escaped her, or some euphemism for having salad in her teeth?

"She's a hag," Mildred said. "Or a grindylow, to be specific. I just find it…kismet that Jenny Greenteeth is working for a brand I'm interested in being an ambassador with—given my moniker, VileHag."

"Well…" Jen began. What should she say in response? The sales team seemed to be listening with rapt attention, so she grabbed her glass and said, "Here's to kismet."

Camila tapped her own wineglass against hers. "To kismet."

Thankfully, when Jen turned to Anna, she appeared happy, sipping her chardonnay as she continued to poke at her garden salad.

As Camila thankfully turned her attention onto others, Jen slid her side of fries across the table to Anna to appease her for having been rude. "Potatoes are vegan."

"Yes, they are," Anna said happily, reaching for the small bowl with her fork.

Quietly, Jen excused herself from the table and made her way to the bathroom. Despite the stylish venue, the bathroom was bland: a brick wall painted white, with black and brass fixtures. On the back of the toilet stall was a letter-sized flyer advertising that the Turtle and Duck had a happy hour between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m.

It was only when she went to wash her hands that she again came face-to-face with Camila, who was standing in the small room, hands buried in the pockets of her jeans.

"I didn't know," Camila said. "In case you thought I knew who you were last night."

Jen washed her hands, dried them before she turned to face the woman. "I know," she said.

"Did you know who I was?"

"No. Despite researching celiacs, I did not dig around Google to see a picture of what you looked like without green make-up and a wig. Almost every photo that came up was you in green. I think the others had you in prosthetics."

"I don't tend to have many pictures of myself out there." Camila's brows pressed together before the annoying smug look returned. "So, we're on the same page?"

"I wouldn't say that," Jen said. "For one, I have a bone to pick with you about the marks you left on me. Anna noticed one, and God knows if any of the sales team did."

"Show me."

Jen paused, her heart thudding at the order. But despite the public location, she reached up, undoing the top two buttons.

Camila stepped forward, tugging the shirt collar aside and looking over her neck. Her finger brushed against the mark, and Jen's eyes fluttered shut, breathing in Camila's perfume.

Sliding a hand around the back of her neck, Camila whispered, "You didn't look at me once when the meeting started. You kept your eyes down, writing notes. Were you thinking about me?"

Jen sucked in a breath. "They'll notice we're missing."

"We'll make it quick."

"This is inappropriate. Anna is asking you to be our brand ambassador."

Camila's head tilted as she stepped closer. "Do you think my integrity is so poor that sex could persuade me one way or another in this deal?"

This time allowing herself to roll her eyes, Jen pushed away from her. "We're in the middle of lunch. I don't intend to mix business with pleasure."

Exiting the bathroom, she drew in a breath. She tried not to think about how close she'd been to saying, *fuck it* and having sex in a toilet stall like she was twenty-three again.

But while yesterday had been an unintentional mistake, she knew who Camila was now, and she had no intention of sleeping with her again—especially while they were in negotiations.

Chapter 3

Anna and Jen ducked out after lunch, leaving the sales team to continue to try and close with Camila as Anna ran to another meeting.

Jen returned to the office far, *far* away from Camila, with her perfume still in her nose.

The woman had been clever and somehow *utterly* full of herself the entire lunch, and yet all Jen wanted to do was meet her in the bathroom again. Have her seduce her again until her fingers were dancing over her skin as she kissed her like she had the night before.

It was a dangerous want.

Instead, she sat in one of the spare office rooms and confirmed Anna's calendar, sorted through the inbox, and returned a few calls to assure that Anna would be in touch later that day or early tomorrow. Given that it was a Monday, it would likely be tomorrow.

The sun was setting, turning the room pink and gold, when Anna pushed open the door, set two glasses and a bottle of wine down, and took a seat on the opposite side of the desk.

"It's after five," she said. "I'm exhausted and the sales team hasn't returned, so I'm assuming they're using their corporate card to get drunk. We may as well do the same in a classier fashion."

Jen saved the document she'd be using to tailor an itinerary for a meeting next month while the bottle was uncorked and then poured. A mouthful of wine would at least make it easier to tell Anna what happened. Anna would either laugh at her or do one of her patented "I'm not angry, just disappointed" faces.

"So, when were you going to tell me that you fucked Camila Rivera?"

Swallowing the mouthful of wine, Jen gave a tight smile. "After I swallowed." She set the glass down. "What gave it away?"

