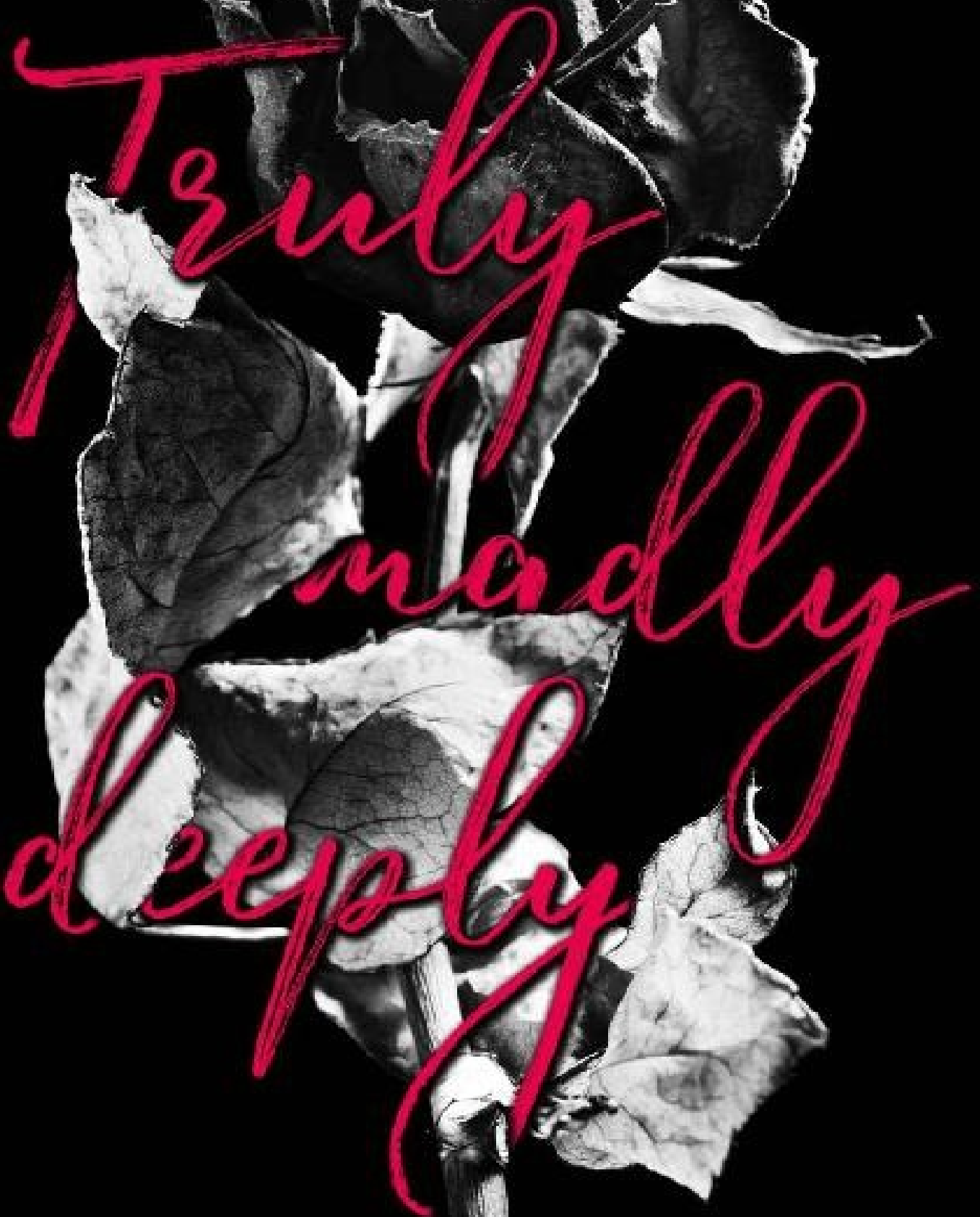


NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARIAN TEE



*Truly
madly
deeply*

TRULY, MADLY, DEEPLY

MARIAN TEE

Truly, Madly, Deeply

Marian Tee

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CONTENTS

Blurb

About The Book

Also by Marian Tee

Prologue

1. Her

2. Him

3. Her

4. Him

5. Her

6. Him

7. Her

8. Together

9. Him

10. Her

11. Him

12. Her

13. Together

14. Him

15. Together

16. Her

17. Together

18. Her

19. Him

20. Her

21. Him

22. Her

23. Him

24. Together

25. Her

26. Together

27. Him

28. Her

29. Him

30. Her

31. Him
32. Her
33. Before
34. Her
35. Her
36. Together
37. Her
38. Together
39. Her
40. Him
41. Together
42. Her
43. Him
44. Together
45. Him
46. Her
47. Together
48. Him

Epilogue

Dear Reader,

Also by Marian Tee

BLURB

“If it is not too much to ask,” the professor asked in a glacial voice, “would you care to put your daydreams on pause for the rest of the class?”

Diana felt her eyes sting in mortification and fought hard to keep her composure. “I...I...”

“Save us from unnecessary explanations, any of which I highly doubt will be the truth.” When she didn’t speak, the professor dealt her an impatient glance, asking irritably, “Well? Your proposal then?”

Oh!

Since she had nothing written on her proposal sheet, Diana could only blurt out the first half-baked idea that came to her mind. “I was thinking, umm, since depression is one of the leading causes of suicide, then perhaps we could use faith to cure depression—”

The professor’s lip curled. “I’ve heard enough.”

He had?

“And I think you’re better off dropping my subject.”

Diana found herself clutching the edge of her desk as shock reverberated in the entire class in palpable silence.

Cut your losses and go.

It was the voice of reason again, but try as she might, she couldn’t make herself listen to it.

“I s-sincerely believe in what I’m saying, professor.”

“Good for you, but that’s not why I’m asking you to drop the subject.”

“What I’m saying makes sense—”

“If I only wanted my students to make sense,” the professor snapped,

“then I should’ve opted to teach in kindergarten, do you think?” The words were intended to hurt, and hurt it did. The girl was now trembling and visibly fighting back tears, but just as before, the sight of her distress did not bring him any amount of gratification.

Damn her. Damn her. Goddamn her for forcing him to make her bleed, and because this had to be the last time, he knew he couldn’t leave it this way. He had to see it to the end, no matter what.

When she started to sit, he saw his opportunity and seized it mercilessly, saying sharply, “I’m not finished.”

The girl flinched, and so did most of the class. That he was a pitiless bastard was a widely-known fact, but couldn’t the professor see he was already beating a dead animal in this instance?

“Remind me what this subject is, Ms. Leventis.”

His words were like a noose tightening around her throat, and while she didn’t know how or when it would happen, the one thing she was certain of was that this was the beginning of the end.

“Ms. Leventis?”

“Novel Therapy—”

“Finally,” the professor mocked. “A correct answer.” It had a few students laughing, causing the girl to flush, but he forced himself to get past this. “Do you think you could properly define this as well?”

“It c-can be any method or technology that could be considered breakthrough or radical—”

“In other words,” the professor murmured silkily, “it could also be the *first* of its kind.”

“Yes—”

“That being said, do you genuinely believe you’re the first person who thought curing depression with faith would help prevent suicide?”

He saw her jerk, saw the first tear fall, and he knew it should be enough.

“Because if you do, then you’re an even bigger idiot than I gave you credit for.”

But instead he found himself pushing the knife deeper.

I’m sorry, but there’s no other fucking way.

Diana could feel everyone staring at her. She knew she should at least say

something, but the humiliating flow of her tears had robbed her of the ability to speak. All she could do was remember how this man destroying her was also the same man she had willingly taken her clothes off for, and this truth... it broke her, to the point that for one second she found herself tempted - *oh, how she was so shamefully tempted* - to be the subject of her own study and surrender herself to oblivion.

But eventually the feeling passed, a hitherto hidden core of strength ultimately prevailing, and Diana's fingers slowly loosened its deathlike grip on the desk.

Dark eyes that neither hated nor judged met eyes that burned an inscrutable shade of gold.

He didn't have to hurt her this way, but he had.

He could have done this differently, but he hadn't.

This, finally, was the end.

Not inevitable, but not salvageable either.

It was the ending he chose, the ending he wanted, and she was just so tired now that she let it be.

Goodbye, Professor.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Underneath the layers of foil wrapper and soft tissue was a box, and hope reluctantly gave way to confusion at what she was seeing.

An iPhone?

Granted, it was the latest model, but...an iPhone?

Maybe Damen needed to give her another phone for security reasons? It would be just like him if so, and she wouldn't be even surprised if this came with GPS tracking and whatnot.

She opened the box, and the first thing she saw was the sticky note posted on its screen.

The passcode is the date we first met.

And that was when she knew, her eyes stinging, her heart skipping a beat, and a euphoric burst of hope exploding inside of her with such force that she could barely breathe.

Her fingers shook as she turned the iPhone on, and her heart skipped another beat as she typed the numbers that corresponded with the clue. The lock screen blinked out, and the next thing she saw was the new message notification.

One click, and her heart started pounding.

Matthijs: *In the event you need to contact me.*

A helpless smile played over her lips.

Diana: *Is that your way of saying you want to keep in touch?*

Matthijs: *No.*

Diana: *But you went as far as buying me an iPhone.*

Matthijs: *To ensure our means of communication remains secure and*

private.

Diana: *Why can't you just lie and say you want to talk to me?*

Matthijs: *Because you'd never believe me even when I tell you the truth.*

Diana: *You're so serious.*

Almost an entire minute passed, and there still wasn't anything from the professor, almost as if he were saying he would only deign to text her back if she had shared something worthwhile.

It rather reminded her of how Damen was, and she couldn't help smiling. This type of similarity with her brother, she would definitely welcome.

Diana: *When I text you here, there's really no way anyone else would read our messages?*

Matthijs: *Given sufficient heads-up, not even if someone steals your phone.*

Diana: *In that case...I think I've got a crush on you, Professor de Graaf.*

On the other side of town, the professor had just grabbed his car keys and was about to leave his place when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He took it out, saw what she had texted, and threw the keys back on the console before heading back to the shower.

He had a boner to attend to, all thanks to his dark-haired troublemaker.

As for Diana, it wasn't until she was on her third class for the day when she noticed the *New Message* icon on her secret phone.

Matthijs: *Fuck.*

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PROLOGUE

GOD ONLY KNOWS BY THE BEACH BOYS

Someday in the future...

Matthijs' footsteps treaded silently on the hallway as he made his way to his daughter's bedroom. He cracked the door open and saw his baby girl still up.

At half past midnight.

She had her back against a mountain of pillows, a tiny dark-haired princess with an oversized pair of headphones plopped over her ears. He entered the room, and she seemed to sense his presence immediately as she stopped humming and turned her head towards his direction.

He smiled, and she beamed at him as the bed sank under his weight. He helped her take off the headphones and bent his head to receive a loud smack on his cheek. "Just because you're being sweet doesn't mean I'll let you stay up late," he said in mock warning, but this only had his little one giggling.

"But you *always* let me stay up late."

Matthijs winced. "Don't let your Mama hear that, will you?" He noticed the old iPhone on her bedside table as he spoke and asked curiously, "What are you listening to?"

"Grandpa's favorite song."

His heart clenched. "I see."

"Do you know it?"

Instead of answering, he started to hum the song's refrain, and Tilda's eyes sparkled with delight. He kept on humming, and soon his daughter began half-singing, half-humming.

God only knows...mm..mm..mm..

"A for effort," he told her with a grin. "I'd give you that at least." And he

was being generous at that, considering how she only knew a fraction of the lyrics.

Unfortunately, his nice deed only had big doe eyes blinking up at him. “Huh?”

“Err, never mind.” Tilda was such an amazing conversationalist that he occasionally forgot she was just four. Picking up the iPhone, he saw that she had the song on repeat and said gruffly, “Grandpa used to play it all the time, too.” Birthdays and wedding anniversaries, Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, and just about any event that Matthijs’ father could get away with it.

And since the old man had been such a damn rascal, he had even taken the TMI route once, saying that Matthijs’ mother had played it on *the morning after...*

Remembering this had Matthijs gritting his teeth.

Damn old man.

Goddamn old man, to stop playing the song just so he could follow his wife—

“*Papa?* Did you hear me?”

“Sorry, kiddo.” He had to cough and clear his throat. Blink his eyes a few times, too, since they were itching like hell. *But it was just an itch*, Matthijs thought forcefully, and nothing else. He glanced at his daughter, now in the process of tucking herself in the bed. “What was that you were asking?”

“Tell me a story. *Please?*”

He grimaced, thinking he should’ve pretended he hadn’t heard anything instead. “You’re only asking me that to torture me,” he grumbled. The brat knew it was his least favorite fatherly duty, but just like her mother, it was also for that same reason she wanted Matthijs doing it for her every night.

“Papa, *pleeeeeeeeeease*. Please, please, please—”

He scowled. “You think just because you’ve said please I’m going to tell you a story?”

“Uh huh.” And the manipulative kid resumed her plea right after. “Please, please, please. Papa, please, please, please—”

“Alright, alright.” Matthijs was torn between exasperation and pride, knowing that his daughter could have only inherited her cunning from him. “Move over then.” But he was already scooping her up as he spoke, causing Tilda to giggle as he deposited her on the other side of the bed and had her bouncing against the mattress.

Leaning against the headboard, he asked, “Any particular bedtime story you’d like me to ruin?”

In between giggles and twinkling dark eyes, she answered rather innocently, “Mama said one day she’d tell me how Grandpa went to heaven.”

Fuck.

“Do you know the story, Papa?”

“The question you should be asking is whether he really—”

“*Matthijs.*” A warning threaded with helpless amusement interrupted him, and father and daughter turned to see the lovely Mrs. de Graaf standing by the doorway, hands planted on her hips.

“It’s possible he could’ve stopped by a McDonald’s first,” he drawled. “That’s all I wanted to make clear.”

“Uh huh.”

“Ye of little faith,” he mocked. “I’m starting to wonder why you agreed to be my wife when you keep thinking the worst of me.”

The words, however, only earned him an eye roll as Tilda’s mother retorted, “Loving you doesn’t make me blind—” Her words ended in a shriek as Matthijs suddenly yanked her down and caused her to fall onto his lap.

“*Matthijs!*” But her voice was breathless, and all the love in the world was shining in her eyes as she looked up at him.

He kissed her on the nose, saying under his breath, “I love you.”

Her expression softened, and she nuzzled up to him, a tactile response to his words. *I love you, too.* His chest eased, but there was still the slightest reluctance in him as he let his wife go and let her settle on the other side of the bed, their wide-eyed daughter sandwiched cozily between them.

“So...” His wife’s voice was light. “What’s our bedtime story for tonight again?”

“How Grandpa went to heaven,” Tilda answered promptly.

“A good choice,” his wife said softly. “Or rather...it’s a good time as any to talk about it.” *Because it’s been weeks, and you still haven’t let yourself grieve.*

Albeit unspoken, the message in her knowing gaze was all too easy to hear, but his expression remained bland. He had kept telling her it was nothing, that she was making a mountain out of a molehill, but she always did like to worry.

Well, only time would show which one of them was right.

But for now...

He glanced down at his daughter. "Shall I start?"

Tilda nodded eagerly. "Yes, please."

"Alright then." Deepening his voice in an effort to sound like Liam Neeson as *Aslan*, he said slowly, "Once upon a time, there was this horribly—" Seeing that his wife was shooting daggers his way again, he readily changed track, finishing, "*—handsome* man who didn't know what love was. And he would never have known it at all if not for this girl..."

All You've Got To Do Is Fall In Love by Benji Hughes

24-year-old Diana Leventis was late.

Which she hated to be, hence the quietly frantic rush to her morning class, and her temporary indifference to the way puddle water turned her lower extremities into a soggy mess. The whole situation was as unattractive and uncomfortable as it sounded, with her leggings now a cold, wet layer of second skin, and her suedes visibly pleading for rescue from permanent ruin.

But still she trod on, her breath coming out in pants and puffs as she forced her limbs to work overtime.

I just can't be late on my first day, Saint M. I just can't.

A short distance down the road, the impressive Neo Gothic facade of the university's main building beckoned with not the slightest pretense of modesty. Lavender gables and lush red stone walls, snarling gargoyles perched atop its towers and its centerpiece, a massive, ornate rose window.

As legends had it, the melancholic outline of a nun may be glimpsed in nights where a blood-red moon would rise to the sky. She was said to be the specter of a woman who had died centuries ago, her family having forced her to make her vows as a bride of Christ rather than have her marry the peasant she had lost her heart to. A dutiful daughter, she had done her best to lead a quiet life, but upon learning that her beloved had lost his life in the war, she, too, had lost her will to live. The parchment pages falling from her fingers, she was said to have a serene smile on her face as she calmly climbed the railings.

And then she let herself fall, whispering her last words to the wind.

I cannot wait to see you, my love.

Try as she might, Diana couldn't keep her mind from visualizing Lady Ethel's final moments, and she winced involuntarily as her thoughts churned out its own twisted, ghastly version of the girl's death. What was supposed to be hauntingly heartbreaking turned into something creepy and ghastly.

That serene smile?

It was all blackened teeth now.

And those words –

“WATCH OUT!”

A pair of hands seized her waist to yank her back, and Diana blinked dazedly, not quite understanding as a red-faced horticultural student (the apron he wore, with the monogrammed initials of his department, was a massive clue) dashed past her.

“So sorry!” But the boy's apology was half-hearted, the words flung over his shoulder as he nearly tripped on his own feet in his haste to run after...

A wagon full of daisies?

The irony wasn't lost on her, and she shook her head, thinking she could've been figuratively doing that if a stranger hadn't - *OH!*

She looked down, and there they were, a pair of hands still clutching her waist.

Long fingers, deeply tanned, and so much larger than hers.

In other words -

A man, she thought dumbly, and one whose grip spoke volumes. *Power*, such as what was imbued within the sharpened edge of a sword's blade, and authority that was as merciless as it was just.

“Are you alright?”

The words, spoken in a deep, cultured voice, jarred Diana out of her strangely fanciful musings, and she found herself blinking. “I'm...umm...”

Save me, Saint Matthew.

While most people relied on the intercessory powers of their guardian angels, Diana was the type to seek assistance from her guardian saint, whose feast day fell on the same day as her birthday.

“Oh, for fuck's sake.” The impatient irritation in the stranger's voice made Diana shrink, the sound reminding her of the countless times her mother would snipe at her for being worthless. She was about to step back, intending

to mumble her thanks before walking away, but the hands on her suddenly tightened, and she stiffened.

Another moment passed, and then she was being spun around, and her head lifted automatically when she realized she was about to see who her grumpy savior was.

Blazing leonine eyes captured her gaze just before raking her appearance from head to toe. It was done in such a blatant, thorough manner that Diana could feel her cheeks turning a self-conscious shade of pink. She wished she could tell him he was being unnecessarily rude, but how could she?

For now that she had seen him—

Oh wow.

She told herself to stop staring, but her stubborn, fascinated gaze remained glued to him.

He's exquisite, Saint M.

His chiseled visage enthralled her, and breathing somehow became a struggle as her dazed gaze took in the way his dark gold hair brushed defiantly past the oversized collars of his trench coat. Which happened to be *tweed* of all things. The one fabric that was most identified with boring old gentlemen, and yet this stranger was so potently *male* he was able to take away the drabness of the material and transform it into something overwhelmingly sexy.

Everything about him was just too perfect that it didn't feel fair. His height was imposing, his build precisely proportioned. Even his bone and muscle structure was flawless, every piece of it seemingly sculpted by an Italian maestro under bronze, sun-kissed flesh.

He was, in sum, an intoxicating sight, and only now did Diana understand what it *truly* meant, for one to be drunk on beauty.

Because this man—

“You seem fine.” The stranger's voice had gone from annoyed to brusque now, with his lips even tightening in acute...*disgust?*

HIM

Professor Matthijs de Graaf was pissed.

He held between his hands the tiniest waist: a fuckably good thing in most cases, but not now. Not when he was staring at what his subconscious recognized as his predestined downfall, and his dick not giving a shit about the sense of foreboding that had turned his body rigid with tension.

The girl's long, dark hair was twisted up in a neat bun, with a few ebony strands escaping to outline the elegant curve of her cheeks. A respectable look on all accounts, and yet it only sharpened his attraction to her with a violent edge.

Ah, dammit.

Why did he find her so fucking hot?

An erotic vision suddenly seized hold of his mind: this lovely beauty on her knees, her silky locks twisted around his fingers as he guided her rosebud mouth to his—

FOCUS, DAMMIT.

He finally managed to jerk his gaze away and tried to look for something else to see or think about, but his eyes only ended up latching on to something more dangerous.

She stared at him, and *dammit*, her big, dark orbs were just the way the professor liked them: quintessential doe eyes that had the highest success rate in beguiling assholes like him. The same could be said for her sartorial modesty, which only made him want to rip her shapeless sweater off and have her dainty breasts spill into his already itching palms.

Moments passed, and still she stared, looking up at him the way only someone pure and untouched could do so. Her doe eyes gawked and gobbled him up at the same time, and it was easy to see she was just too fucking naive to realize how her innocently yearning gaze had the professor thinking of the

other things she could gobble up.

Like his already-swollen dick, for instance.

The thought, forbidden but inevitable, came out of the blue, and his teeth gnashed as lust turned his pants into a tight-squeezing torture. When the professor realized he was still holding on to the girl's waist, he removed his hands from her person with a muttered curse.

She heard this, of course, and it had her eat-you, eat-me eyes blink at him in hurt bewilderment.

Oh no, you fucking don't.

His jaw clenched against an instinctive desire to pull the girl close and soothe her pain with his mouth and hands. His dick might not care about what his mind knew, and it was that this girl was a fuckable disaster waiting to happen - but no goddamn way was he going down ~~on~~ her without a fight.

"I'm s-sorry--"

FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.

Her voice was soft and trembling, and since it was also just the way he liked it, he cut her off brusquely and spoke in a low voice filled with contempt. "Just watch where you're damn going next time. You can't have everyone wasting their time saving idiots like you."

HER

Diana was dumbstruck.

She wasn't brainless as a rule, but the beautiful man in front of her was doing a fantastic job at making her wonder if she had overestimated her own IQ. He had called her an idiot, for heaven's sake - and here she was, struggling to make her vocal chords work. "Uh..." But words still failed her, and when she nervously wetted her lips, she saw Mr. Furious grow, well, even more furious.

Help me, Saint M.

Why was this man so mad, and why did he affect her so even when he was so unbearably rude?

Before she could figure out what to say or do next, Mr. Furious was already turning away, and her last glimpse of his hard, handsome face was the way his lips had compressed together in icy contempt.

Seeing this hurt, but she was at a loss to explain why. Masculine beauty wasn't something she was unfamiliar with. One could say she had become immune to it even, with her own brother Damen often likened to a Greek god, as were all of his friends.

And yet...

~~Mr. Furious was different.~~

No.

~~Mr. Furious was the one.~~

No.

Mr. Furious was an encounter, Diana told herself determinedly, one she wasn't even certain she would add to her diary, and that was all. She absently righted the strap of her bag over her shoulder as she turned back towards the school—

Oh my God.

School!

A gasp of dismay escaped her when she saw the time. She was more than ten minutes late now, and if there had been the slightest chance earlier of slipping into the classroom unnoticed, well, not anymore.

Just the thought of having everyone's heads turning towards her was enough to make Diana flinch, and she knew it could get even worse, *easily*. She could be made to stand in front of the whole class, made to talk and explain herself...

Diana shuddered in fear.

No, never.

She would just call in sick this time. It was only once anyway. It shouldn't be a problem. *Right?*

HIM

The professor was about to masturbate.

His eyes squeezed shut as his hand gripped his dick in a familiar manner.

Damn her.

Goddamn her.

Goddamn her for making him want her so fucking bad he had to do this.

Matthijs was an intensely sexual man, the kind that could go long for hours, and while this served his reputation well, it also had its downside. Or an *upside* rather, with his dick, upon making its presence felt, requiring immediate action. Once it saw, it wanted, and it wanted and stayed *hard*. Hence a detour to the nearest fucking restroom, just to get his damnable erection out of the way.

The professor jerked himself off in a predetermined number of strokes, his fingers conscientiously angled to induce an orgasm in the shortest amount of time.

In the normal course of things, the professor's sexual relief should have earned him a modicum (pun intended) of calmness and clarity. But when he stepped out of the cubicle, agitation still had him in its grip, his every movement stiff and aggressive. His inner equilibrium, normally formidable and imperturbable, was shot to pieces.

To make up for his late arrival, Matthijs assigned his students double the amount of their usual workload, and he heard not a word of dissent even as their collective faces contorted in inaudible grimaces.

At precisely 09:30 in the morning, the university's public announcement system played Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, and the professor dismissed his students with a curt nod.

Helder Meer prided itself for doing away with the more uncouth

applications of long-standing tradition, and the clip of classical music playing in the background was one such change, with the typical, unappealingly shrill school buzzers replaced by Mozart for Mondays, Tchaikovsky for Tuesdays, Wagner for Wednesdays, and so forth.

Of course, not all such changes were of minor or aesthetic consequences. *Ad Altiora Tendo*, the university's motto, translated to 'I strive to higher things,' and this manifested itself in Helder Meer's approach to education, which some praised for being groundbreaking (the professor, for instance, taught Applied Psychology with Respect to the Christian Faith) while others criticized it for being unnecessarily radical (e.g. the permitted use of recreational substances within specific areas on campus).

Radical or not, the professor didn't really give a damn about public perception of the university. What he did feel strongly, however, was the university board's continued refusal to grant professors leeway in kicking students out. Instead, the old fucks were still stuck in the past, with their ludicrous insistence that students had to miss three classes consecutively before professors could permanently cross them out of their lists.

In the professor's experience, students who missed his first class were and would always be a complete waste of his time. More often than not, they turned out to be egoistic, self-entitled animals, like leopards that hadn't even the self-awareness to realize they had spots to begin with, much less appreciate the need to change said spots.

The one student he had to mark *Absent* on the attendance sheet earlier would undoubtedly be the same, and the professor's lip curled when he thought of what was likely to happen afterwards. Helder Meer's students had a remarkable affinity for histrionics regardless of gender, and it was always unpleasant business when the professor dropped the ball and the truth of their ineluctable dismissal from his class stared at them in the face.

Young people today had it too easy, and they didn't even know it. The nature of his thoughts made for hideous company, and the professor's mood was succinctly reflected on his strikingly handsome features.

Female students were able to catch sight of it despite the professor's long-legged stride making brisk work of the walk back to his office, and this mere glimpse was enough, the carved, aristocratic lines of his face seemingly a preordained canvas for haughty derision.

As one infatuated (and no doubt somewhat masochistic) student had once put it: *the professor's scowls only made him look hotter, and his looks of icy derision were a huge turn-on.*

Albeit inelegant, the description was fairly accurate, as evinced by the way heads quickly snapped towards the professor's direction the moment he strode into view. Skin taking on a rosy hue, dryness lining their throats as nipples pricked into awareness - such were the readily-discernible symptoms of their desire, and that he had a reputation for being an unfeeling scoundrel only added immensely to his appeal.

After all, it was a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman would always want what was unattainable, and what could be more unattainable than a Nobel Prize winner who also happened to be a gorgeous, wealthy *asshole*?

HER

Diana was petrified.

She was doing her best not to show it of course, but judging by the sympathetic looks Mrs. Montez were sending her way and the frequency in which she was being offered tea and refreshments, Diana was *not* doing a good job about it.

I'm just being paranoid.

Right, Saint M?

But her guardian saint remained conspicuously silent, as he had been for the past three hours. Could it be because St. Matthew didn't want to lie to her, and she actually had every reason to be afraid?

I wouldn't be surprised if that was so, Diana thought glumly, considering how her friends had acted earlier at lunch. She had told them what happened that morning, and Diana had immediately become the recipient of perturbed-looking frowns.

'How can you not know about T-PILF?' Amine had lamented.

'The one time you had to break your perfect attendance,' Magnolia had muttered, *'and it had to be his class.'*

'I think I'm missing something here. What's T-PILF?' Could it be a dinosaur related to the T-Rex?

"It means THE Professor I'd Like to Fuck," Magnolia had spelled out with a roll of her eyes, *'and the reason Diana doesn't know about him is because she's always off in a la-la land when she's not with us.'*

She had started to protest (out of principle), but Amine had cut Diana off with a worried shake of her head. *'The whys don't matter anymore. The only thing you should care about now is the fact that Professor de Graaf eats students for breakfast, and there's nothing he hates more than when a student*

misses his first class for no reason.'

The glass door suddenly swung open, the swooshing sound startling Diana back into reality, and she scrambled to her feet, back snapping straight and gaze flying towards the figure that had just strode in. Her lips parted, but the words of greeting she had rehearsed failed to come out.

Instead, she heard herself blurt out, "You!"

This earned her a look of chilling dislike, and Diana found herself thinking, *It should be Mr. Still Furious* now. But rather than feeling discouraged, she just felt...*excited*. He really was the most beautiful man alive in her eyes, and it was such a lovely surprise to see him again so soon.

She hadn't even dared let herself hope for such a thing actually, and yet here he was. Surely it meant he was heaven sent.

Right, St. M?