"The bruise on your neck was one thing, but when I saw her flirting with you at the table…it didn't take long to guess. Plus, you came back from the bathroom with your shirt undone. What happened?"

"I didn't realize who she was last night, otherwise I would never have let it become…so unprofessional."

"You looked *mortified* in the boardroom."

Jen pressed her eyes shut as she leaned back in the desk chair. "It was that obvious…"

"To the woman who's known you for the better part of two decades? Yes. To the sales team of twentysomethings who think we're old and boring? Doubtful. I'd put money on them thinking you have an 'out-of-date' critique of our choice of brand ambassador."

"I have an opinion, but we work for a company that's trying to market energy drinks as a healthy alternative to soda, so I don't care enough to vocalize it."

Anna laughed. "I know it's not your dream job, but I hope it's better than your last one."

"The boss is nosy, but I've had worse," Jen teased, smiling at her. "How much did I screw you over…with the ambassador deal?"

"She likes you," Anna said with a shrug, sipping her wine. "And she was clear the reason she hasn't signed yet is because we marketed toward the streaming angle, because that's where Marketing and Sales see the biggest potential for our growth. She wants us to come up with something that's about *her* and what she does."

"Did you want me to redo the presentation for you?"

Anna shook her head. "I'll let the team close her; that's *their* role. She was right. Shows me for thinking that my college-educated sales team knew better than a passionate fifteen-year-old."

"Are you sure? I can do the slide deck."

"At this point, if the team can't close a deal, I'll get Lizzie to do it." Anna laughed. "God, Jen, you should have seen her *Crucible* presentation. Honestly, I'm starting to think I should hire high schoolers to do all my presentations if that's the quality of work."

"I think that it's a reflection of *Lizzie's* quality of work when she likes the topic. Don't forget that her *Hamlet* presentation last year was a black-and-white two-slide show."

Anna hummed in agreement, taking a deeper drink of her wine. "Anyway, going back to what I was saying, you didn't screw anything up

with Mildred. You're both consenting adults. But how did you run into her?"

"The hotel bar," Jen grimaced at the memory. "Who did her booking? Why did they choose *that* hotel?"

"Whoever's been her point of contact on the team organized and booked it, and I imagine, like you, they chose the nicest hotel that the travel booking system recommended, even though company policy says staff should choose something cheap."

How ridiculous.

Jen finished her glass of wine and set it on the table. Anna filled it back up.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Anna told her. "She's not an employee, she's *not* reporting to you in any way, and it's not like you went to bed with any intention of making a deal. You had sex. It happens."

"How often have you faced this sort of situation?"

"Me, personally? Never. But I married Rob when I was twenty-seven. My clients back then were the general public, if you recall. And usually, they were yelling at me and calling me a host of misogynistic names. Not exactly panty-dropping behavior."

Jen smiled inwardly.

"There are people working here who met their partners through client mixers and the like."

"You're talking about it like she's just the employee of another company."

Anna shrugged. "In some ways, she is. She has a team that works with her brand and manages the finances and the legal and day-to-day business. And while she's a self-made woman, at the end of the day there is a team of people she pays wages to, ergo there's a company."

"That does not always mean a company."

"No, but she's registered with an EIN," Anna pointed out.

"You could have just said that."

"It would have undersold her as an individual," Anna shrugged. "She started off with nothing but an internet connection and a computer. Now she's a multimillionaire with over sixty million subscribers on her YouTube channel and her own production company. It's impressive."

It all went over Jen's head. Maybe if she were still working in the marketing department, she'd have her finger on the pulse of these kinds of game-playing influencers—or whatever they were. But as Jen's assistant,

all she needed to know was how to manage the regular contacts in Jen's schedule for the next year. A lot of the client stuff was done by the sales team and filtered to her only when Anna needed to be looped in, such as the case here with a brand ambassador deal that required executive sign-off per their policy.

She knew more about tariffs and acquisitions these days than so-called influencers.

"Do you plan on sleeping with her again?" Anna asked.

"No!" Jen said, and then, as Anna continued to stare at her, repeated, "*No*."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did. She seemed very engaged with you—not to mention that's she's clever and beautiful."

"She's over fifteen years younger than me."

Anna laughed at her. "She's in her mid-thirties, Jen, not some kid fresh out of home. And it apparently didn't stop you the first time."

No, it hadn't. But that didn't mean she was going to do it again. No matter how good the sex had been.

But Jen didn't want to think about Camila anymore. "How's Rob? Did he fix the TV, or did you buy a new one?"