Her guardian saint neglected to answer, but Diana told herself it didn't matter. She glanced back at Mr. Still Furious expectantly, waiting for him to acknowledge her—

"Welcome back, Professor de Graaf." Mrs. Montez' words had Diana reluctantly looking away from her beautiful *crush* (for this was what crushes were, wasn't it?).

Oh, why did the professor have to arrive now of all times?

She glanced back at the door all the same, prepared to greet the professor similarly—

"Did your lunch meeting go well?" The professor's secretary went on to ask.

But there was no one else.

"As well as one could hope." A pause. "I've something to work on, so please make sure I'm not disturbed for the rest of the day."

There was no one else.

"Oh, but there's a student here to see you," Mrs. Montez protested, "and Ms. Leventis has been here for over three hours..."

There was no one else!

"Is that so?" The words were drawled out in a chilling tone, and Diana could feel herself paling as the truth hit her in the head like nails being pounded into her brain.

Professor Matthijs de Graaf was Mr. Furious.

Who also happened to be T-PILF.

And even more furious than usual.

And *forbidden*.

HIM

The professor was silently cursing in seven languages.

Of course the girl would turn out to be no other than Diana Leventis.

His own fuckable fucking student.

He should have expected things to turn out like this, should've remembered the saints above so did love to have a laugh at his expense.

God damn it.

He forced himself to meet her eyes, and in them he found all the things he desired and dreaded.

“G-Good afternoon, Professor.”

Even her voice was a siren call, and it required Herculean effort on the professor's part not to respond. Conscious of having his secretary's curious glance on him as well, Matthijs strove to keep his face expressionless as he spoke to the girl. “Whatever you have to say can be discussed in my next class.”

“I was just hoping to explain—”

“But I'm not paid to listen to explanations, am I?” He knew he was being more cruel than usual, deliberately acting every inch the scoundrel he was reputed to be, but it was better this way. She might never know why, but that didn't matter. He knew, and that was enough.

Stalking to his secretary's desk, he reached for the pad of monogrammed stationery Mrs. Montez always had in stock and pulled out his fountain pen. The professor swiftly scribbled a note, saying curtly, “This is my written consent for you to request a different adviser—”

“But I d-don't want one.”

The reply, stammered out as it may be, sounded like a love confession to

his ears, and the illogical thought had the professor spewing another mental round of curses.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

Tearing off the scribbled sheet, he slammed it down on the counter and turned back to face the solitary, dark-haired thorn in his side. “I’ve been doing this far longer than you, Ms. Leventis, so I’d take my advice if I were you. The two of us are not going to be a good fit.” And it was damn well true, since his dick was insisting it was going to be a perfect fit for her virginal pussy.

“But Professor—”

He walked away as if he hadn’t heard a word. *It was better this way*, he reminded himself savagely, *and always would be*. The thought had the professor slamming the door shut behind him, and he barely managed to control himself from driving a fist to the wall.

What was it about her, dammit?

She was like the fucking *Tethered* counterpart of St. Anthony, and instead of helping people find things, she was the cause for them to lose things.

He could damn well attest to that, with the way she made him lose control - lose his fucking mind even - whenever she was around.

A semblance of a prayer formed on his tongue, but years of bitter resentment refused to give way, and so the words stayed unspoken. While His existence remained true in the professor’s mind, faith in Him had long been extruded. God was real, but God was not always there, and so it was up to humans to solve their own shit.

Tossing his coat on the armchair, he unfolded his length on the leather couch and leaned back as he reached down to unzip his pants. His dick was out in a moment and throbbing painfully, having already swollen to full size.

Mijn obsessie.

That was all she was, nothing else. The why was immaterial, but the how was still within reach. Eliminating her hold on him was only a matter of time and willpower. He would jerk himself off as many times as needed, fuck his mistress ten times a day, and even pay a fortune for a *ménage à trois* if that was what it took.

Anything - any fucking thing - was an alternative worth trying, for the cost of doing what he craved the moment he saw her was too high a price to bear.

The professor began to stroke himself, in the middle of his office, decency be damned. What was a workplace violation when his soul was at risk of a longer stint in Hell?

And yet...

He couldn't stop himself from staring at the door, couldn't help fucking imagine how things would turn out if *she* were to enter his office unbidden, couldn't stop wondering where things would go if she were to see him like this.

Ah, God, if that were to happen...

His grip on his dick tightened.

Fucking obsessie.

But with the thought having already taken hold and refusing to let go, he could no longer stop himself from imagining. Fantasizing. *Craving.*

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

His breath quickened as his own strokes became wilder and less controlled.

And that was when he saw the door starting to open.

HER

Diana was still trembling.

A minute had already passed since the professor not-so-subtly demanded she quit his class, and she wasn't fully able to get past the shock of it. One thing was for sure though. It was definitely no longer accurate to think of him as Mr. Still Furious. Rather, he seemed more like *Mr. Furious Only With Her*, and it was as confusing as it was painful.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Leventis," the professor's secretary apologized in mortified tones.

"I just don't get why he's so mad at me," Diana confessed helplessly. "And if he would just let me explain..."

The older woman hesitated. "You still could..." She inclined her head towards the professor's office. "You heard what he said. I'm supposed to clear the rest of his day."

Diana gnawed uncertainly on her lip, feeling like she was being asked to walk willingly into the lion's den. Which she supposed she could if, that was, she had the spirit of the prophet Daniel inside of her, granting Diana the strength to tame the beast professor.

If that were the case, then what Mrs. Montez was asking of her wouldn't have been a problem.

But since she was miserably convinced it wasn't so, she had a feeling she'd end up no different from a sacrificial lamb and get slaughtered in seconds.

"The professor isn't the type to bluff," the other woman went on to add seriously. "He has the ability to make the rest of the semester extremely unpleasant for you, Ms. Leventis." Mrs. Montez inclined her head towards the professor's office once more. "So if you are truly set on having him as your adviser..."

And that was how Diana found herself doing what she thought herself incapable of doing. An act of courage, when all her life her own mother had made her feel like a spineless, gutless, good-for-nothing daughter.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the knob, and her knees threatened to give out as she stepped inside the professor's office. The silence overwhelmed her, and she found herself praying for strength as her heart raced in terror.

Saint M, look after me.

Diana let the door fall shut behind her even as she battled against the wave of paranoia threatening to drown her. Why was it so *silent*? Shouldn't the professor be snarling at her by now. or could he still be unaware of her presence?

Another unbidden memory invaded her mind, reminding her of the countless times her mother had demanded she wear more jewelry and less clothes.

It's the only way you'll get people to notice you. If not for being an heiress, you'd be nothing and always will—

Diana's fists clenched involuntarily against her side as she shoved the thought away. She rarely thought of Esther Leventis these days, but it sadly made sense that she would suddenly start recalling the worst memories of her childhood. Anger and disappointment were the two only emotions Diana had inspired in her mother, and Professor Matthijs de Graaf kind of...

Oh! Right!

Cheeks turning red when she realized she had actually forgotten where she was and what she had come here for, Diana quickly lifted her head, intending to apologize, but then she saw...

She saw.

Oh, sweet heavens, what was this she was seeing?

The seconds ticked by, neither of them moving, her gaze glued to that one exposed part of his anatomy, his fingers still wrapped around...it.

And oh dear God, the things she were noticing about it.

It was so much thicker than she could have ever imagined, a lot longer than she thought was humanly possible, and it was so...well...angry-looking (just like its owner, Diana couldn't help thinking).

Look away. Stop staring. Leave.

All sensible courses of action, but Diana found it impossible to draw her gaze away, her shaking limbs refusing to move from its spot. He was just so very mesmerizing, and the lazy arrogance of his lounging form in the couch only made him seem larger than life, a living work of art with his blend of refined power and sensual magnetism.

A living work of art, who also happened to be incredibly aroused.

And that was when it struck Diana, an idea so tantalizing that it gave her the willpower to finally look away from his member and have her gaze climb the hard wall of his chest.

She just wanted, needed to see.

Just wanted to know if it could be...

Their gazes finally touched, and her breath caught as leonine eyes once again held her captive. No longer cold or enraged, the professor's gold eyes now glittered with heat.

The kind that craved. Combusted. Consumed.

And it was all for her.

Her mouth parted in an inaudible gasp.

The professor...wanted *her*.

The realization made her head reel, and the more Diana thought about it, the more her thoughts unraveled. She found herself backing away, and her heart skipped a beat when she saw the professor stiffen, a brief look of frustration crossing his gorgeous face, almost as if he was doing his best not to stop her from leaving.

Oh, *if only*.

Sexual tension pulsed in the air when she was back at the other end of the room, close enough to reach for the door knob from behind.

Close enough to still do the sensible thing.

Close enough to leave.

She saw the professor's lips tighten as she put one hand behind her back, and her heart began to drum.

Oh, Professor.

It's not what you think.

Diana saw the professor jerk upon hearing the telltale sound of the door being locked...by her.

She had been a good girl all her life, had always done what was expected of her and to never cause trouble.

But now...

Now...

She made a rather clumsy gesture towards the professor's member, saying haltingly, "That, umm..." *Oh, this was hard.* "That..." She wetted her lips and just went for it. "That's for m-me. *Isn't it?*"

TOGETHER

The professor was done fighting.

This girl might be his soul's downfall, but he no longer fucking cared. He watched her watch him, something he had thought she would be too shy to do, and if he had to admit the truth, it was simply one of the many things he never expected from her.

He had expected her to cry out and run away at the first sight of his dick, but instead she had done the exact fucking opposite and even went on to lock the door like an eager accomplice. He had expected her to disappoint him by saying something trivial (oh, Professor, what are you doing?), but instead...ah God, instead...

That's for me. Isn't it?

“And if it is?” His voice was carefully controlled, his gaze narrowed but unreadable. “What then?”

Diana swallowed hard. The ball was back on her court again, and she should've expected it from him.

As for his question...

The answer was on the tip of her tongue, but a sudden attack of insecurities made Diana hold the words back. What if she were to say them, and he ended up laughing?

Her throat tightened in fear at the mere prospect of it, and she found herself wetting her lips—

Oh!

Her eyes went wide at seeing *it* react, twitching rather violently as the professor's leonine gaze fell on her lips.

She had caused *that*.

Hadn't she?

The realization made her feel giddy, but more than that, the all-too-visible proof of the professor's desire was gloriously empowering, enough to embolden Diana to toss her worries to the wind. She had gone this far, after all, so she might as well speak the truth.

"If it's because of me, then I'm...*glad*." Diana lifted her chin. "Because I want you, too."

The words that had tumbled out in a soft but determined rush almost had the professor's lips curving, with the way it reminded him of an angel rolling in the mud in a misguided attempt to soil her pristine-white wings.

Ingenious, the professor thought, *but ineffective*.

Losing one's purity wasn't that easy of course, but it could be done, and it was just too bad for the girl that she had before her one of the few men who knew exactly how to fall from grace.

And stay fallen.

He beckoned for her to come close with a crook of his finger, purring, "Show me then."

Said the Serpent to Eve, Diana couldn't help thinking, only this time the Serpent who wanted her to sin was a six-foot-plus god in tweed. It almost had her laughing nervously, almost had her turning back and running for the door.

Was she really doing this?

Someone who had never smoked a joint, never gotten drunk, someone who had never done anything explicitly bad, period.

Was she, being the kind of girl that she was, really doing this?

Yes, Diana thought. She couldn't quite explain it, but there was just something about the professor that reminded her of the knights of old. Honorable, despite his cruel persona. Someone who would keep her safe, despite the danger he represented. And most importantly of all - he wanted her.

Even if it was just her body, it was enough. After a lifetime of rejection and emotional abuse, that a man like Professor Matthijs de Graaf would lust for her was more than enough.

This...it...*he* was enough.

The moment she made up her mind, her body took over, her limbs seemingly under someone else's command as they moved with a brazen kind

of lushness Diana would never have thought herself capable of. Breasts swelling and nipples pouting for attention, hips swaying and tender folds that had just begun to ache and grow moist...

And when she was finally standing in front of him, this one man she wanted to please and pleasure, in the way she had never yearned to do so for any other man—

“Tell me what to do, Professor.”

Desire like he had never known slithered into Matthijs at Diana’s soft appeal. It was raw and uncontrollable, threatening to steal his control and overwhelm his judgment.

And it was all because of her.

This girl with eyes that enslaved and sylph-like curves that left him enraptured. This girl whose words substantiated what his subconscious had recognized the very first moment he saw her.

Diana Leventis was *his* temptation turned flesh, a natural-born seductress whose virginity every starving inch of him craved to breach. He wanted to be the one - the only fucking one - to violate and corrupt her, destroy every barrier of innocence until she was drowning in the carnality of his lust.

And maybe, just maybe, she could be dirty - sinful - enough for him to deserve her.

“Take off your clothes, *mijn obsessie*.” His voice was harsh, the professor not wanting the girl to misunderstand in any way who between them was calling the shots. “I want to watch you touch yourself.”

The professor’s words enveloped her in a sensual daze, leaving Diana’s body trembling in anticipation at what could and would happen. Her fingers shook a little as she reached for the hem of her sweater, and the way the professor only had eyes for her made her ache and tingle all over. The voice of caution inside her mind was faint but patently desperate. It begged her to reconsider, cried for her to see the dangers, the sheer insanity of what she was doing.

I’m sorry, but it’s too late.

The glitter of desire in the professor’s leonine gaze leaving no space for awkwardness or timidity, Diana found herself carefully setting her shoes aside and slowly peeling her clothing off, layers of fabrics and inhibitions swept away by the strength of her need. She took her time unclipping the front clasp of her bra, and when her breasts were finally bare to his gaze—

“Yes.” The professor’s voice was a hungry growl, and she could feel

herself blossoming at the realization. Feminine wiles she had not known were in her possession were put into play as she bent down and deliberately made her breasts jiggle while wriggling out of her leggings. His growl of approval was her reward, and she took even more time in discarding her panties.

“Stand straight,” the professor commanded thickly. “I want to see all of you.”

Diana could feel her whole body blushing as she straightened to her full height. It felt deliciously sinful, having his eyes feast on her, and before she knew what she was doing, she was already reaching up to cup her own breasts.

“Fuck.” The expletive came out in a hiss as the professor watched the girl start toying with her nipples.

Diana’s mouth dried when she saw that the professor’s hand had started moving.

Matthijs’ gaze narrowed at her reaction. “You like seeing me pleasure myself.”

“Y-Yes.” It was pointless to deny this, with the way her body had started to writhe at the sight of his hand stroking his member. It was just the most fascinating sight, and when she saw his movements become jerky, her fingers instinctively mirrored his rhythm, plucking her nipples with undue haste.

The unfamiliar scent of arousal tinged the air as she saw the professor squeeze his eyes shut. He began to jack off, and her whole body tightened. His pleasure mingled with hers, her breath coming out in little gasps when she heard his breath turn short and choppy.

Oh God.

She watched the professor throw his head back, and she wanted to cry out with him.

And then he was coming.

Hard. Fast. Loud.

And it was beautiful.

H I M

The professor wanted to give himself a good, hard kick to the head.

With his dick finally finding respite, his mind was lucid again, and the enormity of his mistake had just hit him like a punch to the guts.

What the fuck had he been thinking?

His gaze strayed to where she stood, and the sight of her naked and smiling at him with innocence and optimism made Matthijs feel murderous with self-loathing.

Ah, if only one could kill himself without committing a mortal sin...

Turning away, he said brusquely, "Cover yourself, will you?"

Diana was stunned and confused, the callousness of the professor's words making her feel cheap and stupid. She could feel her eyes stinging at having to pick up her underwear from the floor, and getting dressed became an exercise of excruciating agony. She found herself scrambling for some sense of control as she slipped into her sweater.

Stay calm. Don't overreact. See if you've misunderstood.

But when Diana finally mustered the courage to meet his gaze, what she found had her feeling sick. His beautiful face was cold and unsmiling, but it was his eyes that sliced into her.

They were the eyes of a stranger, and bile rose to her throat.

No. It can't be. It just can't.

She couldn't have misread.

She couldn't have misjudged.

She couldn't have been such a fool.

"P-Professor?" Please. Please. Please.

It had to be a mistake.

What she saw - *no*, what she thought she saw...

It wasn't real.

It just had to be a mistake.

But hope continued to drain out of her as she watched the professor zip his pants and walk to his desk. He moved with languid grace, something she would've admired before, but now it just seemed like a vicious attempt to draw blood. He was deliberately making her wait as if it were to draw a point home.

And what point was that, Diana wondered numbly. Could it be that he had only been having fun with her because she had been so obviously infatuated with him?

Matthijs unfolded his length into his chair, his casual movement effectively masking his tension. He met her gaze, his lips twisting in a purposely crude smile even as his chest clenched at the brightness of her eyes.

"Your assistance was much appreciated, Ms. Leventis."

"M-My assistance?"

"I can only commend your willingness to go to such extraordinary lengths to keep your place in my class."

The insinuation behind his words finally became clear, and Diana felt faint.

"If you still wish me to be your adviser, I am of course at your dispo—"

"Why are you being like this?" she whispered.

Dazed, dark eyes pleaded with him, but he hardened himself against the sight, burying his guilt under a sardonic expression. "Barring a possible episode of senility, but have I made you any promises that I've failed to recall?"

He waited for her to speak, but this time she was silent, and it was as he expected.

"In the interest of making things absolutely clear - what happened earlier was a one-off thing." He spoke with insolence that was as much an attack as a way to protect himself, and his reward-slash-punishment was the way she flinched.

Her eyes begged him to stop, but he couldn't.

Just fucking couldn't, not with parts of her heart still intact.

"I won't lie, Ms. Leventis. I find you extremely attractive, and I've been driving myself crazy wondering how you would look naked since the first time I saw you. Even so, I hadn't any plans to act on it...until *you* or rather *this* happened. Not that I'm complaining, of course. The whole thing was kinky as hell--"

"Please stop."

"But ultimately, the whole encounter--"

Diana could barely breathe. "P-Please--"

"Was a matter of favors being exchanged. That's all there is to it." The professor leaned back against his seat. "I hope that clears things enough, Ms. Leventis?" No answer yet again, nothing except a pair of eyes that had become dull with the absence of hope and life, and his chest almost caved in,

God. Damn. This. Life.

God fucking damn this life.

He had the craziest urge to sink to his knees and beg for her forgiveness and barely managed to restrain himself from doing so. One act of stupidity for this day was already one too many, and it wasn't like he was doing this just to hurt her.

More than anything else, he was doing this for her, and he had to fucking remember that.

Even if it was a truth she wasn't to know, it was enough that he knew.

You're doing this for her, goddammit.

So stick to the fucking plan.

"If you've nothing else to say, Ms. Leventis--" The professor gestured towards the door with a pleasant smile. "I'll see you in class."

I Just Don't Know What To Do With Myself by Nicky Holland

Diana couldn't stop crying.

"I can't believe I was such a fool, Kat. I was such a stupid, stupid fool."

Kat was her best friend, but more than that, she was someone Diana had known her entire life, one of the rare few whom she trusted to never judge her.

And so it was to the other girl that Diana had only been able to confess the entire sordid story.

Magnolia and Amine had been concerned as well, of course, and they had naturally wanted to know what could've happened to cause Diana to break down.

But all she had been able to do was shake her head, too ashamed of how stupid and gullible she had been.

Such a fool.

Stupid, stupid fool.

Panic clutched at her chest as Diana suddenly realized the many ways things could get worse. "What if he has a hidden camera in his office?" Her voice started to rise. "What if he's got pictures and—"

The cry of hysteria Katya heard from the other end of the line had her silently cursing Professor Asshole for breaking her friend's heart. Diana had the sweetest, gentlest soul, and only the worst kind of asshole could have stomached the idea of causing her friend to shed even a single tear.

"*Listen to me.*" Katya spoke in a purposely sharp voice, needing to distract Diana from entertaining pointlessly destructive thoughts. "I've looked

the guy up, and while he's obviously shit when it comes to how he treats women, everything I've read tells me he's *not* the kind of asshole to extort women that way." She stopped speaking, letting the words sink in for a moment before adding quietly, "I know you're hurting. But you aren't doing yourself any favors by worrying things about you're both uncertain of and unable to control."

"It's just so hard, Kat." Another ragged sob shook Diana's form. "It just hurts so much."

"You're the one with the psychology degree between us, Di. So *you* tell me," Katya pressed. "Do you really think he's that kind of person?"

Diana dug her nails into her palm, seeing but not really seeing the way they left red crescent marks on her skin.

Do you really think he's that kind of person?

She dug harder, but the pain just wasn't enough.

Do you really think he's that kind of person?

Something splattered against her fingers, and it was only then she realized she was crying.

"You're right." Diana closed her eyes, and the tears fell harder. "He's not that kind of asshole." He was just someone who thought she was good enough for a ten-minute sex game...and nothing else.

HIM

The professor couldn't believe what he was seeing.

A pale, stiff figure sat on the front row, dark bags under her eyes, and hands tightly clasped over her desk.

Diana.

It had been two days since she had stood naked in his office, two days since he had done his best to humiliate her into wanting to despise the mere thought of him. *Two days.* Two fucking days he hadn't been able to get the sight of her dull, lifeless eyes out of his mind, and when he wasn't fucking thinking of her, he was fucking dreaming of her.

In the past forty-eight hours, there had been countless times he had almost succumbed to his desperation and guilt. Countless times he had already punched in her number on his phone, and all he had to do was hit the *Call* button.

But he hadn't.

Because for once in his goddamned life, he was doing his best to be good.

And the only good thing to do where *she* was concerned was to stay the fuck away.

So why the fuck are you still in my class, mijn obsessie?

With hell's greatest temptation seated just a few damn feet away, his sacrifice was turned into ashes, and a stampede of emotions he hadn't felt a long time was threatening to make his chest explode from within.

Fear. Helplessness. Despair.

But none of it was as terrifying as the hope that had started to flicker, and he was now internally scrambling to extinguish.

Because of her, he was weak again, and the truth made him furious. With

her. With himself. With the whole fucking world. Damn her. Goddamn her for making him weak and forcing his hand.

Goddamn her for leaving him no choice, with only one way for him to be strong again.

H E R

Diana was finding it impossible to breathe and *not* scream.

Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?

(My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)

They were one of Jesus' last words on the cross, and she could practically see her guardian saint frowning in silent censure, could practically hear him reproach her for making light of the Son of God's suffering by comparing her predicament to His.

Everything that was happening now was her doing, not God's, Saint M lectured her. It was your decision to play deaf to the voice of reason. Your decision to come here despite knowing you're not ready. Your decision.

And so it was, hence this blurry world of anguish and desolation, with her nerves stretched so tautly she was terrified just meeting the professor's eyes would break her.

Coming here was such a big mistake.

She knew that now.

And yet Diana was unable to make herself leave, unable to even take her eyes off the professor despite the worrying impact of his presence, her body stirring in awareness even as her heart cracked into pieces.

She watched the professor remove his trench coat, and the whole thing just made her recall the impressive breadth of his shoulders. She watched him drape the coat over the back of his seat, and God, oh God, it only had the most foolish part of her dwelling at the graceful efficiency in his movements.

It was just crazy how she couldn't stop obsessing over every little thing he did.

Just so frighteningly crazy how the knowledge that he was a first-rate scoundrel still wasn't enough to break his spell on her.

Just so crazy...that when the professor finally began speaking, Diana automatically ducked her head, not wanting to risk meeting his gaze.

“Before we proceed to hearing out your proposals, I’d like to hear your thoughts on what this class is supposed to achieve.”

Diana kept her head bowed, her only concern to get through class without embarrassing herself by bursting into tears.

Meanwhile, the redhead seated next to her - Pepper, with the pointy orchid-colored nails - quickly raised her hand and tossed her hair over her shoulder when the professor nodded for her to speak.

“It’s to emphasize the need for and benefits of breakthrough discoveries for smaller groups rather than focusing on treating the human population as a whole,” the redhead declared with a kind of confidence that bordered on obnoxious. “For Novel Therapy courses under Professor de Graaf, the demographic we’re focusing on are Catholics—”

“Perfectly elucidated, Ms. Lowell.” The professor’s firm tone had Pepper reluctantly returning to her seat although she still had a good number of things to say. She even had a quote prepared to end her spiel. *A small step for man, a leap for mankind!*

Pepper suppressed a sigh.

Oh, what a finale would that have been, if she had just thirty seconds more of limelight.

“In addition to what Ms. Lowell has shared...” It was the professor speaking again, and Diana found herself shrinking back at the sound.

“I’d like to make one other thing clear, for the express purpose of keeping any of us from wasting each other’s time.”

The deep timbre of his words was more than enough to threaten her equilibrium, and her chest rose and fell at a more rapid fashion as staying calm remained an uphill battle.

Overcome existing and preconceived boundaries...inhibit creative or divergent thinking...impede the potential for growth and advancement...

She strove to concentrate on the professor’s words, but they kept going over her head.

Speak and explore ideas freely...no place for snowflakes...won’t get anything done if all of us have to waste time tiptoeing...worrying about verbally fragile egos...

Diana noticed a couple of students stiffening in their seats and wondered

if she had missed something rather important.

For those inclined to stay in this class, what I can promise you...we will all be bound to observe rules of civility and common courtesy...anyone found guilty of bullying...dealt accordingly.”

The sudden sound of clapping around her startled Diana, and she unthinkingly lifted her head in bemusement, all thoughts of clear and present danger forgotten until it was too late.

No, no, no—

But what was done was done, and what she had been avoiding had happened.

Leonine eyes collided with her gaze, and they were as cold and furious as she dreaded. But more than that was the ruthless contempt which questioned her very existence in the room—

YOU DON'T FUCKING LEARN, DO YOU?

A choking sound escaped Diana, and silence fell in the room as all eyes turned to her.

TOGETHER

The professor was, once again, reduced to cursing the girl in his mind.

Damn her for coming here, thinking she could escape unscathed, and *damn him*, for letting the sight of her big scared eyes get to him.

“Do you have something to say, Ms. Leventis?” he asked icily.

“No.” The answer was barely audible.

“Then I can only surmise your unreasonable interruption is either due to your vanity or brain needing attending to. Whichever the case may be, I’d strongly advise against making the same mistake.”

Not waiting for an answer, the professor went straight back to addressing the rest of the class, leaving the other students to follow suit, albeit reluctantly and with not a small amount of confusion. From what they knew of T-PILF, he was not the type to let go of such infractions lightly. Perhaps the professor was in an unusually good mood today?

The students had their answer to this a minute later, with the professor dropping a bombshell of an announcement on them. They were to propose a novel therapy for the prevention and/or treatment of suicide - keeping in mind their target demographic - and joy of joys, they had fifteen minutes to work on this.

Clearly, if the professor had any kind of mood today, then it was the sadistic type, and more than a handful seemed to blame her for this. They threw dirty looks in her direction, and Pepper, unsurprisingly, was the worst of the lot. “Great going, idiot,” the redhead sniped under her breath. “If you hadn’t pissed the professor off, we wouldn’t find ourselves in this shithole.”

Diana was taken aback at the venom in the other girl’s voice. “I didn’t mean...” But there was no point continuing, with Pepper having already turned her back on Diana in an intentional snub.

A sandy-haired TA named Bernie came in a short while later, distributing

reading materials they were given permission to use for related literature.

This form of extra service seemed more fitting for a university chancellor, and Diana's brows furrowed as she absently thought of the other little things that made the professor's tenure exceptionally well-compensated. His office was spacious and luxuriously decorated, and he even had his own secretary. Wasn't that unheard of for someone who only taught a single class?

The whole thing smacked of mystery and intrigue, but because it was also a distraction she could ill afford, Diana managed to set this aside and try once more to concentrate on the problem at hand.

Let's do this, Di.

But time continued to tick past, and Diana's nerves started to fray again when her mind remained a blank. By the time all fifteen minutes were up, her anxiety had hit the panic button, and she was a trembling, paranoid mess in her seat.

It's just going to get worse from here.

An admittedly fatalistic thought, but she couldn't help feeling increasingly jittery when the professor reached for his clipboard. The class was supposed to share their proposals one at a time, and as soon as the professor finished speaking, Pepper quickly raised her hand, volunteering to be first.

"Very well," the professor murmured.

Seeing the redhead make another hair flip, Diana tried her hardest not to wish for the other girl's proposal to go horribly, and ~~sadly enough~~ it didn't.

"It seems to me that the problem of these millennials—"

Brows shot up at the reference, with many wondering if Pepper had perhaps forgotten *she*, by virtue of her age alone, was also one of the so-called millennials.

"It's that they've forgotten how the Church still perceives suicide as one of the mortal sins. People must be reminded of this crucial fact as well as eternal damnation being its inevitable consequence."

The whole class seemed to wait in bated breath for the professor's reaction, and when he finally spoke, it was exactly what Diana had ~~dreaded~~ expected.

"While I would caution you against further limiting your scope than what's required—" The professor's lips curved ever so faintly. "Your approach is commendably novel, and since that's what this class is designed for - well done again, Ms. Lowell."

Breaths were expelled when the curve of his lips remained, the sight transforming the professor's cruel beauty into one of slightly more approachable but no less appealing proportions.

If she didn't think it so daft, she could've even sworn that the professor's smile had the hearts of every girl in the room skipping a beat. It was that split second of tingling silence following a stolen glimpse of perfection, and the more she thought about this, the more she became convinced of a reality that should've been glaringly obvious from the start.

Every girl in this room wanted him, too.

A second student was called, but Diana's attempt to listen to her proposal was futile, her mind and heart both distracted by the strange, stifling sensation gripping her chest. It took her several moments to recognize what the feeling was, and a few more to accept it was real.

She had always been an easily contented person, never having felt the need to covet what another person had. She had readily accepted she would never be as interesting or vivacious as other girls, had never thought to ask God when it would be her turn to fall or why she couldn't even have a mother's love.

She had never felt jealous before until—

“Ms. Leventis?”

Diana started in her seat, and when she lifted her head, it was to find everyone staring at her. *Again.* And by the looks of it, this wasn't the first time the professor had called her name.

Oh, Saint M, pray for me.

“If it is not too much to ask,” the professor asked in a glacial voice, “would you care to put your daydreams on pause for the rest of the class?”

Diana felt her eyes sting in mortification and fought hard to keep her composure. “I...I...”

“Save us from unnecessary explanations, any of which I highly doubt will be the truth.” When she didn't speak, the professor dealt her an impatient glance, asking irritably, “Well? Your proposal then?”

Oh!

Since she had nothing written on her proposal sheet, Diana could only blurt out the first half-baked idea that came to her mind. “I was thinking, umm, since depression is one of the leading causes of suicide, then perhaps we could use faith to cure depression—”

The professor's lip curled. "I've heard enough."

He had?

"And I think you're better off dropping my subject."

Diana found herself clutching the edge of her desk as shock reverberated in the entire class in palpable silence.

Cut your losses and go.

It was the voice of reason again, but try as she might, she couldn't make herself listen to it.

"I s-sincerely believe in what I'm saying, professor."

"Good for you, but that's not why I'm asking you to drop the subject."

"What I'm saying makes sense—"

"If I only wanted my students to make sense," the professor snapped, "then I should've opted to teach in kindergarten, do you think?" The words were intended to hurt, and hurt it did. The girl was now trembling and visibly fighting back tears, but just as before, the sight of her distress did not bring him any amount of gratification.

Damn her. Damn her. Goddamn her for forcing him to make her bleed, and because this had to be the last time, he knew he couldn't leave it this way. He had to see it to the end, no matter what.

When she started to sit, he saw his opportunity and seized it mercilessly, saying sharply, "I'm not finished."

The girl flinched, and so did most of the class. That he was a pitiless bastard was a widely-known fact, but couldn't the professor see he was already beating a dead animal in this instance?

"Remind me what this subject is, Ms. Leventis."

His words were like a noose tightening around her throat, and while she didn't know how or when it would happen, the one thing she was certain of was that this was the beginning of the end.

"Ms. Leventis?"

"Novel Therapy—"

"Finally," the professor mocked. "A correct answer." It had a few students laughing, causing the girl to flush, but he forced himself to get past this. "Do you think you could properly define this as well?"

"It c-can be any method or technology that could be considered

breakthrough or radical—”

“In other words,” the professor murmured silkily, “it could also be the *first* of its kind.”

“Yes—”

“That being said, do you genuinely believe you’re the first person who thought curing depression with faith would help prevent suicide?”

He saw her jerk, saw the first tear fall, and he knew it should be enough.

“Because if you do, then you’re an even bigger idiot than I gave you credit for.”

But instead he found himself pushing the knife deeper.

I’m sorry, but there’s no other fucking way.

Diana could feel everyone staring at her. She knew she should at least say something, but the humiliating flow of her tears had robbed her of the ability to speak. All she could do was remember how this man destroying her was also the same man she had willingly taken her clothes off for, and this truth... it broke her, to the point that for one second she found herself tempted - *oh, how she was so shamefully tempted* - to be the subject of her own study and surrender herself to oblivion.

But eventually the feeling passed, a hitherto hidden core of strength ultimately prevailing, and Diana’s fingers slowly loosened its deathlike grip on the desk.

Dark eyes that neither hated nor judged met eyes that burned an inscrutable shade of gold.

He didn’t have to hurt her this way, but he had.

He could have done this differently, but he hadn’t.

This, finally, was the end.

Not inevitable, but not salvageable either.

It was the ending he chose, the ending he wanted, and she was just so tired now that she let it be.

Goodbye, Professor.

HIM

The professor couldn't remember feeling this empty before.

He knew this was saying a lot, considering his past. He knew, but there was no doubting the gaping blackness threatening to swallow him whole, and the truth made him feel volatile and unstable.

Damn her. Damn her. God damn her.

Sixty-five minutes had passed since his class ended, sixty-seven since she asked to be excused and he had been forced to watch her walk out of the room, the sight of her tearstained face making most of the other students look away.

He had promised everyone civility, but confronted with the strength of his obsession, he had fucking lost it instead. In the eight years he had been teaching, not fucking once had he gone back on his word. But with her, he hadn't just fucking failed her as a student. He had fucking failed her in every damn way.

And if he didn't do something now, he knew it would be as he planned.

It would be over, and he would lose her for good.

It would be over, and one day she would forget.

One day, she would find someone else—

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He was on his feet before he even knew what he was doing, was already standing tensely in front of his confused-looking secretary as he heard himself say, "I need you to get a hold of Ms. Leventis."

"Of c-course, sir. What time shall I schedule—"

"As early as you can manage. I don't give a damn what excuse you give her. Just get her in my office as soon as you can."

“As you wish, sir.”

He grimaced at the look she gave him, which told him his secretary already had a fairly good idea of how much he had screwed things up. “I’m sure you’ve seen this coming.”

“I’m afraid I did, but I also have every confidence in your ability to turn things around.” A pause, and then she said gently, “You’re a good man, Professor, and I’m certain she knows this, too.” She saw his lips twist and asserted firmly, “You are, sir. You always do the right thing eventually, and I have no doubt it shall be as well with Ms. Leventis.”

Her faith in him was touching, but because life had long made him a cynic, a part of him believed that his secretary’s good opinion also had much to do with how well he compensated her.

Didn’t matter either way, the professor thought edgily. All he cared now was that she proved to be as efficient as she always was, and twenty-five minutes later, Mrs. Montez delivered on her promise.

She knocked on his door once before opening it, saying simply, “Ms. Leventis is here.” The older woman pushed the door open and stepped back.

Doe eyes met his, and the professor sucked in his breath.

Mijn obsessie.

TOGETHER

The professor spoke as soon as the door closed behind his secretary.

“I’m sorry.”

Two words, just *two words*, and the walls Diana had foolishly thought were impenetrable crumbled in an instant. She wasn’t even given a chance to fight back. Just two words, and it was all over, the tears falling, her promise to *never* be a fool over him crumbling into ashes.

She saw him stiffen. Heard him curse. Felt him coming.

And then he was there, standing just a whisper away. Tall, strong, and proud, but at the same time, a humbled, somber figure, the harsh regret in his leonine gaze reflected in the grave edges of his face.

The tiniest (sensible) part of her wished she could make herself hate him. But she couldn’t. Maybe it was her genetic makeup at fault (she truly hoped it was), but Diana simply couldn’t find it to be mad with him, and when he spoke again—

“*I’m sorry, Diana.*”

She could only cry harder, body shaking, throat tightening to the point of pain. The raw agony in his voice was unbearable, but it was hearing him say her name the very first time that ended her.

I’m done for, Saint M.

She was his to fool, his to possess. She was...*his*.

Matthijs slowly drew her into his arms, and it was like finding his way home when he felt her cheek press against his chest. But her tears still fell, wetting his shirt, and his arms tightened around her.

“I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely. “I never wanted...I’d never want to hurt you—”

“Then why did you?”

He heard the fragile catch in her voice, and his chest threatened to cave in under the weight of his self-contempt. Lips brushing against the silken crown of her head, he whispered, “You know why, my darling.”

The endearment made Diana press closer, and feeling his lips brush against her hair once again was a painfully sweet pleasure.

Please God. Please let this last.

“You’re the first...the only one I’ve ever liked this way.”

“It’s no different for me.” His voice turned rough.

Diana wished she could believe him. But she couldn’t. And even worse, she realized that she no longer cared. Now that she was in his arms, it was no longer possible to hide from the truth, no longer possible to pretend that she would do everything just to keep him in her life.

She slowly pulled away, and his arms gradually slackened its hold. She slowly looked up, heart in her throat. “If I promise...” She swallowed hard. “If I promise to never make you choose between me and your career...if I promise never to say or do anything that might cost you your job...”

Matthijs couldn’t bear the tremulous plea in her voice.

God.

That he was making her of all people beg...

It just showed how little she knew him, just showed how little she understood the strength of his desire for her, that she would think some university policy was enough to keep him away.

“Diana—”

Terrified he was about to say goodbye and even more terrified how that would completely break her, she found herself clutching his shirt, found herself crying and begging, her pride completely forgotten.

“I’m not asking you to marry me. We don’t even have to date if that’s too much of a risk. But just please...please...” Diana’s voice cracked. “Could you please just promise you won’t push me away again?”

H E R

Diana woke up the next day wanting to pinch herself.

But she managed not to, reminding herself that to do so was an indirect admission of doubt.

You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in You.

Isaiah 26:3

Diana quoted to herself, and if she wanted God's backing, she would do well not to forget that to doubt in any way was to doubt Him in every way.

Rosy memories replayed in her mind as she stepped inside the shower, and she found herself humming rather dreamily, her movements languid as she soaped and rinsed her body.

The professor had promised to stay. Had even said he would stay for as long as she wanted him. How could she not be in a good mood, with such beautiful memories playing over and over in her mind?

The sound of her room phone ringing insistently when Diana came out of the shower had her gasping and rushing to answer it. She had been so engrossed fantasizing about what today would bring that she had completely forgotten her weekly morning call with her family.

Diana pressed the button that would allow the phone to switch to video call, and the wall-mounted plasma display immediately lit up. A beaming cherubic face filled the screen, eyes sparkling in excitement. "*Theia Diana!*"

Diana beamed back. "Hello, Nala."

“Papa and Mama are here, too,” her niece declared, moving back to reveal the attractive-looking couple seated on the couch behind her.

Diana waved hi. “Hey guys.”

“It normally doesn’t take you that long to answer our call,” her overprotective billionaire brother pointed out gruffly. “Is something wrong?”

“I just came out of the shower, sorry.”

“And that’s it?” Damen’s tone was skeptical.

She crossed her fingers behind her back, saying, “That’s it. Honest.”

Damen didn’t look convinced. “You know I can send the jet for you anytime, *ne*? No questions asked—”

His wife’s groan cut her off. “Seriously, Damen, ease up. You can see for yourself Diana’s perfectly fine.” But not a second had passed when Mairi slanted a faintly worried glance at her sister-in-law, saying uneasily, “I mean, you are. Right?”

Diana giggled, thinking it was so like Mairi to act first and think later. “I’m perfectly fine, yes.”

The brunette sighed in relief. “Oh thank God. Damen would kill me otherwise.”

It was the Leventis siblings’ turn to roll their eyes. Who did she think she was kidding? Mairi had her husband wrapped around her little finger, and the whole world knew it, thanks to a certain New York Times bestseller that served as Damen’s love letter to his beloved wife.

The four of them were able to snatch a few minutes of good-natured ribbing and small talk before Damen was called away for work and Mairi had to get Nala ready for her ballet class in the afternoon.

“Oh, and Diana, before you go...”

In the act of reaching for her iPad, Diana turned to face the screen again, her sister-in-law’s mischievous tone making her curious. “What is it?”

“You might have fooled your brother for now, but I’m so on to you.”

“Huh?”

“You’re a creature of habit, Di. It’s not like you to be late in taking our calls, and—” Mairi’s tone lowered to a whisper. “It’s so not like you to suddenly start wearing black undies.”

Shit. Oh, shit. Diana fought hard to keep herself from blushing as she tried

to bluff her way out, asking innocently, “What about it?”

“Uh huh.”

“I just wanted to try wearing black. *That’s all.*”

“Sure it is.” Mairi’s tone was sly.

“I’m not kidding—”

Her sister-in-law waved her words away, asking eagerly instead, “Who is he?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, come on. I’m just really excited that you’ve finally found a guy you like.”

Diana made a show of checking the time. “I’m going to be late.”

“Spoilsport,” Mairi grumbled. “But because I’m a nice person, I promise I’ll keep your secret—”

“Goodbye, Mairi.”

“And don’t worry, I’ll make sure to take care of Damen, too.”

She was about to end the call when she realized too late what her sister-in-law meant to do. “Mairi—”

“Talk to you next week, Di!”

“No, wait—”

But the screen had already turned black, and Diana bit back a groan. While Mairi always meant well, she also always ended up having her best-laid plans backfire. *Which means*, Diana thought uneasily, Mairi taking care of Diana’s brother would most likely end up the opposite and have Damen banging on her front door and thinking the worst.

Diana took a deep breath.

Isaiah 26:3, Isaiah 26:3, Isaiah 26:3.

Mairi might be a walking trouble magnet, but even she couldn’t get in the way of the Lord. *Right?*

TOGETHER

This Is Why I Need You by Jesse Ruben

Diana was about to leave the dorm when the resident manager called out to her, asking for her to wait.

He came back a moment later, a small, beautifully wrapped parcel in his hands. He handed it over to her with a smile, and she took it gingerly, unable to think of any reason why she would be sent a present.

“This is really for me?” she asked doubtfully.

“No other gal here by the name of Diana Leventis,” Lenny answered cheerfully, “so I’d have to say yes.”

Since the package didn’t come with any card, she asked, “Did you get a name?”

“Afraid not. Maybe you’ve got a secret admirer?”

Diana couldn’t stop her cheeks from turning red. “I don’t think so.”

And the lady truly meant it, Lenny thought ruefully as Diana thanked him before turning away. *Poor gal*. That Esther Leventis woman must’ve been a real horror, to have made a pretty little swan like Diana think of herself as an ugly duckling.

A cautious but irrepressible form of optimism had infected Diana’s senses by the time she made it out of the dorm, and unable to help it, she plopped down on the nearest bench and eagerly began unwrapping it.

Underneath the layers of foil wrapper and soft tissue was a box, and hope reluctantly gave way to confusion at what she was seeing.

An iPhone?

Granted, it was the latest model, but...an iPhone?

Maybe Damen needed to give her another phone for security reasons? It would be just like him if so, and she wouldn't be even surprised if this came with GPS tracking and whatnot.

She opened the box, and the first thing she saw was the sticky note posted on its screen.

The passcode is the date we first met.

And that was when she knew, her eyes stinging, her heart skipping a beat, and a euphoric burst of hope exploding inside of her with such force that she could barely breathe.

Her fingers shook as she turned the iPhone on, and her heart skipped another beat as she typed the numbers that corresponded with the clue. The lock screen blinked out, and the next thing she saw was the new message notification.

One click, and her heart started pounding.

Matthijs: *In the event you need to contact me.*

A helpless smile played over her lips.

Diana: *Is that your way of saying you want to keep in touch?*

Matthijs: *No.*

Diana: *But you went as far as buying me an iPhone.*

Matthijs: *To ensure our means of communication remains secure and private.*

Diana: *Why can't you just lie and say you want to talk to me?*

Matthijs: *Because you'd never believe me even when I tell you the truth.*

Diana: *You're so serious.*

Almost an entire minute passed, and there still wasn't anything from the professor, almost as if he were saying he would only deign to text her back if she had shared something worthwhile.

It rather reminded her of how Damen was, and she couldn't help smiling. This type of similarity with her brother, she would definitely welcome.

Diana: *When I text you here, there's really no way anyone else would read our messages?*

Matthijs: *Given sufficient heads-up, not even if someone steals your phone.*

Diana: *In that case...I think I've got a crush on you, Professor de Graaf.*

On the other side of town, the professor had just grabbed his car keys and was about to leave his place when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He took it out, saw what she had texted, and threw the keys back on the console before heading back to the shower.

He had a boner to attend to, all thanks to his dark-haired troublemaker.

As for Diana, it wasn't until she was on her third class for the day when she noticed the *New Message* icon on her secret phone.

Matthijs: *Fuck.*

Diana went to her next class with a huge smile on her face, and her buoyant feelings, having spilled over to lunch, had her friends exchanging baffled looks.

“Are you alright?” Magnolia was frankly concerned. The last time she had seen Diana, the other girl had been crying her heart out. Fast forward to today, and Diana looked so blissfully happy she was in danger of floating off any second.

Diana couldn't help feeling sheepish upon seeing Magnolia's frowning expression. “I'm sorry for worrying you guys the past few days.”

Amine raised a brow. “*And?*”

“I'm, um, okay now?” Diana had to fight back a silly grin when she saw Magnolia looking ready to strangle her. “I'm *really* sorry for worrying you?” She saw Magnolia raise her hands threateningly and choked back a laugh. “I'm sorry, really sorry!” Diana clapped her hands together in a gesture of apology. “But that's all I can say.”

“What do you mean that's all you can say?” Magnolia glared at her. “You owe us an explanation, Diana Leventis.”

“I—”

Amine shook her head, a look of wry expression on her face. “Don't bother, Mags.” She made a vague circular gesture towards Diana's face. “Just *look* at her. It's all there.”

Magnolia's blue eyes narrowed. The soft, bright light in her dark eyes, the brush of pale pink in her cheeks, and most of all, the lips that couldn't quite stop curving in a secret smile.

“You're in lust,” Magnolia accused.

Amine, in the act of taking another sip of her hot soy milk, ended up

sputtering instead. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. She’s *in love*.”

Magnolia wrinkled her nose in distaste. “One word: *yuck*.”

Diana swallowed back a laugh, and seeing that the two were about to launch into their usual bickering, quickly made a move to forestall this, saying firmly, “It’s neither.” Her friends’ heads simultaneously snapped towards her direction, so fast that Diana found herself taken aback, and she said weakly, “I’m just *happy*?”

They crossed their arms over their chests, both of them wearing *I’m-still-waiting* expressions on their lovely faces, and feeling obliged to elaborate, Diana said in a small voice, “There’s a guy I like...and he likes me back.”

One, two, three seconds passed, and then Magnolia and Amine burst into squeals and giggles, and Diana couldn’t help giggling as well as the two engulfed her in big, warm hugs.

How did it start?

How do you know he likes you back?

Were you crying because you thought he didn’t like you at first?

Did he hurt you? Did he grovel for you to take him back?

On and on the questions went that Diana had to throw her hands up in a pleading gesture. “I *can’t*. It’s just...I want to keep things private for now.”

“Spoilsport,” Magnolia grumbled.

But Amine was looking perturbed. “He’s not married, is he?”

“What? *No*.” Diana couldn’t help send her friend a chiding look. “I’m *not* that kind of girl.”

Amine’s slender shoulders moved in a shrug. “You’d be surprised at what people could do for love.”

“But...to commit adultery?”

“You really never know until you’re in the situation yourself.”

Diana wasn’t sure she agreed with this, and even as lunch hour came to an end, she found herself still mulling it over.

How far could she go for love?

She couldn’t think of any ready answer to this, but then she suddenly found herself thinking of *him*, and a shiver ran down her spine. It was like having someone walk over her grave, and she couldn’t help thinking, couldn’t help worrying that for the professor, she could easily see herself doing (and

had already done) crazy things for.

And to think...

She wasn't in love with him yet.

H E R

Diana wasn't in the habit of eavesdropping.

But while she was waiting in line at the bus stop, words from the conversation happening behind her started penetrating her daydreams of the professor, and she found herself inadvertently doing just that.

Two women in their thirties, both of them working as cashiers for the same local grocery, and then moonlighting afterwards: one was a waitress at a diner while another did part-time at a convenience store near her house.

An idea started brewing in Diana's mind as she listened to the pair exchange horror stories about their shared workplace, which ranged from a misogynist boss who thought nothing of calling his female workers 'dumb pussies' to having to pay for a customer's groceries because an old woman had gotten away with faking an accident at Aisle 5 and blaming the staff for it.

While she wasn't quite sure of the whys and hows yet, she did know that she was listening to something important, and when their bus finally arrived, Diana made certain to sit behind the pair so she could better (and discreetly, too, hopefully) observe them.

Tired was the first word that came to mind as Diana took in their appearances, their exhaustion so deeply seated in their systems that it almost seemed a scent they wore.

The two women's talk had turned to Hollywood gossip, and Diana leaned back against her seat, feeling like she was missing something crucial.

She turned her gaze to the window in a bid to contain her restlessness and frustration.

She still had ten minutes before her stop, which was a short walk from the suicide help center Helder Meer had a long-standing arrangement with. In exchange of volunteer hours, students were given a chance to consult the

staff, make use of its library with its specialized collections in medical literature, and conduct structured interviews with some of the in-house patients.

She had already spent a few hours there in the past days, and while Diana had found the time illuminating, it hadn't felt...*enough*. Something was missing. Something that she had this unshakable conviction of finding somewhere else, but what it was exactly escaped her. She only knew she would recognize it when she found it...

Life's the biggest bully of them all.

Like now.

Diana jerked up in her seat, the words she had heard from one of the women making her heart thud against her chest.

I know right? It just keeps kicking you down, and it never gives you a break.

Before she could think twice of what she was doing, she was already leaning down to tap on one of the women's shoulders and hearing herself say, "Hi."

The two women turned to her in wary surprise. "Yeah?"

"I'm, umm, Diana, a student from Helder Meer. I was wondering if I could interview you..."

"For what?" The Hispanic woman was visibly bewildered.

"That depends," her blonde friend joked at the same time. "How much will you be paying us?"

Diana didn't hesitate, quoting a figure that had the two women gaping, and because she really wanted to make it happen, she added right after, "Free dinner, too."

The blonde threw her head back with a laugh. "For that kind of deal, hon, we'd change our names and rewrite our life stories for you."

H I M

The professor couldn't reach for his phone fast enough when he saw it vibrate and slide towards the edge of his desk.

Diana: *Good night, Professor.*

He inhaled deeply and told himself to play it cool. There wasn't any need to reply, and he liked to think she wasn't one of those snowflake types that he thoroughly despised and who would find offense in just about every fucking thing.

So forget what you read and get back to work.

But instead his fingers started moving.

Matthijs: *It's two in the morning already.*

Diana: *I know. :(*

The sad face at the end was cute. It shouldn't be, but that was how he found it, and the realization had him cursing under his breath. Goddamn it to hell, but he really had it fucking bad for this girl.

And then a thought occurred to him, and his face hardened.

Matthijs: *Out partying late?*

He had never fished for information his entire life. Not fucking once. And if she let it slip that she was out partying with another guy and she was stupid enough to come to his class tomorrow hung over, he just might kill her. Then kill himself afterwards because he had never had a thing for girls who lived to club, and Diana had him so blind with lust that he had failed to see the truth about her.

A moment later, her answer in text arrived, and his tension slightly eased as her words dispelled his worst fears.

Diana: *I'm working on V2.0 of my proposal. I have a scary professor to*

impress. I don't want him mad at me again.

Matthijs: *Only a heartless bastard could be mad at you.*

Diana: *Oh, I don't think so. He can get mean and cruel, and he has a way with words that can rip you into pieces, but I don't think he's heartless. TBH... I think he's rather hot.*

Matthijs: *And I think you're a masochist.*

Diana: **blush* If anyone else had said that, I'd totally find it creepy. But when it's you...*

The professor scowled. *Don't say it. Don't fucking say it. Don't.* But he was already reaching for his iPhone, and as he hit *Send* on his message—

Matthijs: *It turns you on?*

Her reply had arrived at the same fucking time.

Diana: *It turns me on.*

And upon seeing it, the professor was back to cursing in seven languages. He drove his fingers through his hair in a fit of frustration and clenched and unclenched his fist. But neither helped, and his body, which far from cooling down had instead turned into a tightly coiled mass of sexual need.

Diana: *Oh. Wow.*

Matthijs: *This doesn't change things.*

Diana: *But it does. Because whether you like it or not...You're already close to choosing me.*

The professor, being no idiot, knew when to pick his battles.

Matthijs: *I'll see you tomorrow.*

Diana: *But I want to talk some more. :(*

Matthijs somehow found the strength to turn his iPhone off for the night. If he didn't, those cute emojis of her would end up getting him to do fucking anything.

Leaning back against his seat, he closed his eyes wearily and thought to himself, *What the fuck am I doing?* Hadn't he told her - and himself - that nothing could happen between them? So why the hell were they still playing this game and acting like they had a fucking future?

He briefly considered finishing the rest of his work, but burning the midnight oil - once a favorite hobby of his - had lost its appeal, and he eventually ended up lying in bed, staring sightlessly at the skylight above him

as sleep continued to evade his clutches.

His mood remained black and destructive the next morning, and he had to take several deep breaths before entering his class, not wanting to risk fucking up and taking his anger out on her again.

But as soon as he entered the room, his gaze found hers, and he realized right away he had been worrying for nothing. A single glimpse of the shy but eager look in her sweet doe eyes, and the professor was done for. He was an animal in heat and mindless slave all rolled into one fucked-up mess, and even knowing this - he didn't give a damn.

God, how he wanted her.

And then he noticed the way his students were staring at him oddly, and the professor let out a cough.

Dammit.

He had been standing in front of his class like an idiot who had been asked to illustrate a correlation between the theories of nihilism and general relativity.

And all because she was there.

His gaze drifted towards her one last time, and he saw her bite back a smile.

Fuck.

He found that *cute*, too.

As well as being a massive turn-on—

Ah, shit.

Get yourself together, idiot.

The professor snatched the clipboard on his desk and began rattling out names of students who had failed to propose something feasible in the last class. He noticed the way the whole class turned to Diana when he said her name, and regret bit into him as memories of their last encounter returned with a vengeance.

You're an even bigger idiot than I gave you credit for.

This was enough to make him wince, but when he caught sight of her in his peripheral vision, her face was a lovely blank canvas, and damned if he knew what to make of it.

Unlike before, students on their second round of submissions were given a

tougher assignment by the professor. Aside from having to come up front and present their idea to the class, they were also required to submit the first three chapters of their proposal.

The professor had always thought this a fair price to pay for having another shot at his class.

Or at least he used to until now, and he had to bear the sight of Diana coming to stand next to his desk, knowing that he'd only have himself to blame if she ended up suffering any kind of embarrassment.

He saw her take a deep breath and felt like doing the same.

Goddammit, maybe he should make up some excuse—

“I was waiting at the bus stop yesterday when I overheard two women talking their everyday lives, and from what I could glean from their stories, they were overworked and underpaid as well as being constantly subjected to various types of workplace abuse and harassment.

“One of them had a bedridden mother to support while another was a widow with two children. To say that they had a hard life would be an understatement. To say that they had every right and reason to feel depressed could even be considered a fact. But the thing is, they were not depressed and hadn't even seriously thought of committing suicide to end their torment.”

By this time, practically the entire class was spellbound, and so was the professor, who had long realized that he hadn't anything to worry about. By now, it was so obvious to see that she had changed, with the way she was able to meet everyone's gazes with an earnest smile backed by purposeful determination.

A woman with a purpose, the professor thought, and soon it became clear what that purpose was.

“I had the chance to chat with them over dinner, and I was happy when they invited some of their friends over. We spoke for hours, and the whole time, I kept waiting for one of them to say they were sad or tired - that they were feeling so down they just wanted to end it all. But none of them did. All they spoke of was how they *had* to keep living no matter what - and that was when I realized what made them different. They had people to live for, people whom they were certain *would not* survive if they were to die, and—”

She suddenly stopped speaking, doe eyes blinking rapidly, and his fist involuntarily clenched when he realized she was fighting back tears. He turned to his class and saw that it was the same for them, too.

“One of them s-said...*if she killed herself, then she might as well have*

killed her own m-mother, too.” Diana paused to swallow hard. “I know what I’m about to propose might not...might be *too* novel if there’s such a thing, but what if - what if we were to *give* them something or someone to live for, something or someone that they would know with absolute certainty wouldn’t survive without them - might that not be enough—” Diana’s voice caught, and this time she had no choice but to wipe the tears that had tracked down her cheeks. “Might it not be enough to keep them from committing suicide?”

It was a question no one in the room had the answer to.

But it didn’t matter at this point.

Because by this time, it was more than enough that she was asking the right question, more than enough that she wasn’t asking it just to score points. She was asking the question because she wanted to save lives, she was asking this one question because it was her purpose - and everyone saw this.

One by one they came to their feet, their applause growing thunderous as some of them sniffed while others sobbed outright. The professor had never seen such a thing happen in his class before, and when he turned to meet her dark shining eyes—

Fuck.

Because in her gaze he saw...

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He saw...

His dreams.

His future.

His purpose.

And he was so goddamn fucked.

H E R

Diana couldn't stop thinking about the professor's cock.

And it was all his fault, too, she thought helplessly.

Second-chance presentations were long over, but since returning to her seat, she kept catching the professor looking at her, so often she became giddily convinced he wanted her to *know* he had his eye on her.

It also helped that he had such an amazing and subtle way of doing it no other student seemed to notice. It was just her, only her that the leonine glitter of lust in his eyes focused on. Just *her*.

How could any girl not think about his cock when she had the professor eye-fucking her like that?

She didn't even have to close her eyes. It was so horrifyingly, shamefully easy to remember the way he had been. The way he had been sprawled like a lounging, powerful beast on the couch. The way his elegant fingers had stroked his member. The way he had made her *ache*.