"New one," Anna said, a groan in her voice. "Three days of television parts all over my living room floor before he admitted defeat. But that does remind me: Two weeks, Thursday, are you free for dinner? He's got some new kitchen gadget and has apparently 'cracked' some recipe."

"Will Lizzie be there?"

Anna frowned. "Yes, and I'm hoping she will talk to you. She seems a little sad of late. The only thing that's cheered her up was finding out that I was meeting with 'VileHag.' She asked to come with me, but I managed to convince her that when the marketing campaign starts, she can come to the photo shoot and meet her there."

"Is she sad because of school or friends?"

"I don't know," Anna said. "But I worry. She was going out with her friends for a while, and now she stays at home, locked in her room. It could just be her being a teenager, but I would appreciate if you could be her cool, fun godmother. Rob and I are at a loss, and every time I ask, she becomes more and more withdrawn."

"I'll ask," Jen agreed. "But I wouldn't worry. She's a good kid, and being a teenager is hard."

"Raising one makes me feel like a new parent again."

Chapter 4

Jen didn't expect to see Camila again. The hotel was busy, and she thought the sales team would be out partying with her until the late hours of the morning.

However, as Jen entered the hotel lobby, Camila was talking to a clerk about a missing key card.

"Did you lose it while partying with Sales?" Jen walked past, unable to bite back the comment.

Camila turned to face her, her expression melting from surprise to a bright smile. "No, I had the very sexy, intelligent idea of leaving it upstairs in my room this morning. I blame it on lack of sleep."

Jen held her tongue. The woman was still dressed in the same clothes from their meeting, but she had rolled her sleeves up, which gave her a relaxed appearance.

"Have you had dinner?" Jen asked.

"No. Where did you want to go?"

"I wasn't—" She paused, reminding herself *again* that there was a potential deal going through and Camila had yet to sign anything. "The hotel restaurant does gluten-free."

Camila shook her head. "You don't have to spend time with me if you don't want to."

"I'm aware," Jen said, her eyes narrowing. "Anna would have my head if I didn't make you feel comfortable."

"There are other ways I could feel comfortable. We could order room service," Camila suggested. "And to be clear, I've already told my lawyer I'm interested in signing the ambassador deal. They're finalizing some recommendations for adding some minor clauses, but you're under no constraint to keep me entertained unless you want to."

Ignoring her tone, Jen asked, "What 'minor clauses' are you adding?"

"Your company has a bunch of language that allows you to end the deal if anything comes out that goes against the company's mission statement—standard practice for any company. I'm having the same written in for me: If it comes out that you guys are making your drinks with the souls of first-born children, I can terminate my contract."

"Didn't you rank energy drinks by how much they taste like certain 'souls'?"

"So you *do* watch my videos!" Camila said.

"Hardly. It was in an earlier version of the presentation."

Camila smiled. "But it stayed in your head."

"Because of how ridiculous it is."

"Like an energy drink company having a revenue in the hundreds of millions?"

Despite the accuracy, Jen felt annoyance squeeze at her. Her and Anna shit-talking the company was one thing—they worked there—but Camila was another story. "Why choose to be with us if we're *so* ridiculous, then?"

"Because Pluto ranks as one of the top twenty companies for equal pay in the world and your C-suite is almost fifty percent women."

Jen tilted her head. "And you drink our product."

"I won't say no to free drinks," Camila smiled. "But I wouldn't be signing on to be an ambassador if I didn't think the company was worth doing it with. But enough of that. I'm hungry and curious about the room service, and I want you to join me."

Jen scoffed. "Does being this direct usually work on the people you pursue?"

Camila gave a throaty chuckle, her tongue pressing into her cheek as she stepped forward and said in a low whisper, "It's only working on you because I know that you could barely look at me all day. And when you managed, you couldn't stop staring at my mouth. What I don't know is if you were remembering how good I am with it or if you really wanted to kiss me."

Jen swallowed. If she hadn't already given herself away by staring at her mouth again while Camila spoke, she might have managed to refuse her. Instead, she just flicked her gaze away and said, "I was planning to order room service for myself anyway. May as well charge it to one room."

It was a mistake. It was a messy mistake.

But if the contract was being signed, then that meant that Anna would be handing it over to the marketing team to worry about, while she would go back to her many duties.

Which meant that Camila and she would not be seeing each other again very much, or probably ever.