Oh, sweet mercy, how he had made her ache.

How could she not think? Remember? *Relive?*

A sheaf of papers suddenly smacked her on the face, and she crashed back down to earth to see Pepper giving her an evil, saccharine smile. "Sorry. I didn't think I'd hit you."

Liar, Diana thought. But because the memories had her body still tingling and humming, she couldn't even summon a single ounce of anger. Looking down, she saw that the papers were the schedule request forms the professor had spoken about, and she took one for herself before passing it to the guy on her other side.

He gave her a sympathetic smile, saying in a low, conspiratorial tone, "Don't mind her. She's just jealous your proposal's got a better shot at

winning MPT.”

“MPT?”

“Most Promising Thesis.” This from Pepper, who apparently didn’t mind letting them know she had been listening in. “And as Ms. Melodramatic here doesn’t even know what it is—” The girl leaned over her desk just to bypass Diana and shoot a scornful look at the other student’s direction. “You’re absolutely delusional, to think that she’s got a chance at beating me.”

Diana was flabbergasted at the vitriol embedded in the redhead’s tone. “I wasn’t—”

“What happened earlier was a one-time fluke,” Pepper hissed. “We’ll see how you’ll really fare when you’re made to defend it.” And as if she felt she hadn’t been explicit enough in expressing her hatred, she snarled under her breath, “Bi—”

“Careful, Ms. Lowell,” a silken warning interrupted Pepper, and when the three of them looked up, it was, of course, no other than the professor. None of them had noticed him coming up to them, and maybe it was just her, but Diana couldn’t help thinking how he looked every inch an avenging archangel with his blazing golden eyes and every lethal inch of him radiating a dangerous form of rage.

An archangel, Diana couldn’t help thinking, who also happened to be so much more stylish than all the other professors she had known in her life.

With his cobalt three-piece suit (tweed, of course) including a single-breasted waistcoat that boasted of velvet trimmings for its pockets, he should have appeared laughably overdressed for conducting a lecture. But because he was, after all, *T-PILF*, he only ended up being more breathtaking than usual while at the same time making everyone else feel overwhelmingly underdressed.

It was probably why everyone came to his class with ironed shirts and zero sandal sightings—

“Diana?”

She blinked, the sound of her name bringing her back to reality, and then she blinked again, seeing that the professor was no longer there and - was it just her imagination, or did Pepper seem to be fighting back tears?

“You okay?”

It was the guy seated on her right again, and it took a second longer than it should for Diana to recall that his name was Lars. “Um, yes, sorry.”

“I have a feeling you totally missed the last two minutes,” Lars whispered. He seemed a pleasant enough guy, with light brown hair and an affable smile that had the power to put everyone at ease.

In fact, he had that smile on now, and she returned it tentatively while reminding herself to relax. “I’m afraid so. I was...*thinking*,” she finished lamely. From kindergarten to Christopoulos University, she had always had Katya to act as a buffer between her and the opposite sex. It was only here in Helder Meer that she had been forced to come out of her shell and test her social skills on guys who were neither her brother nor men she had known since childhood.

“Well, you missed the best part unfortunately, but I’ll do my best to recap. Firstly—” Lars nodded towards Pepper, who had just vacated her seat and flounced off in the professor’s direction, schedule request form in hand. “Bitch got schooled. *Hard*.”

The words had her choking, more so when the other student went on to add, “She tried to make light of what happened, but Professor de Graaf wasn’t buying any of her B.S. She got a citation on the spot, and a warning that the next time she ever so much as looked at your direction the wrong way, she would be asked to drop the class or be graded an automatic F.”

Diana’s jaw had dropped by the time Lars finished speaking. “I missed *all* that?”

“There was also the part the professor invited me to be your knight in shining armor,” Lars joked.

“You mean my babysitter,” Diana tried to tease back, and her baby step in socializing was rewarded with Lars turning a little red in the ears.

Schubert started playing from the PA system, and Lars appeared visibly disappointed at finding out that their class had officially ended. “See you next class I guess?”

“See you.” She managed another awkward smile before turning away, and as she reached for her bag, it was then she saw the request form she had yet to fill out.

A wild, crazy germ of an idea struck her, and Diana’s heart thundered against her chest.

Could she? Should she? Would she?

Only one way to find out, Diana thought, and taking her pen up, she started scribbling.

It was around ten in the evening and Diana was about to hit the sack when

a system-generated message from Helder Meer's registrar arrived at her inbox.

Subject: Schedule for Thesis Consultation

Dear Ms. Diana Leventis,

Your requested schedule for thesis consultation for **Novel Therapy** under Professor **Matthijs de Graaf** has been approved.

Tuesday 0500 - 0700

Friday 2100 - 2300

Diana unconsciously pressed a hand to her chest. *Ad Altiora Tendo for the win.*

H I M

The professor was getting used to cursing his stupidity.

Consternation struck him the moment the system sent his confirmation slips out to the wild. He had never been the type to second-guess himself, but ever since that girl happened—

Matthijs raked a hand through his hair.

Had it really been only a week since he met her?

Necessity had made him a creature of habit, with every minute of his day accounted for. And he had been fine with that. Until - again - *she* happened.

For the entire week now, he had been doing things out of character. Pleasuring himself in front of a student. Saying fucking sorry. And his latest insanity? Actually saying *yes* to meeting her on hours they would be least supervised...and anything could happen.

After a discomfitingly sleepless night (or despite it in this case), the professor still woke at exactly a quarter to five on a cloudy Sunday morning. It was his least favorite day of the week, but he had long learned to make do.

His morning routine took up ninety minutes of his time, followed by an hour's session at his personal gym. After this was desk toil: assignments and essays to grade, correspondence to reply to, and journals to read and analyze.

Seminars and conferences were supposed to take up the remaining hours of the day, but there were rare occasions when the rest of the world refused to cooperate. This week's Sunday was such a day, with most of his professional acquaintances opting to honor Sabbath the way the Lord meant to, thus leaving his calendar glaringly empty.

With nothing to keep him from dwelling on his fuck-ups, the professor found himself brooding over the latest cause of disturbance in his otherwise orderly life. Diana had sent him a text message last night, thanking him for approving her schedule request. It was, they both knew, also an invitation. To

flirt. Play sexual games. Stay fucking *connected*.

And fuck yes, but the invitation had worked, and it had him typing as fast as he could.

A thank-you text won't cut it. I want you here with me, on my lap, your pussy impaled on my dick.

That was what he had typed.

But what he ended up *sending* was: *You're welcome.*

Two words that were supposed to be the right thing to do, but it sure hadn't felt right, and it still didn't, with the silence from her end driving him crazy and making his Sundays even more intolerable than they usually were.

What if his rather impersonal reply had her entertaining stupid thoughts? What if he had hurt her without meaning to, driven her to someone else's arms, like that boy Lars?

Too many goddamn what-ifs, but he somehow managed to control himself from doing anything stupid.

Sinning, at the very least, could wait until Monday.

H E R

Diana couldn't believe what Bernie was saying.

Sick? The professor had called in *sick*?

Looking around, she saw that the rest of the class appeared as bewildered as she was, none of them able to picture any kind of illness daring to befall on someone as intimidatingly and vibrantly virile as the professor.

The TA left as soon as he had their worksheets distributed, and for several moments all Diana could do was stare at the piece of paper in her hand.

Back when she still lived under her mother's thumb, she neither thought of Mondays as manic nor mundane. Instead, they were Morbid Mondays to her, with Diana forced to attend board meetings and pretend she was okay with Esther's illegal maneuverings. Mondays were also for social dinners and playing nice with whichever latest bachelor Esther believed to be rich, foolish, and docile enough to pass as her future son-in-law.

Since last Monday though, she had started thinking of the first day of the week as *magical*.

Magical Mondays.

That was how she had thought of it, rather whimsically she knew, and it was all because Monday meant being able to see him. Hear him speak. It meant being able to *bask* in his presence.

But now this.

Diana: *The TA just told us you called in sick. :(Are you okay?*

Matthijs: *Better now, because I know you're worried about me.*

It was so rare to catch the professor in the mood to play, and her heart skipped a beat despite knowing this couldn't mean anything.

Diana: *I'm okay with foregoing tomorrow's consultation so you can rest*

some more.

Matthijs: Don't you know by now, my darling? The sight of you is a better cure than a gallon of antibiotics. And the feel of you...makes me fucking immortal, baby.

HIM

The professor's alarm woke him at half past four the next day.

While a dull, miniscule throbbing still nagged at his temple, his body no longer felt sluggish, and he was even able to leave the bed without tripping over his own feet.

Twenty hours ago, it hadn't been the case at all, with the flu causing the professor to all but crawl just to make it to the en-suite.

Then again, none of it should've happened if he hadn't been so damn careless in the first place.

The last time he had done something as stupid as this, everything had still been new and unfamiliar, his bitterness still raw enough to make him rebel against the drastic changes his life had to accommodate.

But he had no such excuse now.

No damn excuse except for the fact that his thoughts had been so damn entangled because of her and...

Never again, he told himself forcefully. Never again would he let her affect him this way. Never again would he let her affect him to the point of making him do things completely out of character and say things he had no right to say.

Never again, he repeated to himself as he drank his lemon-infused water and read his messages—

WHAT THE FUCK?

Shock had him sputtering over his glass, but words on the message thread between him and Diana didn't even waver. Words that he seemed to have fucking typed while he had been in the throes of fever and delirium. Words that he could no longer take back—

His doorbell buzzed.

Because she was already here, outside his damn house.

The professor moved in record speed, taking a shower while issuing orders to his staff on loudspeaker. But despite his best efforts at multitasking, he still ended up making her wait for a good ten minutes before he was sufficiently presentable.

His housekeeper had already escorted Diana into his living room, allowing her to see him as he came out of the hallway. She stood up right away, and a part of him did the same thing, standing in immediate attention the moment she came into view.

Shit.

He was in trouble.

No, make that *she* was trouble.

Big fucking trouble, the kind that came in petite, slender packages but packed a fucking wallop. The kind that came with eat-you, eat-me eyes that had the power to enslave bastards like him. And the most damn vexing thing of all, she was the kind of trouble that noticed right away the attention-seeking banana in his fucking pocket.

“G-Good morning, Professor.” Her voice was faint.

“Good morning.” His voice, on the other hand, was raspy, with the professor unable to help but notice how her gaze kept darting to the rigid outline his erection had made against his trousers.

“I, um, brought something for you.” If he wasn’t in so much pain, he might’ve been amused at the way she had to drag her eyes off his arousal and reach for something—

The professor blinked.

“I hope you’re not allergic,” she said shyly.

“No.” The professor accepted the bouquet of flowers. “I’m, err, not.” He gazed down at the fresh bunch of wild roses he had in his hands rather blankly, thinking he had never had someone gift him with flowers—

Focus, you idiot.

He recalled himself with an effort, saying stiffly, “Thank you for this.” He glanced at where his housekeeper stood in attentive silence, and at the professor’s nod, Noel took the flowers from his hand, saying, “I’ll take care of this, sir.”

Matthijs nodded his thanks, and the other man took his leave. When he

glanced back at Diana, she asked uncertainly, “Are you really okay?” And almost as if she couldn’t help herself, she moved forward, and he inhaled sharply as her scent teased him.

It was an intriguing combination of feminine elegance - like one of those rare fragrant varieties of tulips - and something masculine (perhaps a hint of leather?). Whatever the combination was, its intangible message was broad as fucking daylight.

I’m a princess, her sweet, tart scent whispered, but I can get dirty...for the right man.

The professor’s teeth gnashed. Message fucking delivered, and it was potent as hell, his trousers once again feeling like they were a damn size smaller than they should be.

“Let’s go, shall we?” He walked away without another word, and he heard her follow behind him after a moment, doe eyes gobbling him up in that innocently hungry way that was uniquely hers.

Most of Matthijs’ first-time visitors typically spent a lot of time gawking and gaping at their surroundings. Modesty aside, he knew damn well his house by the lake was an architectural masterpiece. A sprawling single-story estate designed with an impressive fusion of contemporary and rustic elements, its structure boasted of reclaimed wood logs fortified by black steel and glass walls that offered a 360-degree lakeshore backdrop for the professor’s heirloom furniture.

All of this, and yet the damn girl hadn’t even spared her surroundings more than a distracted glance. She only had eyes for him apparently, and so it remained even when they made it to the breakfast room, which his friends’ wives remarked would be an irresistible delight for any woman.

Apparently, they were wrong.

He got his HomePod to work with a ‘good morning,’ but even having his range of smart appliances operate on its own proved incapable of making her glance away. It was only when music started playing in the background that she finally reacted, a surprised smile breaking over her lips.

“Is that *Sunflower*?” she asked. “From *Spiderverse*?”

“Not exactly.” His voice was gruff. “It’s a cover, by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Contini.”

“Oh.” A pause. Then, she said teasingly, “*Snob alert.*”

“It can’t be helped,” he answered with a disinterested shrug, “if I’ve a more elevated taste in music.”

Diana seemed about to reply when the professor's live-in cook came in and she fell silent instead, her lips automatically curving in a smile, albeit tentatively, as she met the chef's gaze.

At Matthijs' nod, the other man began setting the table. "Good morning, *mejuffrouw*," Antoine said cheerfully. "I hope you like eggs Benedict and French toast."

"They're my favorites."

Her tone was a charming mixture of shyness and warmth, and while it was enough to win Antoine over, it also had him throwing his employer an odd look, almost as if questioning what an innocent like her was doing with a bastard like Matthijs.

The professor's lips twisted. *You and me both, chef*. He watched in brooding silence as the other man continued to fuss over Diana, asking her what she wanted for dessert and insisting that she try his famous lemon-and-cucumber shake.

By the time Antoine had finally taken his leave, thirty minutes had already passed, and the professor was considerably glad about this. The more time wasted, the better.

When he turned to face Diana, she seemed to be squirming on the other end of the table. He raised a brow, and she said haltingly, "I'm sorry I put you and your staff through all this trouble..."

"I should be the one apologizing," the professor dismissed smoothly, "considering I had you come all the way here." In fact, his delirious self had been very insistent about this. *'Don't make me wait a single second. I need to fucking see you'* were, in fact, the exact words he had texted her, and remembering this made Matthijs wince slightly.

"So...um..." Diana cleared her throat. "Shall I say grace?"

"By all means." After all, that meant an additional ten seconds consumed.

Afterwards, Diana offered to start with the consultation while they had breakfast, but the professor demurred, saying he would rather have her properly enjoy Antoine's preparations.

When they finally moved to the professor's library at the other end of the hallway, it was already ten minutes past six.

Perfect.

Since his place was a ten-minute drive away from Helder Meer, it shouldn't be amiss if he had her leave by six forty-five. That meant he had,

what, only 35 minutes left to kill?

The thought brought him relief, enough to put the professor in a far mellower mood as he took his seat behind the desk. Giving Diana a faint smile, he asked calmly, "Shall we start?"

"Of course." She leaned forward as she spoke, her V-necked dress dipping to reveal a plump amount of cleavage...and something else.

The professor's smile vanished.

FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.

And everything he had managed to forget - the rest of the words he had texted her - all of it came back in a flash.

Diana: *Why don't I just come now? I want to take care of you.*

Matthijs: *You can take care of me in every way you want tomorrow.*

Diana: *Is that a promise?*

Matthijs: *Depends. Have you ever tried teasing a man before?*

Diana: *Do I look - act - like I've tried teasing a man before?*

Matthijs: **smirk* Not gonna lie, my darling. Virginity's never been a fetish of mine, but you're different. I haven't been able to stop imagining the countless things I'd like to do to your cunt. I wanna fuck it in every way. Fingers. Tongue. Dick.*

Diana: *I...have...no...words (but in a good, breathless way!)*

Matthijs: *I know this can be too much. So tell you what. Let's make a deal. You come here to my place tomorrow minus your pretties...that's a yes. You come here with your unmentionables on, that's a no.*

Diana: *And you'll know without me saying anything?*

Matthijs: *Fuck yes.*

A guttural growl of frustration inadvertently escaped him, and Diana blinked in confusion. "Professor? Are you okay?" She leaned forward some more, and there was no way he could deny it this time, no way to unfucking see the fact...that her tits were completely bare under her dress.

TOGETHER

Don't Worry, Baby by The Beach Boys & Lorrie Morgan

Diana could barely breathe.

They had been going over her thesis steadily for the past twenty minutes, and while every second of it had been efficiently put to use, a part of her couldn't shake off the feeling that they were playing a game.

But as for what game...

~~Can~~ cat and mouse?

Hide and seek ~~the~~ banana?

Tic-~~fuck~~-tac-toe?

"Did you get that?"

Just one short question. Four simple words. And yet, with the professor so painfully close and looking so breathtakingly beautiful in his black turtleneck cashmere sweater and jeans...

"I...umm..."

He might as well be speaking gibberish.

"Could you please just stop staring at me like that?" she blurted out, giving up on any pretense of not feeling hot and bothered by the slow-burning heat in the professor's gaze.

She had been hoping the words would catch him off guard, but instead it only had him chuckling, and even this...something so dreadfully basic...oh sweet mercy, but even just the sound of his chuckle had her stomach clenching in what she knew by now was sexual desire.

"It's not a crime, is it?"

The purr in his voice almost made her want to whimper. *I'm so out of my league, Saint M.* Something must be drastically wrong, that every little thing he said or did had her obsessing over fornicating. With him, if that wasn't obvious enough.

Clearing her throat, she tried to focus on answering his question. "We're talking about, um, what my stand should be..." His knee suddenly bumped hers under the desk, and she jumped in her chair.

"My apologies."

But the way his leonine eyes were gleaming had her thinking, *Yeah right.* He had totally made that happen, and now her body was suffering a serious case of tingles because of it.

Seriously, Saint M. If you think I'm doing the wrong thing here, now's the time to let her know.

Clearing her throat for the third time, Diana tried to start fresh once more, but this time she spoke in a rush. "You were asking about my stand on Catholics who willingly chose death to save the greater good."

"Correct." The professor's tone turned brisk. "I strongly recommend you look up St. Augustine's writings on this matter."

"Got that." She dutifully added this to her TBR while telling herself she was *not* disappointed about play time apparently being over.

She might have come here without her underwear, but it wasn't like she was really expecting anything to happen.

The professor had only been teasing, and she had known that.

Right?

"Diana?"

Color burst in her cheeks when she realized she had missed the professor's last words. "I'm sorry, Professor. What was that again?" She held her breath right after, bracing herself to withstand his usual avalanche of well-aimed barbs.

But instead, the professor only smiled at her. "I was talking about this part." She watched dumbly as he tapped the chart she had on *Page 14...*and that was it.

Maybe he was still sick, Diana thought worriedly, and he just didn't want to worry her?

The professor gestured to her Apple pencil. "You should label this part--"

His fingers tapped a section of the chart. “–with your initials.”

“Yes, sir.”

The professor raised a brow when several moments had passed and the only thing Diana had done was reach for the pencil. “Well?”

Diana fidgeted in her seat, and apparently, this was sufficient explanation for the professor, whose lips subsequently curved. “You don’t know how to?”

“I just haven’t gotten around to learning it, that’s all.” Diana tried not to sound defensive but knew she had failed when the professor’s amused smile turned into a smirk.

“Let me show you then.”

“It’s fine–”

“Do you have the chart saved in Photos?” he interrupted her to ask, and at her nod, the professor instructed her to open the app. “Click *Edit* on any photo. Now, click on the *More* button. Yes, that’s it. And there you go.”

Diana felt sheepish as she clicked on *Markup*. “Thank you, Professor.”

“And while we’re at it...how about adding a two-way arrow here then a clockwise one on this part? Just click on the *Plus* button.”

Diana did as asked, but this time, the professor’s commands were a lot harder to execute as her iPad refused to cooperate.

“Click on the actual arrow,” he advised, “and the additional design options for arrows should show up at the bottom of the screen.”

“I’m trying,” Diana protested, “But it’s clearly not working.”

“Here, let me show you.”

Before Diana could say another word, the professor had already moved to stand behind her.

Oh. No. Oh. *Shit*.

And then he was already there, the professor’s strong arms forming a cage around her body, and it was all she could do to keep breathing.

He reached for her right hand, his fingers covering her own, and Diana’s body burned so hotly a part of her was simply waiting for her clothes to catch fire.

“You should just do this...”

You should just do me, Diana thought dizzily.

“And now click on this green button.” His voice had thickened by the end, and Diana couldn’t help but think of something else that was wonderfully thick.

His head slowly bent down, and Diana fought hard against the urge of arching her neck.

“Do you get it now?” His breath tickled her ear as he spoke, and her toes curled hard.

“Y-Yes.”

This time, Diana’s word came out in a sexy little whimper, and arousal bit into him hard. The last ounce of sanity the professor possessed urged him to quit while he still could, but the devil inside of him was persuasive as hell, telling him what he wanted to hear.

She’s already here, even went as far as coming with her tits jiggling free under her dress.

Come on, look down. See those nipples saying hi to you?

If you don’t keep your word when she’s kept hers, she might misunderstand, and she’ll leave here hurt and feeling like you’ve done something wrong.

So really, you’re doing a good thing here.

Just give her what you want.

And so he did.

“I want to see you cum again,” he said roughly. “Will you let me?”

“Yes.” Her reply was soft but swift, no fucking hesitation at all because it seemed she was stupid enough to trust him with everything.

“Then start with your breasts, darling. Pull your dress down until they spill free.”

Her trembling fingers followed his command, her boobs bouncing out a moment later: pale, perfectly shaped, and crowned with pretty-in-pink nipples.

It was a tormentingly beautiful sight, and a hiss escaped him. “Yes.” *God, yes.* “Now pinch them the way you want me to pinch them.” His conscience made one last-ditch effort to save him, telling him he was taking too much of a risk, but he shut his ears to it. “Imagine it’s my fingers pinching them.” He was being careful, dammit. There wasn’t any flesh-to-flesh contact, was there? It was all safe. Nothing like the fucking past was going to happen.

So shut the fuck up, conscience.

The professor looked down, and he swallowed hard at seeing her breasts now swollen with need.

God.

If only he had the fucking right to take her breasts into his mouth. But because he couldn't, he sought to distract himself, his fingers curling around his dick, stroking just enough to keep it from going crazy and overruling his brain.

When he heard Diana start to pant, he knew she needed more to push her over the edge, and he was more than happy to teach her the way. "Have you ever fingered yourself, Diana?"

A silent, jerky shake of her dark head, and he nearly exploded at what it meant.

Ah God, this just made him the luckiest and unluckiest bastard all at the same time.

"Would you like to try while I watch?"

He saw her teeth sink into her lower lip, and just when he was convinced it meant she would refuse, he heard her say shakily, "If you want me to."

"I do. *Badly.*"

"Then...yes." She released her left breast and her fingers slowly moved down.

"You don't need to worry about anything," he said hoarsely. "Just one finger will do. Just to open you up and make it ready when it's my dick turn." He heard her breath catch at the mention of his dick, and his strokes automatically jerked faster. "You like thinking of my dick going inside of you?"

"Y-Yes."

"Me, too, darling."

"Then why—"

"Because it's not the right time yet." And it never would be, but she didn't have to know that. "Now, let's get that finger wet..." This time, it was her whole body that shook, and he bit back a groan at how fucking sensitive she was.

"Show me how you get it wet..." And she did, pushing her dress all the way up until her moist, quivering cunt was bared to his sight.

And God, what a fucking pretty sight it was.

“One finger first.”

Her middle finger hovered over her slit.

“Up and down, darling. That’s how you stroke it. *Slowly.*”

And because she had submission down pat, she did exactly as instructed, and it had his balls aching so damn hard he knew he only had minutes left before his orgasm hit him.

“Now, push it inside slowly...”

He saw the head of her finger disappear, and he growled, “Yes. Exactly like that. Deeper now.”

She moaned as she went knuckle deep, and he groaned with her.

“It’s too much,” Diana gasped.

“Then pull it out...”

Another moan.

“Push it back in.”

More moans.

And this time, her body began to undulate, her breasts swinging and her hips squirming on the chair.

“You know how it is,” he rasped. “Do it as fast and hard as you want.”

And so her finger thrust in and out faster and harder, and her moans turned into helpless panting.

“Yes, just like that.”

Diana moaned, and his strokes quickened.

“*P-Professor...*”

“Yes,” he growled. “GOD, YES.”

She screamed as she came, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

Mijn obsessie.

And a dark stain spread over his jeans as he climaxed right behind her.

H E R

It Must Have Been Love by Kathleen Edwards

Diana wondered if people could tell how happy she was, just by looking at her.

She didn't think so, but neither did she think she was imagining the way she was attracting more glances than usual. And since her looks or taste in fashion hadn't changed in any way, then...it was that, wasn't it?

People could tell how much being with the professor was making her happy.

Butterfly wings fluttered in her stomach, and she had an actively hard time resisting the urge to *skip* and clap her heels together for the rest of her short walk to the university's civic hall. In keeping with the university's Neo Gothic theme, the structure also boasted of turrets and spires and Helder Meer's ever-present (mascot) gargoyle. Past its majestic front doors, however, the building seemed to undergo several centuries' worth of makeover, with its sleek, industrial interiors and state-of-the-art facilities.

There was even an AI robot named Krystal manning the concierge, and it was like having a ten-year-old version of Siri to interact with as she keyed in her ID number and explained (verbally) what she was there for.

First-year students like Diana were required to schedule a minimum of three meetings with a life coach, and after verifying her details, Krystal texted her timeslot details.

Mr. Aart Bakker

2/F Room A-3

1400 - 1500

Checking her watch, Diana saw that she still had about thirty minutes to spare and took off for the library. She still had a couple of critical passages to reread from St. Augustine's *Confessiones*, which - albeit not dealing directly with suicide - helped Diana considerably in establishing a causal relationship between the depth of one's faith and depression.

While she did believe depression was a medical condition, she was also of the (unpopular) opinion that depression, at certain points of one's life, was the result of fallacious perceptions and misinformed decisions.

Depression could and was more likely to happen if a person (or, as far as her thesis was concerned, an individual of the Catholic persuasion) failed to appreciate that true happiness was one of the soul. *Eudaimonia* was the term the Greeks used for this particular state while Saint Augustine explained it more eloquently, having written in his autobiography:

What does love look like?

It has the hands to help others.

It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy.

It has eyes to see misery and want.

It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men.

That is what love looks like.

Settling down on one of the empty tables at the back, Diana propped her iPad up and drummed her fingers on the desk as she considered how to best frame her thoughts.

If depression is the outcome of either a person's tendency or unconscious choice to prioritize a lesser form of love, then could this not be effectively rectified by revealing the truest and purest nature of love, and in so doing show what true happiness constitutes?

Not a perfectly conclusive premise, but it was a start at least, and Diana slowly began to type. The words flowed relatively easily, and by the time her alarm went off, she was glad to see that she had been able to write an additional two pages for her thesis.

Since life was so good, she thought contentedly, it should follow that she must be doing God's will. That, after, all was what true happiness was about.

Right, Saint M?

Diana had her answer some minutes later when her first life coaching session commenced with a MoU between Helder Meer and its students.

“Our university likes to keep it simple,” Mr. Bakker explained, “which is why we have this in lieu of the typical student handbook. I’m here to answer any questions you may have, and if there happens to be any issue we’re unable to resolve, you can raise it with either the Student Council or the University Board during our monthly assembly.”

Her life coach stood up and pointed to the door, saying, “We’re required to give you privacy while reading the MoU, so just knock if you need me.”

The Memorandum of Understanding only consisted of three pages, and the terms and conditions it enumerated were as straightforward as Mr. Bakker had said. She was half-inclined to simply affix her signature at the end and be done with it, but her conscience ultimately won this round, and Diana began to read.

Section 1 was all about attendance, Section 2 was on grades, and then... Section 5.

Students have the right to form any relationship that is consensual in nature and participate in activities that are demonstrative of this for as long as these activities are not criminal or felonious in nature and the relationship itself is not unlawful.

Assuming that the above considerations are met, the university thus recognizes any relationship in which the involved persons are any of the following:

- *1A Both parties are of the student body*
- *1B Both parties are of the faculty body*
- *1C Both parties are of the administrative body*
- *1D A student and a member of either the faculty or administrative body**

**Both parties are required to disclose their relationship to the university and file a Conflict of Interest declaration form.*

TOGETHER

Diana felt *sick*.

And the closer she got to the faculty building, the sicker she felt, and she could only feel dimly thankful the moment raindrops struck her skin, and her pain turned invisible amidst the skies' own tears.

She could only muster half a smile for the professor's secretary when she came barging in, and either she looked too terrifying or pathetic, but Mrs. Montez didn't even say a word, much less stop her from walking straight into the professor's office.

Matthijs was on his feet the moment he saw the distraught expression on her face. "Diana?"

She tried to speak, but it was just still too much, and she could only look at him and hurt.

He was so, so beautiful, with nothing in this world able to lessen the flawless symmetry of his face.

So beautiful.

It was just too damn bad he had turned out to be a modern-day Dorian Gray, and almost as if he heard her heart shattering anew, he suddenly stiffened. "You know." His voice was without emotion, and so was his too-gorgeous face, which was no longer anything but just carved edges and grooves now.

"That Helder Meer has no rules on fraternization?" A choking laugh escaped her, but she couldn't even find satisfaction in the way the sound made him flinch. "Yes, *I know*. And it's just...I should've known..." Oh God, she couldn't stop laughing. "I really should." Didn't dare stop. "Congratulations, Professor de Graaf. You really did a number on me—"

"Diana—"

She saw him move towards her, and she stumbled back as laughter turned into a desperate cry. “*Don’t touch me!*”

The professor froze, the fear in her eyes slicing into him like a blade plunging deep and hard into his heart.

“Was it really that fun,” she asked brokenly, “watching me make an ass of myself—”

“I have never wanted to hurt you,” the professor said tightly.

“And yet reality states otherwise.”

“Believe what you want.” The professor’s jaw clenched. “It’s your choice—”

“There isn’t a choice,” she cried out, “and you know it. There’s only the truth, and I can’t - I *can’t* keep lying to myself about it.” Her voice cracked. “I just want to know why. Just please tell me why—”

“Calm down—”

“Then tell me why,” she choked out. “Was it because I’m a novelty? Was it because you were bored?”

“Diana, will you fucking calm down—”

“*Was it because you wanted to bag a billionaire’s little sister—*”

“Are you hearing yourself?” he bit out. “What kind of man do you think I am—”

A wild, crazed laugh spilled past her lips. “A good man, Professor. That’s what I thought. That’s what I’ve always thought, no matter how many times you’ve hurt me...”

A good man, she thought sickly. She had let him gotten away with so many things - *God, she had let him get away with everything!*

And all because she had wanted, needed to fool herself into thinking that—

Her skin started to crawl.

He was a good man.

And suddenly she could no longer take it, the very nearness of him making her want to throw up in shame and self-revulsion. She spun away in clumsy haste, tearing out of his office and running out of the building as the sound of his harsh voice calling her name out faded.

Fool!

I'm such a fool!

Oh, Saint M, I'm such a pathetic, stupid fool!

Despair blinded her, and she stumbled, legs crumpling without warning, falling and skinning her knees, and it was this - seeing blood trickle out to paint her flesh - that was the final straw.

And all throughout this, he watched from a distance, bleeding the same time she did—

I'm sorry.

But he could not, *would not* speak the words.

Once was a coincidence, twice was a warning, and there was a fucking reason the Lord kept allowing the Devil to toy with them.

His dark gaze never leaving her small, beaten form, he called one of Diana's friends, saying simply, "Diana needs you." He told Magnolia where to find Diana and dropped the call. The other girl didn't disappoint, arriving in six minutes flat, and the professor stepped back into the shadows as Magnolia helped her friend up.

Lightning flashed, and it was enough, illuminating the look of devastation on Diana's face as her trembling lips moved in a soundless, fractured plea.

Help me.

Reading the words on her lips and knowing that he was the reason she had been reduced to begging—

He watched her walk away, and his mind nearly splintered, all of her anguished cries suddenly raining down on him, and each damn word was a flaming arrow that burned him alive.

Was it really that fun watching me make an ass of myself?

I just want to know why. Just please tell me why.

A good man, Professor. That's what I thought. That's what I've always thought, no matter how many times you've hurt me...

But even as his heart felt fit to burst, his eyes remained painfully dry, cold, empty darkness swathing every inch of his skin—

To the point that his tears could no longer break past them—

That the skies wept for him instead.

This is the only way I can protect you, my darling.

Cut out my heart so yours can keep beating.

H I M

You Won't See Me Crying by Passage (Acoustic)

The professor had never thought losing her would hurt this much.

It had been two weeks since everything had blown up in his face, and he had thought he would be long over it by now.

But he wasn't.

The only times he saw her these days were in class, and it fucking killed him, the way she never even looked at him in the eye and spoke only when he specifically called her out. As for their private consultations, she basically ignored all of his summons, and even though this gave him every reason to flunk her, big idiot that he was, he still kept her on the fucking roster and found himself sending her emails from his private address.

If you're going to keep acting like a child about this, then at least email me a copy of your draft so I can take a fucking look. Whether you want to admit it, you need my help. I've attached a couple of articles that you'd do well to read. It should help you, whatever direction you've decided to take with your paper.

But every single one of them had gone unanswered, and her silence flayed him alive.

He knew this was what he wanted. Was how he needed it to be. He fucking knew. But it didn't - couldn't - change the way he felt.

He missed her.

He goddamn missed her.

He missed her to the point that she haunted every damn conscious second of his existence. He would be having a meeting with a couple board members of the university, and she would suddenly pop up in front of him, a ghost of the past, head bowed, knees crashing to the ground. He would be in his private box at the Royal Opera House, and in the middle of someone's fucking aria, the sound of her cries would ring in his ears.

I just want to know why.

Just please tell me why.

Tell me why.

And he would find himself laughing his head off, laughing like a fucking hyena that those seated at nearby boxes had turned to look at him like he was insane.

Which he was, Matthijs knew, since there were times, when he was alone, and he was at his lowest fucking point, he would find himself thinking...

What if I had told her why?

What if he ignored logic and pretended the past didn't exist? What if he did tell her why? What if?

What if he told himself when push finally came to fucking shove, and shit finally hit the fan, it wouldn't be as he feared? She wouldn't wish to turn back time. Wouldn't wish he had listened to her and told her why.

Could you be that girl for me?

Would you still stay?

Would you still be there when everyone else was smart enough to leave?

HER

Diana had known, the moment she stepped inside the forum hall, showing up was a big mistake.

But her feet kept moving, and soon it was too late for her to back out, with the professor calling her name out in clipped tones.

She came up to the podium, and all eyes were on her. Aside from the professor, there was also the rest of his panel: a retired priest and a Carmelite nun to represent the Church, Mr. Bakker and the university's resident therapist, and a pair of social workers from the local help center.

Her palms were cold and clammy as she reached for her iPad and connected it to the projector via Bluetooth. Clearing her throat, she began her presentation, and when it was over and the lights went back on, she took one look at her audience and knew.

I was right.

This was a big mistake.

The questions came at her all at once, their myriad of expressions ranging from perplexity to outright dissatisfaction.

"So do I have this correctly," the retired priest said heavily. "Are you insinuating that Catholics who commit suicide are *selfish*?"

"No, Father, that's n-not the case at all." So aghast was Diana she found herself stammering. "All I'm saying that they need to be *more selfless*—"

"In other words, selfish," the therapist pointed out.

She quickly shook her head in protest. "No, I promise, that's truly not what I meant. All I'm saying is that those suffering from depression be made to see that if they die, they might as well have killed the people depending on them."

"What about the people who have no one in their lives?" one of the social

workers quizzed. “Because not everyone’s lucky to have people to love.”

“Then it is the Church as a whole that should help them find someone or something to care for—”

A scoffing sound from the other social worker cut her off. “*That’s it? That’s your answer? For high-suicide-risk individuals to look for leeches to hang on to them? That it’s better to have people suck them dry as long as it keeps them alive?*” The other woman’s tone bordered on disgust, and even though Diana knew better than to take things personally, she couldn’t help it, and her eyes started to sting.

Unfortunately, this only seemed to rile up the woman even more. “Oh, for God’s sake!”

“Give the child a chance to form her thoughts and defend her beliefs, Luisa,” the Carmelite nun murmured. Turning to Diana, the soft-spoken nun gave her an encouraging smile, saying, “Go on, Ms. Leventis.”

“The reason why I want it to be the Church to help individuals struggling with depression find something or someone to care about is because it’s the Church. It would make no sense for the Church to give us someone unworthy to care for.”

“That’s a very risky suggestion,” Mr. Bakker said quietly, “and I say that both as a trained psychologist and a Catholic. The Pope may be made infallible by the grace of God, but other members of the church aren’t so lucky. There’s every possibility ‘mismatches’ could occur, and if that happens, the person they’re supposed to care about becomes another reason for them to kill themselves.”

Diana could feel herself paling. She had *never...oh God*, she hadn’t even thought of that angle, and when she saw the professor’s tight-lipped gaze, she suddenly knew. Even without him telling her, she knew - *this* was probably one of the issues he had taken pains to bring up in the emails he had sent to her. Emails that she had moved to trash without reading a single one of them.

Luisa was right, Diana thought numbly.

I am being a kid about this.

And the people she wanted to help, the people who were supposed to be her purpose - they deserved better.

The professor asked her to stay behind as soon as Telemann began playing in the background and the rest of the panelists started to rise.

“Yes, sir.” Diana’s tone was subdued.

Nouveaux Quatuors Parisiens (No. 4 in B Minor) continued to play. It was one of her favorites, but for once, its serene melody failed to soothe her. It was like reliving one of those horrid blame sessions she used to suffer daily under her mother, and Esther would itemize every little mistake in the most disparaging fashion.

In those days, she had been able to bear her mother's rebukes because she had known she didn't deserve them.

This time was different. This time, she was at fault. This time, she had truly failed.

And when the professor finally gestured for her to come forward, what hurt even more was when he only said, "Do better next time."

She swallowed hard. "You can shout at me. I was stupid."

"You were."

"I shouldn't have ignored your emails. I...I know that now."

"Good."

"Whatever you have to say, I can take it." So please, please, *please* be cruel. Because it was this quiet tone of his that she couldn't bear. It made her think of so many stupid things, and she couldn't risk that. She just couldn't.

"So if you want to shout at me, just do it. I don't deserve--"

"No, Ms. Leventis." The professor's tone was stiff. "It's not about what you do or don't deserve."

Finally, Diana thought in relief. *He's going to be lash out. Hurt me. And most of all, he's going to remind me just how wrong I was about him all this time.*

But that was not the case at all.

"Remember why you are working on this in the first place," the professor said grimly. "Recall the purpose that drove you and had my whole class moved to tears. Remember *the people you wished to help* - and next time, remember it's about what *they* deserve."

Instead, he showed her that she had been right all along.

Hearing what he had to say, knowing he understood where she was coming from despite her screw-up, how could she not see it?

She hadn't been wrong.

He was a good man.

He just wasn't good to her and for her.

HIM

The professor was getting used to missing her.

He knew this because the ache he felt whenever he saw her had subsided, its agony blunted until it was nothing but a dull ache, like an old, untreated injury left for time to heal. But while he had learned to accept the existence of such feelings, he continued to question its validity and veracity, the pragmatic (and cynical) side of him unable to help but wonder if these feelings were nothing but a manifestation of some character defect in him.

The feelings existed, but they might not be what they seem to be.

For how could one miss a person when the time they spent with each other was, in the sum totality of their respective lives, but a fraction, something no greater than a few snatched moments in a lifetime?

He had known her for a total of 37 days, and of those only six had been pristine, just six days that the professor had managed not to befoul with his personal darkness. Six days, regardless of how precious they were, did not and will never a week make, and it was really just this - the sheer ephemerality of their shared history - that the professor could not ignore and obliged him to contest the nature of his feelings.

Six days.

Six *god damned* days, and just like that, she had become his fucking emotional thermostat, the speed and strength of his heartbeat reduced into correlative values of her proximity and perception of him.

Six days, and it had given her unprecedented power over his whole being, to the point that he found himself actually rereading her thesis like a Preston & Child paperback, devouring and analyzing every word just because her work was the only tangible thing he had of her.

His way of staying connected to her, he would silently mock himself in occasion, when all hope was lost.

And because her work drew heavily from *Confessiones*, the professor also found himself poring over the saint's voluminous tomes in a last-ditch attempt to find a truth that would either justify or dispute the current role she played in his life.

And he seemed to have found it, or maybe he was just so damn tired that he was ready to grasp at intellectual straws...either way, the words made more sense than the chaotic state of his emotions. In his musings over man's pursuit of happiness, the sinner-turned-saint remarked upon how such journeys began with one's earliest pleasant memories, childhood experiences which that same person would likely interpret as his first taste of joy.

All have the concept of happiness, and all would answer yes if asked whether they want it—which could not happen if happiness, and not merely the word for it, were not remembered.

And because he could not remember being happy *until her*, could only remember being happy when he was *with her*, was it not possible it was the feelings she evoked that he missed *and not her*?

The answer, as it tended to be for life's greatest questions, persisted in eluding and taunting him, a diaphanous outline of truth that refused to solidify all the while skirting the edges of his mind.

It revealed itself only when it was already too fucking late (or as Christians would insist, *all in God's time*), the validation he sought making itself clear when they met each other at a French restaurant downtown.

He was with someone else, and so was she.

But it was not the same.

HER

Diana knew she was *not* on a date.

She only wished she could let the others understand this, too.

The others being students who also went to Helder Meer and happened to be at the same French restaurant downtown where Magnolia's British half-brother was treating her dinner at. All of them had gawked at Ryder, whose black hair lent an exotic slant to his patrician looks, before glancing at Diana with either confusion or envy.

Some, Diana noticed, looked at her with both, plus a little bit of resentment, too.

She was used to such reactions (just one of the many hazards of being Damen's little sister), and she would normally be indifferent. Tonight, however, exasperated her. Did *nobody* notice the fact he was wearing a clergy's shirt, with the initials of his church even monogrammed on his breast pocket?

He was a deacon, for heaven's sake. Did they really think her *that* desperate, to make her moves on a man of the cloth?

Having also noticed the dirty looks coming from the female patrons at the table next to them, Magnolia's sibling could only grimace in apology, saying, "I am sorry for this, child."

Since Ryder was only a couple years older, the gravely spoken words were exactly what Diana needed to hear. She burst into laughter, tension easing from her form as his levity helped her see the humor in things.

"Maybe I should play it up," Diana joked under her breath, "just to make things worth their while."

"By all means." Ryder was genuinely supportive. While even he recognized how melancholy made her looks rather unearthly in its beauty, he would rather see her a little uglier and happier.

Which, of course, led the concerned deacon to the question of...

“What’s wrong?”

Diana bit back a smile at Ryder’s frankness. “You’re supposed to start the conversation with something about the weather. You’re British, remember?”

“I also have a red-eye flight to catch,” he reminded her. “So if we could just pretend we’ve done our customary thirty-minute bush-beating...” He raised a brow. “Well?”

Diana tried not to squirm under the deacon’s piercing stare. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” he retorted, “if Magnolia insisted that I force you to submit to Confession.”

“She *what?*” Diana didn’t know whether to feel aghast, amused, or offended.

“Aren’t you glad I took you out for dinner instead?”

“To wine and dine the truth out of me?”

“Figuratively speaking,” Ryder admitted without a qualm, “since neither of us drinks.”

Still nothing from the other side, but he wasn’t surprised. Even without Diana volunteering much information about herself, moving in the same circles meant Ryder was privy to more information than what was written about her in the tabloids.

Most of the paps described her as the mousy and bullied daughter of Esther Leventis, but Ryder had seen for himself she was a lot more than that. Her heart was chaste, in the way fewer and fewer people were able to keep theirs past puberty, and if there were anything he might do to keep it that way...

“Magnolia’s seriously worried about you,” Ryder said quietly.

Diana suddenly straightened, her face paling as she said jerkily, “It’s *him*.”

“I see.” Guy trouble wasn’t good, but it could’ve been a lot worse.

Diana shook her head. “No, I mean it’s him. *He’s here*.” She nodded in the direction of the restaurant’s main doors, and when Ryder followed her gaze, he immediately noticed the just-arrived couple being assisted by the maître d’.

The woman was a bombshell, Diana thought numbly, but more like a sophisticated version of Marilyn Monroe...or Paris Hilton with breast implants. Either way, she looked extremely good next to the professor, who

looked his usual strikingly handsome self.

She glanced at Ryder, noticed his frowning expression, and asked self-consciously, “What is it?”

“It’s easy to see why you’re attracted to him,” Ryder murmured. The man seemed to have stepped out of a Michelangelo painting, and it was no secret that the Renaissance *maestro* was one of Diana’s favorite painters. “Is he in one of your classes? Was that how you met?”

“I suppose you could say that,” Diana said in a small voice.

“He dropped out?”

“He’s my professor.”

Ryder choked.

Diana’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Not something you’d expect from a good girl like me, right?”

HIM

Kathang Isip by Ben & Ben

The professor was in familiar territory.

Diana. Trouble. Curse in seven languages.

The situation almost felt like home, but because he also knew things could get a lot worse, he almost wished he had taken the time to learn an eighth language. The way things so often blew up in his face, he had a feeling he would soon run out of cuss words to use.

If only he had seen her before entering the restaurant's main dining hall, he could still have salvaged things, could've still saved her from more pain. But he goddamn hadn't. And now it was too late.

He forced himself to place a hand at the small of Laverne's back, which her dress had left completely exposed. There was nothing less he felt like doing, but he also knew what was expected of him. To act out of character would only raise questions, and Laverne had been with him far too long not to figure things out eventually.

As they followed the maître d' inside, he deliberately sought Laverne's attention, his every word and gesture designed to have her whole world around him.

But it was no use.

"We've reserved your usual table, *monsieur.*"

His usual table, which meant he would have to walk past *her* table.

Fuck no.

But to refuse would only make Laverne realize something was amiss and lead to a scene he absolutely needed to avoid, so he managed to give the other

man a brief, tight smile of acknowledgment. “Thank you, Pierre.”

Time marched on, and with every step he took, the harder his heart thudded against chest. As the distance between them continued to shrink, the emptiness inside of him gnawed more violently at the professor.

And then *it* happened.

Without any fucking warning.

It just fucking happened.

Her gaze finding him, and even without their eyes meeting, he knew.

She was hurting.

Badly.

So much so that her pain made it all the way to him, its scarred edges burying deep into the center of his old and damaged soul.

I’m sorry.

I’m so fucking sorry.

I’m so *god damned* sorry.

In the corner of his eye, he saw her companion turn to face him. The man was too damn handsome for Matthijs’ peace of mind, and he might have even hated him on the spot if he hadn’t noticed the clothes Diana’s companion wore.

A man of God, the professor thought broodingly, *and more likely a deacon or one that had yet to be ordained, given his age.*

Either way, the irony wasn’t lost on him. Of all the times they could meet accidentally, it had to be now, when she was with one of the Lord’s trusted servants...and he was with his mistress.

The professor and Laverne finally made it to their table, and the next few minutes were a blur, with him acting entirely on autopilot while his mind was desperately doing its best to shove out his last image of Diana.

Pale face.

Trembling form.

And eyes that hurt (so much goddamn hurt) but did not hate.

What must I do to make you throw me away, mijn obsessie?

It was a question he thought he wished to know the answer to, but by the time he realized the truth, it was already too late.

Dinner was the usual affair, with the professor managing to keep Laverne suitably occupied that she didn't notice the way his gaze would occasionally stray, almost as if her presence alone was a magnet for his attention.

A call from work came just as the staff came to clear their plates away for dessert, and the professor had to excuse himself from the table. After stepping out in one of the restaurant's balconies, he took the call and the resulting conversation was brief but productive. The person on the other end of the line, a representative of a pontifical university in Spain, had asked if the professor could make time and give their students a talk on *Summa Theologica*. To which he had immediately said yes, because the farther he was from *her*, the less likely he was to do something stupid.

~~Such as asking her for another chance.~~

That was the plan at least, but when the professor pocketed his phone and left the balcony, he only had to turn back to the main dining hall to realize that "something stupid" was already there, just patiently waiting to happen.

Diana.

And almost as if she had heard him, he saw her flinch, and he had to clench his fists to keep himself from reaching out to her.

"Hello, P-professor."

"Ms. Leventis." His voice was curt, his face expressionless, his whole fucking body a rigid form of tension. It was the only way to survive seeing her and still do the right thing, and after giving her a clipped nod, he forced himself to walk past her.

"Professor?"

He kept walking.

"Is she your...*girlfriend*?"

He froze.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

But because he couldn't make himself pretend he hadn't heard the way her voice broke - he just fucking couldn't - he found himself stiffly turning around, and pain nearly crushed his chest when he saw her eyes.

So much hurt. He had hurt her so much. And yet there was still no anger.

"Is she, Professor?" Diana whispered.

"No." And he found himself unable to lie. "Laverne's...my mistress."

Her lips parted, and though no sound came, it didn't matter. He could hear her just fine, and her cry of pain and betrayal cut his heart into pieces.

Let it end there, mijn obsessie.

Let it fucking end there and save yourself from more hurt.

But it didn't.

Because God always answered His people's prayers.

What must I do to make you throw me away, mijn obsessie?

And he heard Diana ask, "Since when?"

No. Fuck. No.

LIE. DAMN YOU, LIE.

You didn't mean to betray her.

SO LIE. FUCKING LIE FOR HER SAKE.

And then he saw her already crying, and he realized it was too late.

She already had her answer.

Even without him saying a word, she already knew.

"I'm sorry." His voice was uneven. "I'm—"

"*Since when?*" And this time her pain was no longer silent or unseen, her body shaking, her tears falling faster, and her voice tremulous and whisper-thin.

He gazed at her bleakly. "For six years now."

H E R

In My Life by Bette Midler

The professor sounded frantic in his texts.

I'm outside your dorm. I need to see you. Please. I don't want you hurting like this.

Let me talk to you. Please.

But Diana couldn't make herself believe him.

Please, my darling. Let me talk to you. Just three words. That's all I'm asking you to let me say.

Just three words.

Three words, he said.

Did he really think it would be that easy? That he only had to say those words and all would be forgiven?

Diana: *Say it now.*

Matthijs: *It's something better discussed in person. Please.*

She stared at the words he had typed until her tears washed them all away. She was just so tired. So damn tired. She had known that being with a man like him wouldn't be a walk in the park, but this...this was the end.

She could have and probably would have eventually forgiven him for lying about the university's dating policies (or lack thereof). Given enough time, she would've likely learned to accept that he had secrets to keep, and that she could only be patient and wait for him to trust her.

She was so very likely to do all of those things and more because he was the only man she had ever wanted to touch. The only man who could make

her feel brave and beautiful. The only man who mattered.

But now...it could never be.

Diana: *I'm sorry.*

And because she couldn't give herself a chance to weaken, she forced herself to switch her phone off and took a couple of sleeping pills just to survive the night.

Tomorrow, she thought, hoped, and prayed.

Tomorrow, the pain wouldn't hurt as much.

Tomorrow, things would change for the better.

Tomorrow, she would do better at forgetting him.

But when the skies turned from orange to blue, and the moon gave way to warm, golden rays –

The moment she opened her eyes, all the pain came flooding back, and she realized she had only been fooling herself.

It still hurt.

Nothing had changed.

And she still couldn't forget him.

The tears started to fall as she found herself reaching for her phone.

Three words, he had said.

Could he have said those words last night? And if he had, what then? Was it really going to be just that easy? *Saint M, I'm begging you. Help me.* Should it really be just that easy?

Come now, let us settle the matter, ” says the Lord.

‘Though your sins are like scarlet,

they shall be as white as snow;

though they are red as crimson,

they shall be like wool.

The tears fell faster. The screen of her iPhone lit up. And she saw his message, with the three words he had promised and she thought he wouldn't give.

Matthijs: *I have HIV.*

BEFORE

Kahit Maputi Na Ang Buhok Ko by Moira dela Torre

The professor was no coward.

But at the same time, he couldn't make his feet move a damn inch. All he could do was stare, a part of him still trapped in denial, maybe even shock.

She couldn't really be dead.

But the marble headstone in front of him said differently, and his fists clenched as his gaze fell on the letters engraved on them. Letters that spelled the same name that would forever etch a wound in his heart. Letters that didn't fucking allow him to lie to himself.

Letters that sentenced him as a murderer.

The thought annihilated him, smashing all his inner defenses and breaking through the wall he had painstakingly built around his memories. He breathed roughly, battling for control, but it was like going against a powerful tide.

God.

Please.

Fuck.

No.

But it was too late.

And he could no longer stop himself from remembering.

Those last messages she had left in his voice mail.

Please, Matthijs. Please. I'm begging you. Please. I need you. I love you. I

know you're still mad. I know what I've done's unforgivable. But please. Please. Please, Matthijs. Please. I just can't take it anymore. I really think I'm going to kill myself this time. I swear I'm not lying. I just can feel myself unraveling, and I'm scared. But I just can't go on like this. I can't face a life without you. So please, Matthijs. Please. If you had ever loved me please. Please. Please. Please come.

The time he had found out what she had done, and the truth had gutted him so fucking bad he hadn't even been able to feel any kind of anger.

He stared at her, unable to believe how blind he had been all these years, to never have seen that she could be this fucking selfish. This stupid. This...bad.

"Please say something." Her voice was soft and trembling, a look of entreaty in her angelic blue eyes.

But it was all a fucking lie.

All these years she had lied to him.

Him, a fucking Nobel Prize winner, a goddamn genius, and this child of nineteen had managed to pull the wool over his fucking eyes.

"Please, Matthijs."

She went down on her knees, and when he saw her trying to reach for his hands, he reacted instinctively and pulled away with a jerk. A look of hurt flitted over her face, and that she had the fucking gall to feel that way, after what she had done...

He left the couch and stalked towards the door. "You should go." His voice was cold and tight, and his gaze never strayed back to her as he yanked his front door open. He had a feeling if she dared do the same thing again and act like she was the victim—

He heard her footsteps but didn't bother to turn. He felt her stand beside him, and the urge to strangle her got so fucking bad he had to shove his hands into his pockets.

"I know what I did was wrong..."

Was she fucking kidding? Wrong was if temptation got the better of you and you flirted black with someone who wanted you. Wrong was if you were so damn stressed at work you ended up lashing out at your partner. Wrong was forgivable.

But what she did–

“Can’t we be adults–”

FUCK.

Rage had him spinning around so fast, it had her stumbling back and losing her balance. She cried his name out as she fell, but the sound only made his skin crawl.

“Matthijs!”

He stared at her crumpled form on the ground, but the sight only fanned the flames of his rage and turned it into hatred. “You goddamn knew.” He had never shouted at her. Not in all the years they had known each other. But now, he wished he could fucking do more, wished his words could make her bleed. “You goddamn knew–”

She started to cry, but when it used to be that the first sight of tears would have him caving in to whatever she wanted, it was no longer the same. Now that he knew, now that he was no longer blind, her tears no longer seemed real or pure. This time, her tears only made him want to fucking kill her.

Kill her like she had killed him.

“Goddamn you!”

“Matthijs–”

“You goddamn knew what could happen, and you still let me fuck you!”

She started crawling towards him. “Please–” She tried to reach for him again, but he slapped her hands away. “Don’t you fucking touch me–”

He saw her whiten at his words, but he no longer gave a damn. “You make me sick,” he hissed. “The sight of you makes me fucking sick. Just knowing we’re breathing the same fucking air–”

“Please, M-Matthijs–”

“Don’t ever show your face to me again. That’s the only warning you’ll ever get, and if you’re stupid enough to think I don’t mean it...” His jaw clenched. “Then it would be my turn to ruin your life.”

She had caused him so much fucking pain. Had single-handedly and permanently turned his life into a living hell. She had, in one fell swoop, ruined his every chance for happiness.

And yet...

He could not stop himself from remembering the times that it had been good between them.

Because they had been that.

Good.

Damn good, actually.

He had been her date to the prom. The big brother she had run to when she needed a shoulder to cry on. He had been her first love, and she was probably going to be his last.

This girl he had once imagined spending the rest of his life with.

This girl whose firsts were all with him.

This girl who, at the mere age of thirteen, had already declared he was going to lose his heart to her one day.

‘Go ahead, laugh,’ she had grumbled. ‘But mark my words, Matthijs de Graaf. There will be a time when I’ll be the one laughing. Because one day, you’ll fall in love with me.’

And he had.

“You’ll love me so much that you’ll want to marry me.”

And he had.

“And when that day comes, you’ll even do that stupid thing you hate.” And at his frown, she had said laughingly,

“I asked you once, remember? What you’re willing to do for a girl, and you said—”

The truth had hit him then, and he had grinned as he finished her sentence for her. ‘I won’t give her flowers because it’s out of date, and it would make me feel like a troll trying to pass itself off as a knight.’

‘Exactly,’ she had said cheerfully.

‘Over my dead body,’ he had said just as cheerfully.

'Don't you underestimate me. I have my ways, and you mark my words. It will happen.'

And so he had.

His eyes closed, and as his knees slowly fell to the ground, so did his tears. It washed away what little there was of his hatred that remained, washed everything out until all that was left was emptiness.

I'm sorry I listened to you too late. I'm sorry I let you down. I'm sorry.

H E R

You & Me Against The World by Marissa Sanchez

Diana could not stop crying.

She hated herself for it. For being so damn weak. For doing exactly what the professor had no doubt expected her to do.

I'm sorry, Professor. I'm so sorry.

He had asked to see her, and when he had come, one look at her appeared to have been enough, and he had said hoarsely, *I'll tell you everything. And then after that, it's all up to you.*

At that time, one look had been enough for her as well. One look at his ashen face, and she had known she had somehow hurt him. She had known, but she hadn't been able to do a thing. Had been such a mess that all she could do was listen in numb silence as the truth came pouring out.

The woman she had met at the restaurant?

She was his mistress alright, and an extremely well-paid one at that, for Laverne knew of his sickness and the risks came with it.

The last time I had been with her was eight months ago, and I hadn't even spoken to her until that night.

And as for that other girl from his past...

A childhood friend who had been born with HIV, and he had loved her from the very start. Enough to give her his ring. Enough to trust her completely. And he had paid for it with his life.

She remembered how his voice had faltered at admitting this, and GOD OH GOD she hadn't been able to do anything.