Jen sat with her skirt hiked up around her waist, her silk underwear somewhere in the corner of the room, as she straddled Camila. Pluto's new brand ambassador thrusted inside of her.

"I like the way you look with your make-up smudged," Camila said, running her thumb over Jen's bottom lip as three fingers of her other hand curled inside of her. "Especially your lipstick."

There was an embarrassing moan as she brushed her tongue over the thumb stroking Jen's bottom lip, and an all-too-pleased look washed over Camila's face.

"Shut up," Jen said.

"No, I don't think I will. It's cute when you're annoyed at me as I…" She trailed off as she splayed her fingers, stroking over a spot that had Jen panting, trying to remember why she'd been annoyed in the first place as another high-pitched moan spilled from her lips.

When Jen opened her eyes, she was face-to-face with that disgusting smug expression looking at her with a far-too-sharp grin.

"Exactly," Camila said. "That's my girl."

"I am *not* your girl." Jen's voice had gone somehow tight. The words seemed to run down her spine and make her muscles twitch as she edged closer and closer to climax.

"No? Do you prefer something else? *My queen*? *My princess*?" Camila leaned forward so that her breath brushed against Jen's lips. "Or do you prefer my lovely desperate wretch?"

Jen shivered at the words. They were horrible, humiliating. Yet, as she kissed Camila, she could taste them on her tongue. Like a whiskey, the words were sharp and deliciously warming.

"I should bite you," Jen snapped when Camila pulled back abruptly.

"Room service will be here soon. Do you want to come first, or should I leave you here, on the very edge, when they knock on the door?"

"Don't you dare."

"Say *please*."

Please? She wanted Jen to *beg* for an orgasm?

Camila's mouth moved to her shoulder, sucking a spot until Jen's conviction waivered. "Fine! *Please*," she said.

There was a warm chuckle against her skin, and then Jen was arching as Camila worked fast to get her to orgasm. "It's a good sound you make when you want to come for me."

"It's not about *you*," Jen said, but her scolding tone was soon lost as her voice pitched upward to a keening noise.

There was a knock at the door and the muffled sound of "Room service." But just as Jen was about to come, Camila's mouth was on hers, swallowing the sounds as Jen cried out.

She held her firmly until Jen's muscles relaxed. She was happy to be guided back, lying on pillows as Camila slid out of her and quickly grabbed a robe from the closet, answering the door.

"Thank you. Here, for being so speedy," Camila said, likely handing over a tip.

Fixing her own skirt and shirt, Jen sat up. Camila set a tray of food on the end of the bed.

"*Bon appétit*," Camila said, her voice slipping into a decent French accent as she gave a wild gesture.

From the woman demanding she beg for an orgasm to her turning silly was a whiplash that had Jen pressing her lips into a thin line and pretending to ignore her as she removed the cloche and picked at the Wagyu-and roast-vegetable-skewer.

There was a post-orgasm relaxed feeling settling over her, but the food had a soft miso glaze, and the taste of salt, meat, and roasted vegetables was giving her a distinct sleepy feeling.

"When you're not working, what do you do in your spare time?" Camila asked. "Read?"

"Why are you asking?" Usually, her post-sex talk with someone consisted of safer topics: the weather, the bartender from whatever bar they'd been at, the car ride. Not this.

Camila shrugged. "Curiosity."

"I read in the evenings," she said. "I take it that you play video games to relax?"

"Sometimes. But I do other things. Sudoku, crosswords, masturbation." She said it so nonchalantly that Jen wasn't sure whether she was trying to

gauge her reaction. Camila's brown-eyed gaze flicked up, meeting Jen's as she set the skewer back on the plate. "I try to reduce screen time before bed."

"Once I'm in bed, I usually check Anna's emails, because of the international clients, and then read."

"Do you work a lot because it's Anna or because you like your job?"

The question poised over her. "Both. I was in marketing before I worked for Anna, and despite spending nearly three decades building my career, I lost my love for it. Now I have a boss I like, and I can do my own hours within reason."

There had been a time once, long ago, when she had loved marketing. Now it was only nostalgic. "As it is, I have an early morning," Jen said, pushing up from the bed and fixing her clothes. "Thank you for the room service."

Camila looked up at her from beneath dark lashes. "You didn't want to try out the spa bath first?"

Gazing at her, Jen fixed the collar of her shirt, combing her fingers through her hair. "Your room came with a spa bath?"

Shrugging, Camila gestured to the en suite.

Stepping over, Jen nudged the door open, revealing a large room with a double-headed shower, a toilet and a sink, as well as an oval spa bath with jets. The deep tub was large enough for two people.