A stronger woman would have stopped him from talking. Would have

wrapped her arms around him and told him that none of it changed anything. Would have done anything except sit there like an idiot.

I'm so sorry.

When it was him that his pain should have rendered helpless, it was her that had become immobile with shock. She had been so damn weak that it had forced him to become strong for her—

I'm so sorry.

She remembered the unusual clumsiness he had displayed as he moved towards the door, and the tears fell harder and faster. She remembered the stiffness in his voice as he spoke his last words—

I'm sorry for deceiving you. I know it's a lot to process, and having me around is just going to make things harder.

He hadn't even given her a chance to say anything back. Had probably known that if he did, she would only have ended up saying something they would both regret, do something that would make the truth irrefutable, and the truth was that she was WEAK.

I'm so sorry.

Diana tucked her knees under her chin, hugging them tighter to her chest, but it did nothing to ease the coldness spreading inside of her, and over and over she couldn't stop sobbing the words in her mind.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

She had the craziest urge to punish herself for her weakness, to knock her head back repeatedly against the wall behind her until her skull was crushed. She just had this crazy, crazy urge to cause herself pain, the way *she* had hurt him.

Maybe Esther was right, she thought dully. Maybe she really was nothing but a stupid, cowardly fool, and she was better off having someone else control her life.

Maybe...maybe that way, she wouldn't end up failing the people who trusted her to be strong.

God, help me.

Please.

I'm begging You.

Please.

Help me.

Please.

I need You.

Don't Worry, Baby by Rachel Fannan

Diana took her time walking.

Miami was just as sunny as she remembered it, a city she had enjoyed very much but had never quite felt like home. *And it had been the same with Athens*, Diana thought absently. Even with all the years she had spent in Greece's capital, her soul had always felt lost and unsettled, and it was only when she realized her purpose that everything had clicked.

Home was where she could be of most help, and for some time, that had been what Helder Meer was to her.

Now...things had somehow changed.

A helpless smile broke over her lips when she saw the staff all lined up in front of Damen's building, half of them reception while the other half was security.

A man stepped up as soon as she reached the foot of the steps, bowing deferentially as he greeted her. "Good afternoon, Ms. Leventis. Your brother's expecting you."

Her smile widened into a grin. "Of course he is." And it was just as she expected. "Did he have to cancel any meetings to make it back here?"

"Aaaaah..."

"I'll take that as a yes," Diana concluded ruefully. "Anyway, thanks for the, err, grand welcome, and I'll see myself up."

A worried expression flitted over the man's face. "We were instructed to escort you—"

She shook her head at the offer, saying, "It's fine. I can handle going up

the elevator on my own, I promise.” And because this was something she had done for ages, she beat a hasty retreat after her words, leaving them no chance to make their case.

Damen was already waiting for her when she made it to the penthouse floor, hands clasped behind his back. Tall, dark, and handsome, he was one of the richest men in the world, and - if his rivals were to be believed - he was said to be one of the most ruthless as well.

Whether that was true or not, however, didn't really matter.

For Diana, he was just Damen, the big brother who had always cherished and protected her.

And right now, Diana thought with a gulp, she needed him more than ever.

Clearing her throat, she tested a tentative smile at him, saying simply, “Hey.”

His handsome face immediately softened, and she breathed a sigh of relief as his arms opened. She ran straight to her brother's embrace, and her eyes closed as his hard arms closed around her. Damen always made her feel safe, and no matter how old she got, she didn't think that would ever change.

“So...” It had been minutes since Diana had arrived at his office, and Damen had given her as much time as he could to settle down, having seen the wan expression on her face.

“I know you're not surprised that I've come,” Diana blurted out.

“Your security saw it fit to inform me as soon as you booked your flight, yes.”

“And because I've come here instead of your home...”

“It's something you'd rather Mairi doesn't know about.”

Diana gave him a small nod.

“You know you can tell me anything,” Damen said gently.

“I know.” Her voice was subdued. “It's just *hard*.”

And so it was, Damen thought, seeing the way his sister had started wringing her hands on her lap. It wasn't like Diana at all to show her anxiety; with a mother like Esther, who delighted in exploiting people's weaknesses, both of them had learned early on to use their composure as a shield.

Gazing at her contemplatively, he decided it was time to give Diana a little nudge, just to see if it would be enough to have her open up. “How are your studies?”

When he saw Diana visibly relax at his words, he knew that he had done the right thing, just as he knew that school was *not* why she had come running home.

“I’m doing a lot better than I personally expected,” Diana admitted. “Better than anyone would probably expect, considering my reasons for going there.”

“You went there because it was what you felt you needed to do.” Damen’s voice was firm. “I see nothing wrong with that.”

Diana wrinkled her nose, thinking she should’ve expected it of Damen to *not* see how eccentric her choices had been. “Honestly, I’m just glad you didn’t laugh at me when I told you a Netflix show gave me purpose. Not all big brothers would have been open-minded as you.”

“That’s because not all little sisters are saints like mine.” The words would’ve normally made her laugh, but instead a stricken look crossed her face.

“I’m not...” Her voice faltered. “I’m not a saint.”

“Diana...” He stopped speaking when she shook her head, and when he noticed how her fingers had started digging into her palms, his chest clenched with the urge to protect her. She was and would always be his little sister, and there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for her.

“Talk to me.”

“I don’t know how to start.”

“Then...is it about de Graaf?”

Her head shot up.

“You didn’t think I wouldn’t have my people check him out, did you?”

Her heart slammed against her chest. “A-And?”

Diana’s tone perplexed him. “He checked out, of course.” But far from assuring her, the words seemed to make her uneasy. It was almost as if she was expecting him to forbid her from seeing the man, which of course didn’t make any sense at all.

“What’s wrong?” Damen asked bluntly. He didn’t think he couldn’t have chosen any better than Matthijs de Graaf. The man was worth hundreds of millions, a Nobel Prize winner, and the decent sort all around. The only thing the professor had against him was the fact that de Graaf had yet to break things off with his long-term mistress. But since Damen’s sources had ascertained it had been months since the professor had sex with the other

woman, Damen was willing to overlook it...*for now.*

“I think...I’m in love with him.”

“I suspected as much.” But when this didn’t ease her tension, he asked, “Are you worried that you can’t make him love you back? Is that what this whole thing’s about?” Diana slowly shook her head, and his puzzlement grew. “You need to be more specific if you want me to help—”

Taking a deep breath, she cut him off, saying in a rush, “I came here because I thought I needed to let you know that by loving him...if you c-can’t accept him...I can’t leave him...I might have to say g-goodbye—” Her voice broke.

Damen stiffened. “What the hell are you saying?”

“D-Damen.” And her voice caught once more.

“Diana, dammit, you’re worrying me—”

“*He has HIV.*”

Damen went white.

And suddenly, she could no longer stop talking, the words tumbling out one after another even as her tears started to fall. Crying was all she seemed to do lately, but even as she hated herself for it, she just couldn’t stop.

I didn’t know at the start, and he kept trying to push me away because of it.

He’s never touched me, and I wondered about it before, but now I know why.

I don’t want to put any of you at risk, and that’s why I wanted to tell you first.

Because I know you can make the tough decisions.

Tell me to stay away so that Mairi and Nala are safe.

Diana’s words hit him like one blow after another, and all he could do was take every fucking thing in numb silence. A part of him was still in denial, wanting to rage against the fates. He was sorry - of course he was damn sorry that life had turned out the way it had for de Graaf, but couldn’t any other woman fall in love with him? Couldn’t it be anyone else but Diana?

Now, he understood why Diana had been looking at him the way she had been doing so all this time. From the very start, she had come here, prepared for him to cut ties with her, and she would have accepted it. Maybe she had expected it even. God knew, the way Esther had brought her up, Diana had

foolishly come to believe that she would never be worthy of people's love.

When she finally finished talking, he could only look at her for one long moment, wondering how it was that he had missed it. Sometime between the past and the present, Diana had grown from being the little girl he knew and turned into the woman she was now.

Someone who loved like he did, loved so damn fiercely that she had the strength and courage to throw everything away, just to be with the man she had entrusted her heart with.

Looking at her, he said quietly, "I don't think you came here to ask for my permission for anything."

Diana couldn't stop crying, couldn't do anything but just look at him and wish...oh God, she wished...she wished...

"Because it seems to me that you've already made up your mind."

The tears fell faster, and her heart started breaking.

"And that you're just here to tell us we have a new member to welcome to our family."

She stared at him in shock.

And then she threw herself in his arms. "Damen. Damen. Damen." She started sobbing against his chest. She had so many things to say, but in the end, it was just his name that she could utter, just like how it had been before, and she had been a little girl asking for her big brother's help.

And he had always been there for her.

Always.

"Sssh. I know." Damen kissed the top of her head. "And I'm proud of you, baby." His voice turned rough with emotion. "You've got this. *We've got this.*"

TOGETHER

Marry You by The Acoustikats

On Diana's flight back to Contini, she did her best to analyze and even (knowingly) over-analyze her feelings, feeling obliged to come up with all the reasons she should forget about the professor.

How sure am I that I'm not just going back out of pity?

Do I really understand what I'm getting myself into, what it really means to be in a relationship with someone with HIV?

And is it really possible for a person to love another, despite not having the length and depth of time to validate such feelings?

She asked herself these questions again and again, but every single time, she could only remember this one line from the Bible that spoke of people whose relationships were so close...

The wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul...

It was as if their souls were one.

And every time this line went through her head, she just couldn't stop thinking, *'That's us.'*

Not just lust, not just love, but her soul rejoicing in finding its mate, the moment Matthijs de Graaf saved her from a wagon full of daisies.

And that was her answer, Diana realized with painfully bittersweet joy.

He was her answer, whether it was right or wrong, whether he thought either of them was ready, whether he liked it or not.

Their souls left them no choice, but when she thought of explaining this to him, Diana could only choke back a teary laugh, knowing that the concept of soulmates was unlikely to sit well with someone as determinedly methodical

as the professor.

So calling him first and explaining her change of heart over the phone was definitely out, Diana decided as she came out of the airport. Instead, she needed a plan. Better yet, an accomplice (the more, the merrier), and an idea slowly took form in her mind.

Gears were eventually set in motion, and it was how that afternoon the professor came to expect an express package from Mrs. Montez.

With his entire staff out on some domestic staff union meeting, it was left to Matthijs to open the door when the doorbell rang. But instead of a courier service, he got a dark-haired whirlwind flying straight towards him.

Diana?

She slammed into him with such force he almost toppled backwards. He cursed under his breath, but she only laughed, all the while wrapping herself around his body, her arms looping over his shoulders and her legs encircling his waist.

The last time they had *seen* each other, it had been at the restaurant, and he had to tell her about his mistress of six years. The last time they *spoke*, he had to tell her about his illness.

After that - *nothing*.

No texts. No calls. And certainly no fucking visits. She had even missed his class this morning.

All he had been able to do was cling to dreams and memories, his life completely turned upside down by her coming and going. The real world no longer held any appeal, and Matthijs only went through the motions of living while his mind doggedly relived the past.

Because it was all he thought he had.

Until *this*.

His hands seemed to move involuntarily, and he could only watch rather than feel them shaking, his inability to believe that *she* was truly here making the whole thing seem like an illusion. He needed truth to be tangible just like Didymus, who despite being one of the Twelve, was also human, and with humanity came doubts that belied his faith.

Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.

The professor's fingers slowly drifted down her spine.

Flesh.

His other hand carefully, and then firmly and tightly, gripped the side of her waist.

Soft, supple, corporeal flesh.

Real.

Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.

Because she was here.

Diana worked hard to keep the tears back as his golden eyes lifted to his, and in them she saw all the things that could break her heart.

Disbelief, because she was here.

Bleakness, because she was here.

But also hope, because she was here.

And it was all she could do not to bawl her eyes out and throw her arms around him.

I'm here, my love. I won't ever leave you again. I'll stay with you forever.

But because she knew it was too soon to say such words, she swallowed them all back and instead mustered up a watery smile for the professor. "Hey there." The casual, playful (albeit slightly shaking) tone was meant to tease him into smiling back, but when the professor only stared at her, she reminded herself that it was just his way of protecting himself.

And so she tried again, continuing, "I, umm, just got back from Miami."

Something flickered in his gaze, and she told herself this was a good sign.

"There were things I had to work out..."

The professor was doing his best not to read between the lines, but his brain was too damn stubborn for its own good. *Things she had to work out*, she said. Wasn't just that polite fucking speak for 'I was looking for a nice, clean excuse to end things?'

His jaw clenched. *Fine then.* He'd make things real easy *for her*, rip his own heart out *for her*, he'd do everything *for her*, because that was how pathetic he had become.

But when he tried putting her down, her legs tightened around his waist instead. And when he tried untangling her arms around his neck, she leaned back and shook her head. "N-No."

What the fuck?

“I’m not done speaking yet.”

He opened his mouth to tell her he already fucking got that she was leaving him, but before he could get one single word out, Diana had pressed a finger against his lips, and he immediately forgot what he had to say. She had never touched him like this, had never initiated contact like this, and it left him stunned, bemused, and...ah, fuck, it left him fucking *hopeful*.

“Let me speak first.” Diana’s voice quavered in the end, and while her eyes were still bright with tears, they were also sparkling with...*mischief*.

The professor inhaled sharply.

Only a soulless bitch could look mischievous when planning to break another guy’s heart.

Which meant...

“I just have one last thing to say,” Diana promised, “and then a-after that, you can do whatever you want with me—*aah!*” One of Matthijs’ hands had slid under her to give her bottom a good, hard squeeze, and at her look of astonishment, he smirked against her lips, as if saying, *Whatever I want, right?*

A laugh escaped her, but it turned halfway into a sob. “Oh, Professor.” That smirk told her he understood she was staying. That smirk told her he wasn’t going to make her leave anymore. That smirk...was *everything*.

And suddenly, she could no longer hold the words back.

“Professor—” Her voice broke. “P-Professor, *I love you.*”

A moment later, and Diana had to bite back a hysterical giggle as the professor responded by dumping her on her feet and practically tearing out of her hold like it was *her* who had HIV.

“No,” Matthijs grated out. “You don’t.” Because it was one thing for her to come back, but another thing to say *that*.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I do.”

“No. You just think you feel that, but it’s only fucking pity—”

“I’d have to be the biggest idiot to pity someone as arrogant as you...” And then she only looked at him, letting her doe eyes say the rest.

And since I’m no idiot...

I’m not here because I pity you..

I'm here because I love you.

The professor wanted to slam his head against a wall. FUCK, FUCK, FUCK. Even without her saying a single thing, her dark eyes spoke loud and clear, and despite knowing that he was about to commit a mortal sin by letting her stay -

Let me have Heaven here, and Hell can have my soul later.

Diana held her breath when the professor suddenly spoke. "I wouldn't know about being arrogant..."

Their eyes met.

"But if you think that and yet you still say you love me..."

And suddenly everything became clear.

"Then I suppose you *are* an idiot."

Oh God.

A laugh escaped her, and once again it turned into a sob halfway, and then it kept on coming, laughter and sobs mixed into one. Because with him saying those words - with him *joking* - with him looking at her like he also knew - like *his soul also found its mate* - Diana knew she had won.

They had won.

She threw herself at him, still crying and laughing, and it was like coming back home as his arms locked around her shaking body.

Her tears wet his shirt. *I really love you, Professor.*

His arms tightened around her. *I know. And more fool you.*

Her body shook with laughter, and so did his, because even if words hadn't been spoken, their souls heard each other just fine.

With Diana once again in his arms, the professor carried her to the living room, but as soon as they were both on the couch, she came crawling to his lap, arms around his neck and her head lying against his chest.

The strangest feeling crept upon him, something unfamiliar and powerful, and it took him a while to realize the feelings were nothing but...peace.

Because she was with him again, he was at peace, and while his own feelings were probably just a fraction of what Diana's beloved Saint Augustine had felt upon finding his perfect dwelling in God's love, Matthijs could think no better than the sainted bishop's words to describe how he felt—

Our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.

He closed his eyes.

That was exactly how he felt.

His heart had been restless until it rested in Diana, and it was just too fucking bad he had not met her sooner, at a time when he had been a better man, and his heart had been purer, and his body uncontaminated.

The thought reminded the professor of the many things he was still honor-bound to say, but when he tried to pull away, he felt her sweet, gentle resistance, with the faint shake of her head and the way her arms tightened around him.

In spite of what she now knew, she still didn't want to be apart, and the realization was as humbling as it was painful.

Tipping her chin up, he found her eyes wet and swollen, but also soft with love.

For him.

And his throat burned, for there were words he wished he could say but didn't deserve to.

"Diana—" Her gaze turned wary the moment he spoke, and he couldn't help feeling amused. "I haven't said anything yet," he pointed out.

"You don't have to," she muttered. "And the answer is yes, yes, yes. I know what I'm getting into. I know it's not going to be a bed of roses. I know it's going to be hard, harder even than the worst that I can think of. *I know*, Professor, but it doesn't change a thing."

"You deserve someone whole," he said flatly. "Someone—"

"I love," she finished for him fiercely. "Don't you think I deserve that, too?" And when this only made the professor's strikingly handsome face turn stoic, almost as if he was still trying to find a way to kick her out of his life, she knew just what to do.

If it had worked earlier, then it should work once more.

"I love you, Professor."

An expletive slipped past his cruelly beautiful lips, and she could barely suppress her smile, thinking it was just like the professor to swear at a declaration of love.

"I've been in love with you for some time now, and I think, deep inside, you knew I felt that way." She felt his body turn rigid under her and knew that she was getting through to him. But because he was still silent, she also knew

she had to do something bigger, something to completely knock him off–

And before she knew it, she was already cupping his face, and her lips were moving to cover his.

“NO!”

Matthijs had a hard time believing the ridiculous situation he had just found himself in, with him doing his best to evade Diana’s lips.

“But you seem to need proof of how committed I am to this.” She couldn’t help grinning as she spoke, with the professor contorting in every way possible just to avoid her mouth. “So just let me kiss you–”

“Diana, dammit–”

“It’s just a kiss–”

“You haven’t had a fucking medical clearance yet,” he growled.

“I’ll leave it to God,” she said with feigned carelessness.

Exasperated and frustrated at her stubbornness, Matthijs decided to take matters in his own hands and rose to his feet as he swept her off the couch.

Diana let out a shriek when the professor suddenly swung her up in the air, but then she burst into laughter when the professor slung her over his shoulder the next moment.

Definitely no way to kiss him now, she thought with a grin, but this new position did give her a rather nice view of his bum.

“Now...” The professor’s voice was grim. “Can we start discussing things like adults?”

“Discussions are a two-way street, Professor, and you didn’t seem inclined to listen to me.”

“I only listen when someone’s saying something worth liste–what the fuck!” But he also had trouble fighting back a grin, unable to believe Diana had the audacity to pinch his butt.

“I wasn’t sure you’d feel that,” he heard her say cheerfully. “Too much muscle, too little fat, but...” And then she pinched him again.

“Goddammit, Diana.” But his words were without heat, and when he finally put her down on her feet, she immediately smiled up at him, and it was a dazzling sight that pierced him like an arrow shooting straight to his heart.

“Do you get it now?”

“Fuck no.”

But she only laughed. “Liar.” Her voice was sweet and affectionate, its sound music to every cell of his body, and when she placed a hand over his heart, ah, *fuck*.

It felt good. It felt right. It felt...like home.

“I know you only kept pushing me away for my sake, but every time you did, it never did either of us any good. So don’t you think we should try it the other way around? Can’t we believe, even just this once, that God’s on our side on this and give His plan a try?”

Her hand left his chest, moving up to cup his cheek, and a ragged sigh escaped him because it was like being touched by heaven.

She started to raise herself on her toes, and he bent his head.

Her lips touched his ears, and she whispered hope to his soul.

Jeremiah 29:11, Professor.

H E R

Sunflower by ItsAMoney (Violin Cover)

Diana had always known that the professor, once his mind was made up, would be the type to move fast.

What she had not realized was just *how* fast he could be, and she found herself striving to keep up with his incredible pace as the professor made call after call and scheduled sessions and meetings for her, all of which he told Diana was non-negotiable. A meeting with his lawyer, personal doctor, therapist, and those were just the experts on *his* side.

When she had seen that he also wanted her to speak with families whose members had once suffered from HIV and eventually died of AIDS, she had initially balked, thinking it was too much, but then he had pulled her close, brushing his lips against her forehead as he displayed his hitherto unknown skills in cajolery.

Do this for me, please, he had whispered ever so beguilingly, and that was it.

She had meekly gone on to do his bidding, and by the time he had dropped her off at university, his tender kiss on her cheek was enough to have her floating away in a daze of happiness.

It was only when she was alone in her dorm room, like now, that she found herself torn between rapturous joy and strangling anxiety.

There were times when all she could do was remember the moments his lips touched her skin, and her toes would curl so hard because she remembered them so vividly. And oh sweet heavens, but so much had changed now, and these days, he seemed to be kissing her every chance he could get.

Before entering and leaving the car. Before entering and leaving his house. Before entering and leaving the room.

Those were the moments that her heart felt fit to burst with happiness, and oh God, if only her whole life could be made up of just those moments.

But it was not.

Because what made life more beautiful was the ugly moments, and there were times when those were all she could think of. Times when it was deep in the night and, with only the silent darkness to keep her company, she couldn't help remember the moments that turned love into the most agonizing form of pain.

She had once asked him why he had never tried kissing her before, and the professor had said simply, *Because it didn't feel right.*

Touching you...kissing you...

When you hadn't any fucking idea of what I have inside of me...

Those moments were ugly alright, but oh God, it was also those moments that proved how ludicrously good the professor was at breaking her heart and piecing them back together. Over and over, he would do it, and he always did so at the same damn time.

They would be working on her thesis, and he had this way of saying her name...

They would be in the middle of class, and he would have this way of looking at her...

Oh, Saint M.

If their first week together was of Diana falling for him, then this week was of her falling even harder.

I love him so much.

Because there were just so many those important little things...

The brush of his knuckles against her cheek, the drift of his fingers down her spine...

So, so much.

With every single thing the professor said and did, he just had this way of making her feel like she alone was what he had been waiting for.

And that's why I'm so scared, too.

His entire life, he had been waiting for her. Just her.

I don't want to lose him, Saint M.

Because as bittersweet and beautiful the past week had been, they had been just as brutal as well, with expert after expert telling Diana in not so many words they thought the whole thing was doomed to fail.

His accountant had looked at her like he believed she was only with his employer for the money, and while the size of the professor's personal fortune had indeed been a surprise, Diana had also been hurt and incensed on the professor's behalf. So much so she had *her* own accountant come over and let everyone who cared to know her own wealth could match Matthijs' penny for penny.

Petty or not, she needed everyone to understand she was with Matthijs because she loved him.

Diana had said as much when she was confronted with the same amount of skepticism from Matthijs' lawyer. But while Arthur Folsgaard was less obnoxious than the accountant, he had been a lot more cold-blooded and mercilessly blunt.

My client expressly forbade me from doing this, but since I'm being paid to look after his interests and not yours...

She had taken the piece of paper Arthur offered, which turned out to be what he wished would comprise of her sworn legal statement.

I have not been forced or coerced in any way...

I am fully aware of the illness that Mr. Matthijs de Graaf was diagnosed with...

I entered into a consensual relationship of my own free will...

She had signed it on the spot, and sensing Arthur's surprise, she had said simply, "I'm in this for the long haul."

But if she had thought the words would impress him, it had the opposite effect.

"Bravo, Ms. Leventis," he said mockingly. "You've just proven to me what I suspected."

"I truly love him—"

"Maybe you do and maybe you don't," Arthur had cut her off flatly. "Either way, loving someone is no excuse to be an idiot and not think things through." He had then dealt Diana a contemptuous look, saying, "You think you know what you're in for, but you don't. You think it's enough that you've read up on things, but it's not. You can never give Matthijs a blowjob unless

he's wearing a condom. Taking medications will no longer be an option. It's a necessity, and if you miss a single dose, your life can fall apart in a blink. And what of the future, and you suddenly find yourself wanting a child of your own - you really think you won't resent him for preventing you from being a mother? You say you've thought this through, but I don't think so. I think you haven't thought of this at all, and I think my client's making a big mistake, trusting you to stay with him until the end."

TOGETHER

Cherish by The Association

The professor parked his sports car by the curb and stepped out, a picture of elegant perfection in his tweeds and dark aviator glasses shielding his leonine gaze.

With the sun in a particularly good mood on a Saturday afternoon, there were more people than usual on the streets, and all of the females who happened to walk past the professor weren't able to resist staring at him.

An all-grown-up, smoking-hot, fuck-me-now angel.

That was how all of them saw him.

An angel, who also happened to be in love.

This, too, was the public consensus, with the professor's austere expression only softening when a dark-haired girl came out of the hospital across the street. They watched him take his glasses off as the girl came running down the steps, they saw their eyes meet, and they knew. There was just no doubting it, with that look in his eyes.

That man was head over heels...and so was she.

Color had blossomed in her cheeks upon seeing her beau, and the moment the pedestrian lights turned green, it was as if she had grown wings, with the girl dashing and practically flying in her haste to be with the man waiting for her on the other side.

"Whoa." Once again, her sudden weight threatened his balance, but also just like before, Matthijs' proved too strong and too powerful, and soon Diana felt his arm going around her waist as he regained his footing.

"Hello."

Her smile was irresistible, and he found himself smiling down at her. “Hello.”

So far, so good, Diana thought impishly, and so she raised her face for a kiss.

But her wiles didn’t work this time, and she burst into laughter when the professor responded by rolling his pretty golden eyes at her.

“Too soon?”

His eyes bored through her. “What do you think?”

“Well, maybe this could help...”

The professor took the envelope Diana handed over and saw her confused surprise when he shoved it straight to his pocket.

“You’re not going to read it?” After everything she had done for the past ten days, just to make sure that she could kiss and touch him without having him to worry he might hurt her—

“I don’t need to.”

What?

The professor touched her nose as he murmured, “Everything I need to know is already written on your face.”

Oh.

And then it really hit her, what the professor was saying - that he knew there was no longer anything to keep them apart...

OH.

The professor smirked, and he looked so, so hot, and she just loved him so, so much, she heard herself blurt out, “T-PILF.”

Matthijs blinked. “Excuse me?”

Oh. Shit.

Had she said that out loud?

Diana cleared her throat. “It’s, um, what the other students call you.”

“And it’s supposed to mean something?”

“*The Professor I’d Like t-to Fuck.*” And with Diana’s voice becoming smaller with each word, it was barely audible by the end. But even so, it was obvious he had heard her just fine, with the way the professor threw his head back with a laugh.

A rich, dark laugh, its sound she found herself cherishing so much that she just had to close her eyes to savor it.

And when she opened her eyes again—

Just in time to see his dark head bending down.

And then...

Everything.

Her whole world coming to a standstill, her soul finding its other half, her life rediscovering its meaning—

This kiss was her every dream come true.

The movement of his lips was both bold and gentle, the strokes of his tongue passionate and tender, and oh Saint M, but this kiss was beyond everything she imagined, and all she could do was grip the lapels of his jacket and kiss him back.

Even when she heard the sound of people starting to clap and whistle, even when she started to hear the loud clicking of professional cameras snapping away and feel the blinding flash strike the sides of her face, even when she started to realize that the few paps in the area had found her, and it was very likely that photos of them making out would be all over gossip websites...

She just didn't give a damn.

Nothing mattered more than kissing him back, nothing else mattered than letting him know that his kiss didn't scare her and would never ever scare her.

When he finally pulled away to let her breathe, and their gazes met anew, when instead of bleakness she saw hope—

She reached to trace his lips with trembling fingers, and the tears started to fall when he didn't flinch away from her touch.

I can finally touch you, Professor.

He took hold of her hand and pressed his lips to the heart of her palm.

And so can I, my darling.

After that, things pretty much moved in another fast-paced if not anti-climactic blur, with Diana so dazed with relief and happiness that all she could remember was the feel of his hand tightly gripping hers.

Having both students and faculty members gape at the sight of them walking hand in hand, entering the Registrar's office to submit a declaration

form regarding their relationship, packing her things so she could move in with the professor—

They were all major events that she would normally have fretted over.

Normally.

And maybe, later on, when the euphoria had dimmed a little, she *would* worry about them.

But for now...

The professor opened the door for her, and she took his hand as he helped her out of the car. In the corner of her eye, she saw his entire staff all lined up in front of his home, but instead of turning to face them, his golden gaze remained on her.

And once again, they were blazing.

But whereas it used to be with anger, this time she understood that the intensity came from something else.

“You’re worried?” she asked softly.

“It’s okay to have second thoughts about this,” he muttered. “You can still—”

“Love you?” Diana cupped his face. “Kiss you? Touch you? F—”

His mouth slammed down on hers, and she laughed against his lips.

I love you, Professor.

Matthijs’ arm went around her waist to pull her closer.

And I you.

H E R

This Guy's In Love With You by Herb Albert & The Tijuana Brass

Diana tried to take her time in the shower, but it was impossible. She was just so excited to be with the professor again. Nervous and a little frightened, too, yes, but mostly, just excited, her toes perpetually curling and her heart constantly skipping a beat at the knowledge that finally, *oh finally*, they could be one.