"I promise to keep my hands to myself," Camila said, making her way past Jen and turning on the water. "Either way, I'll be enjoying myself."

The bathrobe dropped to the floor, revealing warm brown skin as the brand ambassador posed on the tub's edge with a knowing look and then swirled the quickly flowing water around with one hand, as if checking the temperature.

It *had* been a long time since she'd enjoyed a proper bath. And her muscles were sore. Soaking in hot water would help.

"Fine." Jen unzipped her skirt and tugged the shirt back off.

"Oh? Am I twisting your arm here?" Camila slid into the tub, leaning back on the porcelain rim. Her head rolled as she stared at Jen. "Just admit that you like me."

Jen ignored her, undressing before she stepped into the spa.

Camila was lying back against the tub, her legs slightly parted so that the only comfortable way to sit across from her was to have one foot

between Camila's feet, and the other pressed to the side of the tub, their knees knocking together as the water stirred.

The bath was deep enough that even without the tub entirely filled, the water came to sit just above Jen's chest, and she was able to comfortably ease back her head against the tub's lip.

It was warm, almost hot, and Jen found herself pressing her eyes closed as she tried to ignore the feeling of Camila's legs against hers and the soft minute adjustments that had one leg or the other dragging against hers. It was likely unavoidable movement, but it somehow felt like a slow, deliberate act that was shifting her thighs further and further apart.

"What do you read?" Camila asked.

Jen opened her eyes and looked across the bathtub, watching the woman's fingertips swirl again in the water, creating a rippling pattern across the surface.

"Literary fiction, usually. Sometimes autobiographies that are recommended to me. Anna's big on those, and self-help books."

"*How to Love Yourself* type of books?"

"Mm. More like books on sleeping habits and understanding why we believe lies."

"It's obvious why we believe lies. We either want them to be true, or we're scared that they're true."

"No," Jen said, shaking her head. "We need to believe in them."

"Do we?" Camila asked. "Or do they make us feel safe when we can't bear to sit inside our discomfort?"

The immediate disagreement rose in Jen, a sharp, visceral desire to reject Camila's words, though nothing came out of her mouth. All she could feel was her heart thudding in her chest as everything else melted away.

All she could think about was—

"Jen?" Camila's hand touched against Jen's knee.

Jen flinched, sitting up straight, and swallowed. "I don't know."

"Are you alright?"

"Fine," she lied. It'd been a mistake to come here. It was a mistake to be here, in this bath. What the hell had she been thinking? "I'm sorry, I—"

Camila shifted back, letting her fingers drop away. "Have you worked with Anna for long?"

"Anna?" Jen asked. "Ah…no. I mean, in some ways. Our first jobs were at the same bank, but I left to go into marketing." She paused, remembering

that moment in her life. How excited she'd been for marketing. "I did perfumes for years before finance and insurance. Selling stories to make buyers feel better."

"'Stories'?"

"Perfume advertising is trying to sell someone a scent they can't smell. So you try to sell a moment. You're picking the bottle, the color, the font… all of it to aim at the market you're pursuing, all of it about the idea that wearing the perfume is the reason the model is elegant or successful or desirable. It needs to be a mirror reflecting what they want to be."

"So I bought a perfume based on who I see myself as while wearing it?"

"What perfume do you wear?" Jen asked, feeling herself return to the present. There was something soothing about talking marketing again, explaining it to someone who had genuine curiosity.

Camila's head tilted as she seemed to consider the question. "I buy mine from a bespoke local business."

"How did you come across the business?"

"There's a YouTuber who does goth and alt-brand recommendations—I did a collaboration with her a couple of years ago where she did my make-up and dressed me from some local brands. On that stream, she brought a collection for me to try."

"So that brand chooses people with a viewership that matches their desired market. Given how expensive the perfume smells, I would say they're aiming for a niche market that values the quality of their product."

"You make it sound so simple," Camila said. "But how do you know it's expensive?"

"You've been wearing it all day, and I can still smell the layers of it. It's expensive. If I saw the bottle, I could tell you. Presentation of an item is half the story."

Camila smiled. "What I hear is that you noticed what my perfume smells like the entire day. Were you standing there, trying to catch a whiff of it every time I was nearby?"

Shaking her head, Jen glanced aside. "Why go with Pluto, then? And don't say it's about the women. You know that we're trying to tap into a specific market. What is the story that *you* want from this deal?"

Camila visibly bit down on her lip, and there was a hungry way she looked at her as she sat forward, shifting to move closer.

The water splashed around them, some of it spilling over the tub's lip and splashing onto the tiles. Jen would have said something if Camila weren't practically hovering over her.

She wasn't touching her yet, but she was damned close.

The wet tips of her dark hair dripped down her body, slipping over her breasts. Jen swallowed, suddenly feeling parched.

"Are you trying to convince me out of the contract, Jennifer?"

"I'm curious," Jen whispered. But instead of meeting Camila's eyes, she was looking to where the indent of her teeth had left a mark on her bottom lip.

"Tell you what," Camila said. "I'll tell you why I went with Pluto if I get to put my *personal* number in your phone. You can choose if you want to call or text me or even delete it."

"That's absurd."

"Go and get your phone," Camila ordered as she sat back, giving Jen room to push up and out of the bath. "I know you want the answer."

"Hardly."

"Please. You don't ask questions frivolously." Camila leaned back and returned to playing with the water surface.

Pushing herself up, out of the bath, Jen grabbed at a towel so she didn't drip everywhere on the carpet floor. Heading back into the main bedroom, she dug around her handbag and pulled out her phone before returning to the bathroom.

"Six, two, six," Camila began, reading out a California area code before she provided her mobile number.

Jen input it into her phone underneath the name *Camila Rivera* and showed the new contact to her before setting the phone aside, still holding her towel. "Now?"

Camila was lounging in the tub, having stretched out, leaving little room for her, but she beckoned her with a curl of her finger. When Jen stepped closer, Camila tugged at the towel, throwing it behind Jen before nodding for her to sit on her lap.

"You act like a woman who's never been told no," Jen said, standing before the bath.

"I act like a woman who goes after what she wants with someone who wants to be pursued. But if I have it wrong, you're a big girl who can use her words."

It was spoken so patronizingly that irritation burned in Jen's chest, but when Camila tilted her head, those warm brown eyes looking up at her, she found herself biting back. "I'm not some girl that wants to be chased."

"No," she said, her voice a low purr. "You're a woman who enjoys knowing the effect she has on others." And then she gave a small nod of her head, repeating the gesture for Jen to get back into the bath.

"Why?" Jen bit out.

"Why what?" Camila asked, her head tilting the other way. "Why should you enjoy yourself? Why should you have fun? Or are you asking why a successful thirty-four-year-old woman who knows what she likes is seducing a prickly hot woman?"

Jen's eyes flicked over her. "Sure, fine. Why are you so insistent?"

"Because I like how annoyed you are at being told what to do," Camila said, so quickly as if she was waiting for Jen to ask. "And I know you like it."

"You're insufferable."

"I am," she agreed. "But I'm good with my hands."

Jen stared at her, before coming to slide into the bath, onto her lap.

"Anyone ever slap you?"

"Would it make you feel better?" Camila asked, leaning forward so that their lips almost brushed. "Maybe you just want to dig your nails into my skin as I fuck you, so you can make me bleed."

"You would like that, wouldn't you?" Jen whispered as Camila's mouth brushed against hers this time.

An amused sound slipped from Camila as she began a fast, needy kiss. It was as if Camila were starved for her. Sucking on her bottom lip, she tugged Jen's hips down to grind against her.

The water did little to allow friction, but its warmth had its own benefits.

Jen paused, pulling back just enough that she could look Camila in the eye. "You still haven't told me why you chose Pluto?"

"It's not that deep. I have a caffeine addiction. I already had a preference for Pluto, and now I'll get their drinks for free."

"That's not your reason."

"It's a reason."

"Why did you choose Pluto?" she insisted as Camila's mouth traced down her throat. "Tell me the truth or I'll delete your number."

"I want every vile hag in the world to see me and know that they can be just as weird and strange as me. I want people to know that they're not

alone. And I want to see the name Mildred up on billboards, dripping in green, just so I can see people like you cringe away from it."

Jen would have rolled her eyes and considered leaving the bath, if Camila's hand hadn't already slipped between her thighs and hadn't slowly, gently begun teasing her clit.

"Besides," Camila said. "Whether or not I took the contract, coming out to New York was worth it just for running into you. I don't think I've ever seen someone come so hard around my fingertips."

"Fuck you."

"Baby, you can fuck me if you're good for me," she said before sliding inside of her, kissing Jen's jawline. "Do you think you can be good?"

"I don't like you."

"We both know that's not true."

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