She tried to while the time away by taking extra care in styling her hair and choosing the right dress - a strapless, ruby red velvet concoction that bared nearly two-thirds of her cleavage that she matched with the same-colored stilettos.

But even after this, a glance at the clock told her it was only five minutes to six, and she still had over half an hour to go before she could meet the professor for dinner.

What to do then?

Diana grabbed her phone on impulse, and her eyes widened in surprise when she saw she had 289 unread messages waiting.

Mairi: *OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD.*

Diana grinned. That was her sister-in-law, alright.

Mairi: *YOUR NEW (HOTTIE) BOYFRIEND IS YOUR PROFESSOR.*

She thought of answering Mairi's text but eventually decided against it. Her brother's wife might seem totally harmless, but the older woman also had a way of making people spill their guts, and that was something she could ill afford at the moment.

Diana moved on to the next message.

Katya: *I take it he's no longer an asshole?*

Realizing she had completely forgotten to update her best friend, Diana quickly started typing.

Diana: *Long story. But yes, no longer an asshole.*

Diana: *And Damen knows about him.*

Katya: *And he's okay with it?*

Diana: *Yes.*

Katya: *Good enough for me. Call me when you're done bonking each other.*

Diana could feel herself turning red after reading Katya's last message. *Sheesh*. But since it was true, and that was top priority in tonight's agenda, Diana decided it was best not to reply for now.

The next set of messages was from her chat group with Amine and Magnolia, and Diana choked out a laugh when she saw the screenshots they had sent. All of it were apparently tweets from women who used to have hopes of being the professor's next girlfriend, and while most of them were students from Helder Meer, there were also a good number made up by both his present-day and former peers.

One tweet included a photo of Jennifer Lawrence shouting *'I volunteer'* from Hunger Games, and its caption: *When T-PILF and his new girlfriend breaks up, and he's thinking of hooking up with another student.*

The second screenshot had a photo of Diana and the professor kissing on the street, and its caption was pretty straightforward: *When you see your secret crush kissing another girl, and you immediately start praying they choke on each other's saliva, and wish you had your own Drogon so you could Dracarys the shit out of them #pettyisaspettygoes*

Another screenshot had two photos. The first was of her and the professor kissing again, labeled simply, *What I Saw Earlier*. The second photo was of a cat, its big eyes welling up with tears, and its label: *How I Am Now*.

But then she saw the last screenshot Magnolia had sent, and she started to laugh and cry. Its caption was from a student determined to move on now that her beloved T-PILF had a girlfriend.

Could you please find a way to make yourself just a little less hotter? I'm trying to get over you here.

And the photo attached to it was from several years back: a younger-looking professor, and he was up on stage to receive his Nobel Prize. He was

beautiful as ever, and he was grinning. *Grinning*. Because at that moment, someone hadn't yet stolen his life from him.

But now...

Oh God, but now...

It hit her all of a sudden, how all this time, it had always been about her, and not once had they spoken of his risks, of the risks he *still* faced...

A sob broke out of her, and after that, there was no stopping it, and she found herself crumpling. Her phone fell from her fingers, but still she couldn't stop crying, her sobs as wild and uncontrollable as the fears strangling her.

I can't lose him. I can't. I can't.

Saint M, please, I can't.

Please.

Don't let God take him away from me.

Please.

Time passed by, and before she knew it, he was there, striding inside her room, his shadow falling over her as he crouched down to her level.

"Diana."

The quiet heaviness in his tone made her head jerk up. "Professor—" And then she saw that it was back, bleakness once again darkening his eyes, and her trepidation turned into full-blown panic. He had been hurt so much - so, so much - that the thought of her causing him more pain was unbearable.

She shook her head frantically at him. "It's n-not what you think—"

"Ssssh." He tried to pull her towards him, but she scrambled away, knowing that to let him embrace her, even if it was what she badly needed, was to let him think he was right.

"It's not what you think," she repeated doggedly.

"You said you were scared."

And so she did.

But the way he said the words, the way his face turned completely expressionless as he spoke—

It told her that it was really as she feared, and another sob wracked her body.

“You don’t understand,” she choked out. “You just don’t...”

“Of course I do.” And the dullness in his voice had her crying harder. “And I promised you, didn’t I?”

“*It’s not—*”

“I won’t force you to stay. In spite of all the precautions we’ve taken, there’s still a chance for you to get infected—”

She grabbed his face with both hands. “*Listen to me!*” She saw his jaw clench, saw the way his body turned rigid, and she knew by now what it meant. He was preparing himself, in case she left him, and her heart broke all over again.

“I *am* scared, Professor,” she whispered tremulously. “But it’s not what you think.”

“Isn’t it?”

She shook her head. “I’m scared *for* you. I’m scared that I’ll lose you. And I can’t. I just can’t...I want you to live forever. I need you to live forever—” And then she could no longer speak, crying so hard she could only let her lips move.

Don’t leave me.

Don’t leave me.

Please, please, please don’t ever leave me.

HIM

The professor woke up to find her gone.

And his first thought was, *I should've expected it.*

He couldn't even blame her. She had every right to run, with all the baggage he carried. He was her teacher, he had HIV, and the last girl he had a relationship with had killed herself because he was a prick.

So no, if he had to be fucking honest, a part of him had long expected this. If anything, he was actually surprised she lasted this long and got this far. So now, the question was...*did he run after her or let this stand as a lesson for him?*

He walked into the shower, hoping the hot blast of water could help clear his head, but all it did was let memories of last night infiltrate his mind.

It had been the first and only time he spent the entire night with a woman and *not* touched her, and while Matthijs wanted to think it was because fucking a girl crying her heart out held no appeal, he knew it had been more than that.

Last night, listening to her cry and knowing that her tears were all *for* him, it just hadn't felt fucking right to touch her in any way that wasn't pure. All he had been able to do was hold her, kiss her fucking hair, and murmur idiotic nothings to her ear.

Maybe he had been wrong about her, he reflected humorlessly. The power she wielded over him from the moment they met...it had once made him think of her as his downfall. But maybe it was the other way around, and she was his soul's salvation, with her ability to turn a sinner like him into a...well, a saint would be cutting it too fine, so maybe she had just enough power to turn him into a eunuch?

Then again, none of it mattered now, did it?

She was gone, and it was time for him to move on.

Stepping out of his bedroom, the professor forced himself to stick to his usual Sunday routine and headed down to the kitchen. His movements were purely mechanical, preparing his breakfast shake and the assortment of pills he had to take.

This, he thought broodingly, was how life was going to be, from here on.

It was when he was on his way to his personal basement that he heard it.

Music streaming from the garden, and the professor absently rifled through his memory banks for the title of the song.

God Only Knows...

Since when did Dan, his head gardener, start listening to *The Beach Boys*?

He was about to turn the corner that led to the other hallway when he heard something else - a soft, feminine voice, humming alongside the music - and the professor tensed.

It couldn't be.

But the sweet humming went on, and before he knew it, his feet were already moving, and then he was breaking into a run, his heart banging against the walls of his chest.

Let it be her.

Let it be her.

Let it be her.

He was panting by the time he made it to the sliding glass doors that opened to the patio, out of breath not because of overexertion but out of sheer dread.

Because he was hoping, he was goddamn hoping, and at the same time, he was fucking terrified it would all be just a dream.

But it wasn't.

Because she was there.

Diana.

She was seated on the steps, her dark hair loose against her bare back, and an empty bowl of cereal placed next to her. She still had last night's lovely dress - the sexiest fucking red dress he had ever seen, with her tits threatening to spill out every time her body trembled the slightest bit. But she had ditched her stilettos and gone barefoot, and the sight of it was erotic.

He must've made some noise after that. Or maybe it was her soul finally heeding the call of his own. Either way, she was suddenly twisting around, and his face appeared to have mirrored his fears, because she only took one look at him, and then she was once again rushing towards him—

Bam.

His arms closed around her the moment she slammed into his embrace.

Looking down, he started to joke about her penchant for crashing into him, but she beat him to speaking.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was wobbling. “I’m so sorry.” And her eyes were welling up with tears. “I didn’t think you’d even think I would leave you.”

Ah.

And just like that, he was no longer in any mood to fuck around.

Just like that, he could no longer hold the words back.

Just like that, she owned him.

“I love you.” The words were ripped out of him.

“And I you.” She was crying again. “So, so much.”

“But I thought you *left* me.”

“I never would.”

“I wouldn’t have run after you if you had.”

“Then I’d have c-come after you.”

His arms tightened around her, his eyes squeezing shut as he felt her body shake against him.

“I don’t think I can ever make it,” he said hoarsely, “if you leave me.”

“Then stop thinking of it.” He felt her fingers grip his shirt. “Because it will never happen.”

And for countless moments, they simply stood there, listening to each other’s heartbeats. It made the most beautiful music because every beat meant the both of them still lived, *together*.

“Professor...”

He looked down at her.

“Make love to me?”

TOGETHER

Never My Love by The Association

As Diana let the professor lead her to his bedroom, she couldn't help wondering if he was able to hear her heartbeat. Because the way it was hammering so hard and loudly against her chest, she could barely hear anything else, and the fact that she couldn't seem to catch her breath wasn't helping at all.

They finally made it to his bedroom, and she could only spare her surroundings a dazed, distracted glance. It was just as beautiful as the rest of his home, if not a little more austere in his choice of furniture. That was all she managed to think. Because after gently guiding her to sit on the edge of the bed, the professor had drawn her hands to his chest, a silent request for her to undress him, and, well, how could anyone be capable of thinking after that?

Her breath caught as she managed to pull his shirt over his head and she was treated to the magnificent sight of his bare chest.

He noticed the odd way she was staring at him. "What is it?"

"You really are," she murmured, "like a Michelangelo painting come to life."

It wasn't Matthijs' first time to be complimented, but somehow her words were different, and he felt like a fucking god, with the way she was gazing at him with such awe.

"I'm flattered you think so." The professor's purring voice had her whole body shivering under its invisible caress. "But don't you want to see more?"

Diana could feel her face turning red as the professor guided her hands to the waistband of his pants. "Umm. Of course. I, umm, would." She saw him smirk, and this made her blush harder for some reason, and her fingers shook

hard as she started to unbutton his pants. It took a couple of tries, but she managed in the end, and she found herself gulping as the pants fell to the floor.

It was just his boxers now, but oh God, the thin scrap of silk was a total failure at hiding the bulge of his erection.

“Can you manage or...”

“I. Can. Manage.” Each word came out a croak, but she told herself not to mind it. The important thing was that she had said them and had thus shown the professor she was not some naïve, inexperienced girl to be coddled.

So...let's do this, Saint M—

Oh shit.

No.

Forget I called you, Saint M.

This isn't something—

The professor frowned at the flicker of panic in her gaze. “If you're having second thoughts...”

“*What? No.*” Pushing all thoughts of her guardian saint away, she forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand.

All ten - or at least it seemed like ten, or maybe it was more? - inches of it.

Here we go, Di.

Matthijs coughed back a laugh when she pulled his boxers down with such force it had her falling on her knees - and staring straight at his dick.

“*Oh my—*”

His still-swelling dick accidentally bumped her nose.

There was a moment of silence, but then their gazes met, and he could no longer keep a straight face. Her stunned expression had him throwing his head back with a laugh. “God.” Only her...it was just her and no one else who could make him feel this fucking happy and horny at the same time.

“Come here, darling.” He took her hand to pull her up, and she watched him open his drawer. A second later, and he was placing a foil packet in her hand. “Have you ever tried putting this on another man?”

“Actually...”

The professor stiffened.

“I practiced on a vibrator.”

WHAT. THE. FUCK.

Seeing his expression, she muttered defensively, “I wanted to be prepared.”

And another laugh escaped him.

God.

God.

God.

How I love her.

Glancing down at her, he said huskily, “Impress me then.”

And so she did.

She was back on her knees, almost as if she instinctively knew how the dominant in him loved seeing her in such a position, and then her fingers were slowly reaching for his dick.

He bit back a groan as her fingers slowly pushed the rubber down until every inch of his member was covered. “Diana—” And then he forgot what else he had to say, with her taking him completely by surprise as her mouth closed around his dick.

FUCK.

She worked him like a pro, sucking and licking in a way that guaranteed his undoing in a matter of mere minutes. It had him wondering if she had also practiced this on a vibrator, and of course this thought had him harder than ever, and he found himself gripping her hair.

She sucked harder, and his balls tightened.

FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.

Diana felt the professor’s fingers tighten its grip on her hair, and it felt good. *Really good.* So much so that she couldn’t help licking every inch of him while her hands tentatively reached for his balls. They felt heavier and sturdier than she imagined, and when she gave them a little squeeze, it was both exciting and a little frightening, the way the professor’s manhood pulsed inside her mouth.

She tried it again, squeezing harder and sucking harder at the same time, and the moment she did, it was as if his control went to pieces, and she found

herself reliving a porn film staple. The professor gripping her hair tightly as he controlled the bobbing of her head while his member thrust in and out, faster and wilder, and oh God, she couldn't, just couldn't get enough—

POP!

Diana fell back as he yanked out of her mouth, and her eyes widened when she saw him stroking his manhood furiously as he started coming and filling the condom until it looked in danger of exploding. Their gazes clashed, his golden eyes hard, and it was as if he was saying, *This is how it would always be between us.*

Almost as if he was trying to scare her away, Diana thought.

Oh, Professor.

When would he get it?

Eyes still locked with him, she slowly licked her lips and saw his entire body jerk. *Good.* And as his climax slowed to its aftermath, she rose to her feet and reached behind her for the zip of her dress.

Her eyes stayed with his as it fell softly to the floor, its descent a proud, quiet statement of its own.

I'm here.

She reached for her lace panties and stepped out of it.

I'm here for good.

She stood before him, naked and trembling, but despite her fears, she kept her chin up, her back straight, and everything of her bared to his gaze.

All of me...

She stepped forward.

Is for you.

The professor closed the distance between them, and her eyes swept close as she felt his hand curve around her nape.

Third kiss, Diana couldn't help thinking dizzily.

And so it was.

His mouth was forceful and hungry, almost to the point of ravishment, as if he was making up for all the nights he had wanted and needed, all the times he had ached to kiss her.

And knowing this, all she could do was part her lips willingly under his,

her tongue molding its strokes to his.

All of me is yours.

His body shuddered, his kisses gradually turning gentle and tender, and when he pulled away, his eyes were once again blazing with emotions. Passion. Heat. Lust. Love. So much emotions, but not one of it was bleakness, and that was all she cared about.

Bleakness meant he still thought he was alone in this.

And he was not.

Never would be.

She looked up at him.

All of me is yours.

“Last chance,” he gritted out.

And because it seemed he needed to hear it out loud, she said softly and very, very clearly, “All of me is yours.”

His eyes closed. “May God forgive me.” She saw him swallow hard. “Because I might never ever let you go after this.”

And then he was carrying her to his bed and, after laying her down, she watched him pull back to reach for the drawer and take out another condom. She watched him get rid of the old one and found it an intimately erotic experience, watching the man she loved put on his own condom. It was stupid and fanciful, but she couldn't help seeing him as a warrior, oiling his blade, and the thought of him stabbing her flesh with it and having him pull out with her blood on his blade—

Diana's face heated as she felt her nipples pinch up in a painfully erect position.

Forgive me if this is a sin.

But I think there's a bit of a twisted masochist in me.

And then the professor was moving back, looming over her as he nudged her legs apart, and both guilt and consciousness dissipated in the sensual, throbbing heat of his presence.

“You look beautiful,” the professor said huskily, “spread out and naked for me like this.” His fingers drifted down to her body as he spoke, and a whimper escaped her as he cupped one breast. A moment later, and she could only whimper again, with his hand fully palming her breast.

And then both of his hands were doing it, and her whimpers turned into moans. It was the most embarrassing sound, but when she tried to cover her mouth, the professor's gaze glinted.

"I want to hear you, Diana."

And so she found herself fisting the bed sheets on each side instead, her moans growing louder and lewder as he continued to play with her swelling and aching breasts. And when he bent down to pinch one nipple before covering it with his mouth, her body could only arch up as another moan was ripped out of her throat.

"Oh God."

He began to suck, and she began to writhe.

"Professor."

Sucking and sucking, and she couldn't stop writhing.

It was good. So good. So unbelievably good.

He moved to her other breast, and it was heaven and hell all over again, and she reached for him with a sob, fingers clawing unthinkingly on his back.

And then she felt it.

His fingers trailing down ever so slowly.

Her legs fell open.

And one finger pushed home.

A cry of pleasure broke out of her, and then all she could do was pant and remind herself to breathe as his finger withdrew and plunged back inside of her in a maddeningly leisurely pace.

"Diana." The professor's whisper caressed her ear, and as her body buckled, his finger pushed deeper - deep enough to brush against the membrane of her virginity - and she let out another cry.

"Professor."

"I'm going to take your virginity with my finger."

She could only nod, her mind and body still too busy grappling with all the sensations that his thrusting finger were pushing to the fore.

"It's safer that way, but after that..."

A second finger slid in, and she cried out once more, already feeling so full, and oh God, if that was how it felt now, how much fuller would she feel

later on—

“It will be my dick stuffing you.”

AAAAH!

And then it was already happening, his fingers tearing past her hymen, and a gasp broke past her lips as she could literally feel it breaking.

Matthijs’ jaw clenched as her wide, dazed doe eyes locked with his.

“It’s done,” she said shakily.

“It is.”

“And I’m yours.”

Fuck.

“Yes,” he rasped. “You’re mine.”

And so he slowly pulled his fingers out and moved over her to replace it with his dick, just as he fucking promised.

His gaze devoured every sweep of expression on her face as his dick nudged the moist entrance of her pussy. He wanted to memorize it, wanted to have every fucking moment of this imprinted in his brain.

Because if there would still come a day that she’d leave him, he would at least have this.

His dick slowly went in, and her fingers dug into his shoulders as her eyes went wide.

This.

He pushed all the way in, and desire and wonder flashed in her eyes.

And then she was crying her name out.

“*Matthijs.*”

He began to move, slowly and gently at first, his eyes never leaving her face, and when her legs tightened around his waist, he slightly increased the pace, beads of sweat lining his face as he strove to maintain his control.

“Oh, Matthijs.” Her eat-you, eat-me eyes did what it did best, begging and pleading for him to ruin her—

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He still stood no chance against it, and with a guttural growl, he did as asked, did as they both wanted, his hips moving wildly as his dick pistoned in and out of her. She cried out with each thrust, again and again, and when their

gazes collided between thrusts, her dark eyes, even filled as they were with tears, were still begging.

More.

More.

More.

Ruin me. Violate me. Own me.

He bent down to bite her nipple, just enough to turn pain into pleasure without drawing blood, and her sweet, piercing cry rippled in the room.

“Matthijs.”

Her fingers dug hard into the blades of his back.

“I’m cumming.”

And, with those words, so was he.

Her moan melted into his growl, her arching, shuddering body pressing against his rigid, bent form as his dick ejaculated into the condom.

Their orgasm could’ve lasted anywhere between seconds and minutes, but for Matthijs, it seemed like a fucking eternity, and the way her limp body eventually fell back against the bed, so it seemed for her as well.

He rolled to his back, pulling her with him, and his chest eased and tightened at the way she sighed as she curled close, his semi-erect dick still thrumming inside of her. He could hear her still trying to catch her breath, and this close, he imagined she could also hear the still-thunderous drum of his heartbeat.

It was done, Matthijs thought.

He waited for the guilt and remorse to strike him.

But there was none.

Jeremiah 29:11, she had once whispered to him.

His jaw clenched.

So be it.

For better or worse, he would let himself hope and believe that their future together was part of His plan.

H E R

Diana woke to the feel of the professor nuzzling the valley between her breasts.

Even as her eyes struggled to open, she couldn't help lifting herself up on her elbows, a part of her still having a hard time believing that...

This wasn't a dream?

And it wasn't.

His golden head was between her breasts, his magnificently naked body was between her legs, and when his gaze lifted to hers, leonine eyes glittering with wicked intentions, a blush stole over her cheeks.

Oh, Saint M.

His gaze still holding hers captive, demanding her to watch, the professor slowly laved one pouting nipple with his tongue, and Diana's blush spread to the rest of her quaking body.

I'm so dead.

The professor smirked. "Too much?"

"Y-yes." But her answer came out in a gasp, with the professor choosing that same moment to start sucking on her nipple.

So good. It's just so, so good. Too, too good.

And she never wanted it to end.

Her head fell back against the pillows, and her fingers moved down blindly to grip his head. The professor seemed to be taking his time sucking on her nipples, almost as if he wished to feast on them, and it was driving her mad.

But just as she was about to break, she felt his head lift, and a sigh of relief escaped her. She just needed some time to breathe and—aaaaaaah!

His mouth had landed between her legs, and when they instinctively tried to press together, the professor simply took hold of each one and slung them over his shoulders.

Oh Gooooooooooooood.

And then *it* was happening.

His mouth once again feasting, this time on her moist, quivery womanhood. His lips nuzzling the entrance of her core, pressing gentle, tickling kisses that traced the lines of her folds, and finally - *oh, oh, oh God* - his tongue slowly pushed in.

A moan spilled out of her.

And it started then, the relentless in-and-out thrusts of his tongue, and she found herself once again rising up on her elbows, fingers desperately clutching the sheets as her dazed eyes clung to the sight of him eating her pussy.

“P-Professor.”

She wasn't sure if she said this to make him stop, but either way, it only seemed to do the opposite, spurring his tongue to move even faster and drive her wilder with desire.

It was just too much, too, too much, and as the pleasure sharpened up into an agonizing peak, she felt his mouth move up, his teeth grazing her clitoris.

AAAAAAH!

He sucked hard on the tiny nub of flesh, and she started coming...just...as...hard.

Wave after wave of pleasure struck her body, making her feel like she was being thrown all over in an ocean of sensations.

Too much. Just too, too much.

But before she could even start breathing again, she felt the professor moving, and when she managed to open her eyes, it was to see the professor sheathing himself with a condom.

Oh God.

His name came out in whimpers and gasps as he suddenly hauled her up to position Diana on all fours.

Oh God.

Was this what they called doggie—

The professor shoved his member inside of her from behind.

And so it was...and it felt so, so good.

He began fucking her. Hard and good. Enough to make her breasts jiggle and create slapping sounds every time his hips hit the back of her legs. It was beyond erotic and embarrassing, but even as she felt her face heat up, she knew she would never in a million of years want it to stop. This was the professor fucking her, *finally*. She would always—

AAAAAAAAAH!

All sensible thoughts disappeared the moment the professor reached down to pinch her nipple.

Oh God.

Pinch. Thrust. Pinch. Thrust. Pinch. Thrust.

She tried to hold on to her sanity, tried to make it last, but when his fingers latched one last time to her nipple *and never let go*, it was just too, too much once more, and she gasped his name out.

“Matthijs!”

She sobbed as she came, and a moment later, she heard him growl *her* name as he started cumming, his fingers digging hard into the cheeks of her butt.

When she woke again, it was to the smell of something awesome.

Steak.

Mac & cheese.

Buttered corn.

She was already licking her lips even before she could open her eyes, and she heard a rich, lazy chuckle play in the air.

Oops?

Diana pushed herself up and turned towards the sound, her gaze already sheepish as it collided with the professor’s golden eyes, which were gleaming with amusement. He was sprawled on the La-Z-Boy, dressed only in lounge pants and nothing else. He looked simply gorgeous, and her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him.

This man was hers.

Hers.

And her heart skipped another beat.

The professor's gaze narrowed. "What is it?"

"H-Huh?"

He studied her for another moment before a smirk slowly slashed over his lips. "Let me guess."

Please don't let him guess.

"You were thinking you can't believe I'm all yours."

Oh Saint M, how could you!

"I don't know what you're talking about." Diana tried to act blasé as she uttered her lie.

"But I think you do. And—" The professor rose to his feet. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, is there?"

Diana let out a gasp as he scooped her off the bed.

"Because it's true."

Oh.

"I *am* yours." He raised one challenging brow at her. "But if you don't want me then—"

Even knowing that the words were nothing but a teasing joke, she still couldn't help reacting instinctively, shaking her head as she said fervently, "I want you."

The professor chuckled. "Say it then."

She swallowed hard, but his gaze remained intently on hers, calm and patient but at the same time arrogant and commanding—

Irresistible.

That was him in one word.

And she heard herself say, "You're mine." And after that, she couldn't stop saying it, her arms going around his neck. "You're mine, *Matthijs de Graaf*."

He answered with a brush of his lips against her hair. *Yes.*

For the rest of the evening, the professor kept her curled in his lap, and in between feeding her slices of steak and spoonfuls of sides, he outlined what he predicted her life would shape out to be for the next few weeks.

Expect a wide variety of reactions from other students.

Those who know you and truly care will stand by your side.

And this would later turn out to be true, with Magnolia and Amine taking on the role of her staunch supporters and firmly defending Diana and Matthijs' relationship to those silly enough to criticize the couple in their hearing.

Those who hated you from the start will only hate you more.

And so it would be with Pepper Lowell, who right away submitted an official complaint in view of Diana's relationship with the professor and the possibility of his favorable bias towards her. But because the other girl hadn't done her due diligence, the Registrar's office had very coolly pointed out that such concerns were made negligible. *'They've already submitted a declaration form to acknowledge conflict of interest, and as such, Ms. Leventis now has a new adviser and her work from hereon will be graded by said person.'*

And when Diana had asked the professor about the people in between, those who might know her a little or might not know her at all...

There will be those who'd disappoint you.

And so it had been with Lars, whom Diana sincerely thought was a friend, but because he had wanted *more* with her, the other student was unable to get past his resentment. And as he also knew he could never win against someone like the professor, the younger man chose instead to start spreading harmless but hurtful insinuations. *'Diana was a gullible fool...Professor de Graaf was a sex maniac...The two of them had threesomes with the professor's former students.'*

The professor had given her a look of resignation afterwards, adding rather dryly, *And knowing you, my darling, rather than wanting to get even, learning the truth about them will just make you feel sad.*

And so it had.

When that time comes, I want you to remember that you have me and that you will always have me. You only have to call me, and I'll come fucking running. I'll never let you feel sad or alone.

And when said time had indeed come, and the regrets were too much to bear on her own, she had gone knocking on his office door, and the professor, after taking just one look at her face, had hauled her inside, locked the door, and proceeded to make love to her right then and there.

Her mouth crushed under his, her back against the wall, her legs around his waist while his cock slammed into her again and again—

I'll fuck you so hard you'll see stars, the professor whispered to her ear, and after that, you can cry on my shoulder.

Which she had.

Because when I told you I love you, it wasn't just an expression of my feelings. It was a promise. You're my life now. For better or for worse. Through all the ups and downs, you will always be everything for me and to me, and nothing will ever be more important.

That night he had said those words, she hadn't really quite understood him. Because she had been young and naïve, stupid and inexperienced, the worst had to happen, and she ended up hurting the professor just to know what his love truly meant.

It had been about two weeks since they started living together when she told him her best friend was coming to visit her. *I want to meet her first, she had told him hesitantly. And if it's okay with you, I was hoping I could also let her know...*

And when all she had gotten was silence, she had started stammering nervously. *I just thought, since you were okay with me telling Magnolia and Amine about you, it would be okay for me to tell Katya...*

She had waited and waited, and in the end, the professor had said quietly, *If that's what you think is best.*

The conversation had haunted her throughout the day, to the point that she had almost succumbed to calling their couples' therapist just so she could ask what the big deal was. Katya was a big part of her life, and didn't she owe the truth to her best friend? Shouldn't Katya be given a choice about whether or not she still wanted to be in Diana's life, once she knew of Matthijs' condition?

She had gone as far as calling the therapist's office number, but the moment it started ringing on the other line, she had found herself ending the call, cold and shaking in the backseat of the professor's car and unable to get rid of the feeling that she had almost *betrayed* him.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

She had a sudden, desperate urge to say the words, and it had her rushing back home. And when she found him alone in their bedroom, the dull look in his eyes had her falling to her knees in front of him.

I'm sorry. She had no idea what she was apologizing for; she only knew that she had done something wrong, and she had hurt him. *I'm so, so sorry.*

Are you ashamed of me?

And she had started to cry. *No. Of course not.*

Because it's alright if you are.

The words had her crying harder. *I'm not ashamed. I swear.* But when she had tried reaching for his hands, he had shaken his head, and she could only cry, seeing that refusing her touch had hurt him just as much.

I'm so sorry, she had whispered.

There's a reason why there isn't any law that requires full and immediate disclosure of my condition. The only way I can kill someone is when I have my dick in that person's hole, and I've stopped taking medications.

And when he looked at her, the bleakness was back in his eyes, and this time it was because of her.

It will never work if being with me makes you feel guilty and you have the constant need to tell everyone what I have. I won't stop loving you for it, but I wouldn't be able to bear it either, knowing how I make you feel—

She had cut him off by throwing herself in his arms. Had cut him off because it was then she had finally understood, just what this very special man meant, when he had told her *'I love you.'*

That night, she had loved him with all she had, using her mouth and her hands to beg for his forgiveness and ask for another chance. And after, with Matthijs sleeping beside her, his arms around her, she had let the tears fall as she prayed.

Please God. Please Saint M. Please.

She prayed that the time would never come and he might think he had to push her away again.

She prayed that the time would never come and she would be so weak as to leave him.

She prayed and prayed, prayed for everything that had to do with her failings.

But not once did she remember to pray that the day would never come... and it would be her love for him that would spell their end, and she would find herself leaving, not because of him, but *for him.*

HIM

The professor was no sentimental fool.

For every cause of joy, there would be pain. It had always been this way, and he knew his life would be no exception, not even when he had his own beautiful saint to love. For every day in his life that she changed, for every day that she made good and *happy*, he knew there would be a corresponding effect, that one day life would inevitably come to collect.

He knew this.

He believed in this.

But such was the power of love that he refused to let this govern him.

He loved her, and she him, and he began to live according to these two principles. His work, his attitude towards other people, virtually every aspect of his life reflected the changes loving Diana wrought in him, and the results were as he expected.

He had colleagues ridiculing him, saying that whereas his essays once delivered great insights, they were now nothing but a disastrous mix of spiritual gibberish and emotional rubbish.

Professor Matthijs de Graaf has clearly lost it, one peer scathingly wrote in his review, to even dare think we would let him get away with quoting the bible in a scientific journal.

A number of invitations had also been rescinded ever since knowledge of his relationship with Diana came about, some of them politely worded while a few had been openly malignant and bordered on libel.

It is my responsibility to protect the reputation of my university and ensure the well-being of my students. If I have you lecture them, I might as well have the Devil corrupt their souls.

Added together, the incidents should have taken a toll on the professor,

but it did not. Not once did it make him regret his decision, and he knew it would always be so. For when one faced the stakes that he did, the trivialities of life ceased to matter, and one learned to appreciate what truly made each day worth living.

And for him, it was her.

The way she was always there, waiting and smiling to welcome him home.

The way she took him in her arms and loved him without fear or hesitation.

All of these things and more were the reasons he loved her and why, later on, the status quo was no longer enough.

He was at the airport in Frankfurt, waiting for his private jet to be refueled, when he found himself stopping in his tracks. Before him was the display window of a famous jewelry chain, and catching his eye was a pair of platinum bands lying in a bed of white silk.

The last time he bought a ring, the professor thought, his life had fallen apart soon after.

Was there any reason to think it would end differently this time?

The question lingered in his mind even well after he had boarded the jet, and it persisted in haunting him even as he made his way to the back entrance of his home.

Because he had arrived two hours earlier than expected, he was hoping to surprise Diana. But as soon as he made it near enough to hear and see her moving about in the kitchen, it was the professor who had a bombshell dropped on him instead.

One moment she was by the stove, cooking and humming as her hips swayed in gentle rhythm.

My Girl by The Temptations, the professor managed to identify in spite of being distracted by the way her butt had started wriggling, almost as if it was begging for a spank.

He was about to go in and do just right that...when history repeated itself.

And life threatened to fall apart once more.

Diana suddenly rushed to the sink and started throwing up.

Fuck.

He managed to get past his shock and already had his phone whipped out

when, just as he was about to dial 911, he heard the retching sounds stop. His frantic gaze snapped back to her, and the first thing he saw was her pale face as her fingers fumbled for the phone lying on the countertop.

She was calling someone, and he tensed, somehow unable to make himself move as he waited for his phone to ring.

But it didn't.

Instead, he heard her start to speak, voice wobbling as her shoulders started to shake in silent sobs.

"D-Doctor Olsen?"

Matthijs whitened.

"This is Diana Leventis. I thought I'd leave you a voice mail in case..."

He watched her inhale, all the while thinking, this was it. He knew it in his guts. This was life coming to collect.

"Anyway, it's, um, Day 24. The nausea's still bad, and the vomiting...it's gotten worse."

And so it was.

"I think I'll go ahead with the kidney checkup you mentioned, and if the side effects still persist...we'll do it your way. We'll change medications then, but—"

He heard her voice break, and his own chest caved in with it.

"Matthijs...he still doesn't know, and I'd like to keep it that way. *Please*. Him knowing won't change my condition, but what it will change is him worrying about me even more...and I just...I just don't want him to have any reason to push me away again."

The professor closed his eyes.

"So please..."

The sound of her voice faded as he slowly retraced his steps back to the front door.

FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.

He struggled to breathe.

I just don't want him to have any reason to push me away again.

Matthijs slowly raised his hand to press the doorbell.

He heard footsteps and a murmur of voices, Diana asking Oskar why the

butler still hadn't opened the door. He listened to the other man make excuses, listened to Diana answer in exasperation, and then she was opening the door—

“Professor?”

And just as before, she threw herself at him, and he caught her in his arms. Her face lifted up for a kiss, but try as he might, he couldn't make himself devour her mouth.

God.

What the fuck am I doing?

God.

Tell me if I should leave.

Tell me.

Diana pulled back, her doe eyes turning uncertain. “What's wrong?”

The ring he had in his pocket seemed to burn all the way to his flesh, and his guts twisted inside of him.

Was that it then?

The compromise.

The sacrifice.

He could be with her but not marry her?

Diana touched his cheek. “Matthijs?”

So be it, God.

So fucking be it.

Anything was fine as long as she remained safe.

He forced himself to smile. “Nothing. I was just thinking I've forgotten how beautiful you are.”

She smacked his shoulder. “Ha!”

Lowering Diana back to her feet, he asked casually, “Anything happen while I was gone?”

“Nope.” She looked up at him. “You?”

“Nothing either, except for me missing you.”

Her cheeks turned pink, but her smile was blinding and her gaze soft with tenderness. “It's the same for me.”

And so it was, with both of them missing each other, both of them lying to each other.

He followed her inside, but even before the door had swept shut behind him, he was unable to help himself, reaching to spin her around and causing Diana to gasp in surprise as he yanked her to his arms.

“Matthijs?”

But he could only hold on to her tightly.

God.

I don't want her sick because of me.

Please.

His arms tightened around her even more, and he said fiercely, “I love you.”

She started to struggle in his arms, wanting to look up, but she was no match for his strength, and she eventually subsided, her head falling back against her chest.

“I love you, too,” she finally whispered. “Always. You know that, right?”

He closed his eyes.

“Please, Matthijs. Can't you tell me what's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Because they would get through this. “Nothing's wrong.” But no matter how much the professor willed this to be true, he had a feeling he was fighting against what was already destined.

TOGETHER

Diana had never been the type to believe in omens.

If she had been, maybe things would've been different and she would've been better prepared. Maybe, if she had been the type to believe, she wouldn't have so quickly disregarded the notification on her phone, popping up from nowhere with a Verse of the Day from her bible app.

1 Peter 5:8

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

Maybe.

So many maybes.

But because all of these maybes could only occur with hindsight, she had been clueless as a newborn babe on the day she was fated to lose everything. And it had started innocuously enough, with Diana at the university's parking lot, making a call to the professor's office while she waited for Magnolia to pick her up.

"Hello, darling."

Her toes curled, like it always did, and she couldn't help smiling like a silly infatuated fool. "Hello, Professor."

"Are you on your way back?"

"Actually, that's the thing..." She told him about her planned visit to St. Therese's Shelter for the Sick and Homeless with Magnolia, adding afterwards, "It's in St. Valentine's, so it should be safe."

Crime-wise perhaps, the professor thought, but that wasn't the only kind of danger they had to worry about.

"You know I'm still stuck with my thesis," Diana ventured in face of the

professor's prolonged silence. "I know this could be nothing but a wild goose chase, but I just think it's still worth a try, if it could give me the direction I need."

The professor's fingers tightened involuntarily around his phone. If he told her no, he would be doing exactly what he promised himself he wouldn't do - change her life and lock her in a cage, atoning for a sin she hadn't even committed.

But if he were to say yes...

"Alright," he said finally. "But you need to take proper precautions."

"Of course." Diana's voice was filled with relief. "I have my pepper spray with me at all times, and it's not like I don't know you and Damen still have me under 24/7 surveillance."

"Diana—"

"I gotta go." Magnolia was waving for her to hurry from the driver's seat, and Diana quickly made her way to the passenger seat. "Thanks for letting me do this. I know how much of a worrywart you are, and I promise to text you all the time. I love you."

The professor started to say 'I love you' back, but she had already ended the call, and something inside of him turned cold, like someone walking over his grave. But instead of worrying about his own safety, he could only think of Diana.

To hell with being paranoid, the professor thought. And so he made the call, and it was why, when Diana and Magnolia arrived at the shelter, it was to find one of Damen's undercover bodyguards waiting for her by the steps.

"Alvin?"

"Good evening, Ms. Leventis. Mr. de Graaf asked that you have this." The former Marine handed her a paper bag, and inside of it was a box of surgical gloves and professional-grade face masks. "If you need anything else, please just let us know."

"Yes." Diana's voice was faint. "Thank you." Her fingers tightened its grip on the paper bag as a strange sense of foreboding squeezed her heart.

She watched Alvin walk away and a part of her wanted to call the man back, wanted to ask him take her straight home to the professor so that everything would be alright.

Oh, Saint M—

But her prayers were interrupted, with Magnolia impatiently calling her

name out, and she mentally squared her shoulders. *You're just being paranoid, Di. That's all.* She followed her friend inside, but her unspoken misgivings persisted, and her quiet anxiety turned into something ominous and suffocating.

A weary-looking nun came to greet them, and Diana could only nod as Magnolia made the introductions.

While the shelter had been a pleasant-looking, two-story brick house on the outside, what existed within its walls was another story. Its long and narrow hallway was cramped, with hospital beds parked on each side, all of them bearing patients that appeared either gravely ill or were already at death's door.

Seeing her bewilderment, Sister Clare explained in a low voice, "We don't have enough doctors to treat them."

"I don't understand. Doesn't St. Valentines have sufficient funding—"

"Money has never been a problem," the nun answered curtly. "What we lack are doctors who have the necessary compassion to treat them. As you can see, this is no glamorous workplace, and when you compare it to the posh clinics they have up at the ski resorts..."

Diana couldn't speak. *The professor had known*, she realized painfully. He had known what she would find here, how this could endanger his health a thousand ways, and he had still let her go.

He had let her go and risk his health, just because she had whined about her stupid thesis.

She took one of the masks out, but Sister Clare started shaking her head as soon as she saw it.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Leventis. But if you were to wear that, it would...it would complicate things. It would make them think you're disgusted."

"Then I can't..." She turned to Magnolia helplessly. "The professor..."

Magnolia paled, realizing what her friend was trying to say. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Di. I didn't think. I forgot..."

"Is anything wrong?" Sister Clare asked worriedly.

"I'm sorry." Diana found herself stumbling a step back. "I h-have someone at home..." *The man I love.* "He's easily...I can't...I'm so sorry." She could barely breathe now, her earlier sense of foreboding having risen back to the fore, and it was now a thousand times worse. "I have to leave. I'm sorry." She turned away, tears blinding her, and promptly bumped into

someone.

“I’m sor—”

The woman interrupted her with a series of coughs, and the moment Diana felt droplets of saliva strike her face, she wanted to cry.

Paranoid, a sly voice inside of her suggested. *You’re just being paranoid.*

But she knew better now than to believe this, knew enough that she should have just listened to her fears and go running home to him.

I’m sorry, Professor.

And now it was too late, and the Devil still wanted to play with her.

A tear slipped down Diana’s cheek, and the sight had the other woman flying in a rage. “What the fuck?”

Diana’s head jerked up in confusion.

“Poverty isn’t contagious, bitch!”

Realizing she had been misunderstood, and that her tears had been mistaken for an expression for disgust, Diana sought to explain, stammering, “It’s not what you think—”

But the other woman simply answered by spitting on her face.

It was chaos after that, with Sister Clare and Magnolia rushing in to restrain the other woman as she went berserk and tried to claw at Diana’s face. But other patients had seen what had happened, and with a snap of the Devil’s fingers, she had become the face of all their frustrations.

They came at her and for her.

No, no, no.

She could only curl herself in a ball, eyes closed and lips sewn shut, enduring everything they did - the hair-pulling, the kicks to her sides, the punches to her face - she could and would withstand everything just as long...

Please, Saint M.

Just as long...

Please, Saint M.

Please.

She fought to stay conscious until she heard security break in, fought to protect herself until she was lying on a stretcher and inside the safety of an ambulance. A paramedic started asking questions, and even as she tried to

answer them as best as she could, her mind was already drifting, and she found herself remembering the oddest and most painful things...

She was a little girl again, and her nanny was telling her goodbye because Esther thought her too soft on her daughter.

It pains me to tell you this, my sweet girl, but you have to know, to protect yourself.

The Devil wears many faces, and his favorite masks are often those we're inclined to trust.

The scene faded, and Diana was suddenly in Dr. Owens' clinic, and the other woman was looking at her gravely.

Do you know what the varicella-zoster virus is, Diana?

It's a strain of virus that causes children to have chicken pox or adults to have shingles.

But for someone with HIV, in the very worst cases, it can cause internal bleeding in the brain.

It can result in death.

That's why you have to be just as careful with your health as Matthijs is.

Something that can only make you cough or sneeze could be enough to kill him.

When she finally woke up, she was in the hospital, and tears were rushing down her cheeks.

Because now she understood.

The Devil wears many faces, her nanny had once told her.

And it used to be that his favorite mask was that of her mother's face.

But now, it was something else.

Now, he sought to harm the professor, and the Devil's mask was of Diana's face.

HIM

The moment the professor saw Diana's name flash on his screen and his phone started ringing, he knew.

He already knew.

He fucking knew.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry."

And there it goddamn was.

The defeated sound of her voice.

Like she had already made up her mind to leave him.

It made him want to drive his fist into the wall, made him fucking want to roar to the heavens, WHY, GOD, WHY?

Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?

But because he loved her, his first thought was for her and of her.

"Are you safe?" he asked harshly.

"Matthijs—"

"Answer the goddamn question!"

"I am," she choked out.

His tension eased, just enough for him to breathe. "Where are you?"

"It d-doesn't matter."

"Goddammit, Diana—"

"*I almost killed you.*" A sob broke out from the other end of the line. "I almost k-killed you, and for n-no reason at all." And after that, a jumble of words came out in a rush. All of it should've been incoherent, and she might

as well have been speaking in tongues. But somehow he understood. Somehow, he understood every fucking thing that transpired...just as he understood that she thought she was doing the right thing now.

“I love you, Matthijs. I love you so much, you know that, right?”

“Shut up.”

“I would never hurt you, I can’t ever bear the thought that I could ever hurt—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

A cry spilled out of her. *“I love you—”*

“Then stop saying it like you’re saying goodbye,” he snarled. “We can fix this. We *will* fix this. As soon as the hospital clears you, I’ll come get you—”

“I’m s-sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re fucking sorry and just say you’ll stay—”

“I can’t. *I just can’t*. I love you. You’re my life.”

“You goddamn promised—”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t...I just can’t...*I just want you to keep living.*”

The line went dead.

And just like that...

It was over.

The professor threw his phone against the wall and watched it smash to pieces.

Jeremiah fucking 29:11.

You fucking promised, remember?

You made me believe.

You made me hope.

So the ball is fucking back on your court, GOD.

Tell me what to say.

Show me what to do.

Anything He asked, Matthijs would do.

He had no choice.

No fucking choice.

Because he had already forgotten how it was to breathe when she was not with him.

H E R

This Guy's In Love With You by 101 String Orchestra

In her desperate need to keep him safe and protected, to keep him *alive*, Diana had gone as far as meeting with her lawyer and having him write Matthijs a gentle warning. *Respect my client's request or a restraining order shall be filed against you, for which we will be obliged to cite your illness as basis for harassment.*

To which the professor had simply turned the letter over and scrawled back in reply, *Lamentations 3:28-33.*

Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;
let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;
let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.
For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

Her lawyer had recited the words out loud, his voice filled with puzzlement. “What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t get it.”

But I do, Diana thought, and the urge to laugh and cry was upon her once again.

Oh, Professor.

Who would’ve thought this was possible, for a scoundrel like you to quote the Bible just to woo and entice a girl to come back?

Seeing that her poor lawyer was virtually scratching his head at his cryptic response, she said softly, “He’s saying he’s going to wait me out.”

“Oh.” Her lawyer fell back against his seat. “And, uh, you’re okay with that?”

She could only smile and shrug, and after that she left in a hurry.

She made it as far as the backseat before despair engulfed her, and her tears flowed endlessly.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

It had been five days, four hours, and ten minutes since she had last laid eyes on him. And then it would be just a few hours more until tomorrow’s final defense, and she would see him.

One last time.

She knew she was doing the right thing. She knew that. But somehow, she just couldn’t make herself move on, couldn’t even make herself stop taking her medications even though there shouldn’t be any need for it.

Because they were over.

Weren’t they?

I love you, I love you, I love you.

And suddenly, she could no longer stop herself, her fingers scrambling for her phone, and then she was typing the words even as the tears continued to splash over the screen.

I love you so much.

The professor answered right away, and her shoulders started to shake, laughter mixed in with tears.

Songs 4:9.

Oh, Professor.

It was almost as if he was playing with her.

Songs was the one book in the bible that didn't speak of laws and teachings but instead expressed the yearnings of the heart. Songs, however, was also one of the few books that she rarely read, and so she found herself clicking on her bible app just to read the verses.

*Thou hast ravished my heart,
my sister, my spouse;
Thou hast ravished my heart
with one of thine eyes,
with one chain of thy neck.*

She covered her face with her hands, but it was not enough to stop herself from sobbing.

She gasped for breath, but it was not enough to drown the sound of his words drumming inside her mind.

She begged for help—

Please.

Saint M, please.

Please.

But all the angels and saints seemed to be on the professor's side, and comprehension forced its way to her heart, and the words he quoted were so, so clear it was almost as if he was whispering them to her ear.

I loved you from the moment I saw you.

I love you still.

And I always will.

She closed her eyes, and God, oh God, she could almost swear she felt his knuckles grazing her cheek—

It's my turn to fight for us, my darling.

Could've sworn she felt his lips brushing against her hair—

And you won't stand a chance.

TOGETHER

The professor couldn't remember the last time he had paid attention to his looks. But that was exactly what he found himself doing, on the morning of Diana's final defense. And while he still ended up with his usual tweed suit, it *was* new, and so were his tie and shoes. Preparation was the often underestimated key in winning battles, and he was not taking anything for granted.

When the professor stepped inside the forum hall, all gazes swung to him, Diana included.

That's right, darling.

Stare at me.

Swoon over me.

Fucking lust after me.

She had once told him, albeit shyly, that he was the only man to have turned her on, and the professor was all for doing anything and everything to remind her of this.

A lot of sighing and gushing seemed to happen as the professor made his way down the steps, but he only eyes had for one girl.

His girl.

She seemed unable to stop herself from staring, and he wondered idly if she was aware of how her doe eyes had once again started eating him.

If you want to eat me so damn bad, then don't leave me.

He took his seat, and at his nod, the fourth-year student he had assigned to moderate went up to the podium. Introductions were made, and soon the first student to defend his or her thesis was called.

"May I ask Ms. Diana Leventis to present herself before the panel?"

Diana's jaw dropped. The last time she heard, the order of defense was supposed to be random. Her gaze swung accusingly to the professor's, but his leonine gaze only met hers in bland challenge. *Yes, it's deliberate. Are you going to do anything about it?*

Her teeth gnashed even as she forced herself to stand up. Since the professor wasn't the petty type, she knew he was doing this for a reason, and that was *what?* Did he want her rattled? Did he want her so nervous that she'd blurt out the first thing on her mind?

Oh, Saint M, save me.

Diana's knees bumped each other under her skirt as she came up the dais and face the panel.

Her face whitened.

The panel, which was made up of every single individual that had once attended her mock defense.

Dear God.

Had she somehow gotten all of this wrong?

Her gaze swung back to him, but his handsome face was a blank, hard mask, and her heart shriveled at the sight of it. She felt sick and cold with fear, but she couldn't make herself back out. This was her purpose, dammit, and not even the professor would ruin this for her.

She managed a smile for the crowd. "Good morning everyone." She could barely hear herself over the hammering of her heart. "My name is Diana Leventis. As with all the students here, we've been tasked by Professor de G-Graaf—" She could feel her cheeks heating up at the way her tongue suddenly stumbled over his name, and her color deepened when she heard Pepper snicker.

Clearing her throat, she tried again, saying, "We've been tasked by the professor to propose a novel approach in resolving the growing suicide rate among Catholics."

"The last time we spoke," the priest murmured, "I mentioned a few concerns you had trouble addressing."

"Yes, Father. And one of the adjustments I've made was to redefine the limitations of my thesis."

"With regards to what?"

"My thesis will not cover the rare and special instances in which an individual may be called upon God to end his life and serve His purpose, as

was such in the case of several biblical figures—”

A rude, scoffing sound interrupted her, causing her to stop speaking.

The moderator cleared her throat. “I, err, believe Professor de Graaf has something to say?”

Diana’s astonishment turned into consternation at the older student’s words. *That was the professor?* Her head snapped to his direction, in time to see his golden eyes mock her as he drawled, “No surprise there, that after all the time you’ve been given to improve your thesis, and all you were able to do was add a fucking limitation—”

Nervous laughs erupted from the crowd even as the Carmelite nun seated next to Matthijs let out an affronted gasp. “Language, Professor!”

“Apologies, Sister Dorothy.” But his mocking gaze remained on the trembling, red-faced figure of his target. She was hurt and confused, but she was also visibly angry, and it was exactly what he wanted.

“I simply had to express my disappointment,” he murmured laconically. “I was hoping Ms. Leventis would have significantly improved herself, but perhaps I was expecting too much from someone like her.”

“Professor de Graaf...” Mr. Bakker looked distinctly uncomfortable. “It’s best not to make things personal...”

“If I had wanted this to be personal,” Matthijs drawled, “then I should have said from the start that trash is what one’s likely to expect—”

Diana jerked.

“Coming from a student whose admission essay singled out a teen TV show as her reason for wishing to study in Helder Meer.” The professor’s gaze swung back to her. “13 Reasons Why, wasn’t it, Ms. Leventis?”

Diana could feel everyone staring at her, judging her, laughing at her, and all she could do was gaze back at the professor. *Why was he doing this? Why was he being cruel? Why?*

“No rebuttal?”

In the corner of her eye, she saw Pepper taking a photo of her with a smirk, and when her dazed gaze swept across the crowd, she saw that most of them were the same, uploading photos and live-tweeting what they could of Diana’s gradual and inevitable breakdown.

Because it would happen.

His vicious, inexplicable cruelty had done a great job in demolishing her

self-control, and even with her still doing her best to fight off her tears, Diana knew that it was only a matter of time before everything in her gave out.

“We’re waiting, Ms. Leventis,” the professor taunted.

Her lips moved, but the words just wouldn’t come out. She could only stare at him, wishing she had the courage to ask, *Why? Dear God, why?*

Why send all her those sweet quotes, making her think he still and truly loved her, and then do this?

Was it because her lawyer’s letter had stung his pride?

Was it because he despised her for breaking her word?

She just wanted to know why.

Diana bit her lip hard the moment it started to tremble, but if she had thought this would inspire his mercy, it did the opposite, and she actually saw his upper lip curl in contempt.

“So much for your so-called purpose,” the professor said coldly. “And to think you made so many of your peers believe that this whole thing was more than an academic requirement—”

“It is!” Hurting as she was, she couldn’t, she just couldn’t let him say that about her.

“And yet here you are, and all you can talk about is a new limitation for your thesis,” the professor derided.

The university therapist shifted in her seat when she noticed the tears running down Diana’s face. “Matthijs, I think that’s enough—”

But it was Diana herself who interrupted her, saying in a fierce, tight voice, “I meant every word I said.”

“You still believe the Church has the power to cure depression to prevent suicide?”

“Yes!”

“How then?” he challenged.

“I’m s-still trying to figure out—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” A majority of the panel protested more loudly this time, but the professor didn’t even look at them. “You’re trying as much as I’d expect from someone who think a TV show is a modern-day prophet—” He saw Diana take a furious step forward, and he rose to his feet with a sardonic laugh. “Itching to slap me, Ms. Leventis?” He stalked towards her until they

were mere inches apart. “*Go on.* You have the privilege, being my ex-girlfriend—”

“Damn you!”

“And so you shall be as well,” he snarled,” for promising what you can’t keep—”

Tears of frustration burned in her eyes because he wasn’t saying anything that wasn’t true.

“What do you want from me?” she cried out. “What, damn you?” And she could no longer stop herself, her fingers curling into a fist as she struck his chest. “I know what I’m doing isn’t enough. *I know.* But I’m not God—”

The professor’s handsome face turned expressionless. “Are you not?”

“No—” And that was when it started to dawn on her. “I’m not.” And her voice faded as it finally hit her, what all the pain was for, and why the professor had kept pushing and pushing until she finally made it to this point.

Until she finally understood.

She was not God.

And no one else could be.

Diana spun back to face the panel and the rest of her audience. “I...I was wrong,” she whispered, “and you were all...you were all right.” She turned to the professor, and this time she was no longer blind, and her heart ached, seeing how much it had hurt him to hurt her. “Professor de Graaf...has made me realize that while I was on the right track, I had the wrong conclusion.”

“Can you be a little more specific?” It was Luisa, the social worker, but unlike before, her gaze was sympathetic and her tone careful.

“I once thought that suicide could simply be prevented by making people responsible for other people. But you were all right when you told me it won’t work. Just as a person is essentially incapable of finding what he is unable to see, depression...is the likely concomitant of any unsuccessful pursuit of happiness. Just as true freedom is gained by doing God’s will, true happiness can only be founded in God’s purpose.”

She knew it could only be her imagination, but with every word she spoke, it was almost as if she could feel more of the Holy Spirit filling her heart, dispersing her fears and doubts, until all that was left was the *rightness* of what she was doing.

“Depression in its every form, including all of its symptoms and consequences - depression may be immediately reversed, *miraculously* if you

will, if one is made to understand the true nature of happiness. That's how the Church can save the lives of its children, and that's how we can also help other people. Because it's as St. Augustine says. *Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.*"

Silence.

So much silence.

While she hadn't been expecting a standing ovation like before, was it too much to expect for someone to just *react* in any—

And then she noticed Father Edwards pointing at her and then making a circular motion with his finger, as if asking her to turn around.

Okaaaaay.

But she did as asked.

And Diana had the shock of her life.

"Professor?"

A gorgeous face. Golden eyes. And a dazzling smile.

That was all she managed to see before his mouth conquered hers, and he had her locked tightly in his arms, every inch of her body pressed against his.

He kissed her long and hard, kissed and kissed and kissed, and oh it didn't even stop as everyone started to clap and whistle. Kissed and kissed until she cried and heard what his lips were telling her without the words.

My purpose is to show you the way so you can save other people.

Your purpose is to save me.

His head slowly lifted, and their gazes met.

"I'm just so scared," she whispered brokenly. "I don't ever want to risk hurting you—"

"You won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Jeremiah 29:11. Remember?"

She sobbed and laughed. "Oh, Professor. Do you think anyone would believe me if I told them that you use bible quotes to get me into bed with you?"

"You can try, but I think everyone's just going to think you're on something." The professor pulled a small black box out of his pocket as he

spoke.

“Is that so—*oh*.”

The professor took the ring from the box. “I’m not even going to ask.”

A smile wobbled over her lips. “For some reason...I never expected you to.”

And as she watched him slide the ring down her finger, she heard him say her name.

“Diana?”

“Mm?”

“Keep your promise this time, will you?” He slowly brought her hand to his lips. “Never leave me again.”

H I M

The professor was pacing.

But because it was a fairly small room, and the professor was long-legged, it only took him two seconds to span its length before he had to turn around and walk the other way. From the other side of the room, his best man watched in amused silence, having never seen the aloof and worldly professor display such tension.

“Nervous?” Ryder asked finally.

“Fuck yes.”

Ryder laughed, thinking that the days when Matthijs kept his emotions to himself were truly gone indeed. “Diana’s really gotten you wrapped around her finger, hasn’t she?”

“I’ll have my fingers wrapped around her neck,” the professor muttered under his breath, “if she even thinks of standing me up today.”

“She won’t.” Matthijs’ best man stood up and clapped a hand over his back. “So relax. You got this.” He started for the door. “I’ll leave you to pray.”

“Who says I’m going to pray?”

“You have five minutes,” Ryder said simply, “and then I’ll come back and get you.”

The door closed behind the other man, and Matthijs was left alone in the tiny room behind the altar.

Now what?

Matthijs stared at the crucifix hanging on the wall.

I’ve already thanked You.

What else is there to stay?

He waited and waited.

But he heard nothing, no voice coming from the sky, no white dove flying down.

Nothing.

This was stupid, the professor thought.

But just as he turned away, he felt it. A familiar sensation, an embrace that he had known and cherished, once upon a time.

Matthijs.

It was his blue-eyed beauty, the girl he once loved...and lost forever.

His eyes squeezed shut.

'I'm sorry.'

There's nothing to be sorry for. You didn't kill me.

'But if I hadn't hurt you...'

You did hurt me. But that's all. You hurt me, and I forgive you. I've forgiven you a long time ago, and I've been trying to tell you so many times. You just couldn't hear me.

And after that, he could've sworn he heard her sigh wistfully, could've sworn he felt her fingers touch a lock of his hair, the way she used to.

Are you happy?

He slowly nodded.

I'm glad. That's all I've ever wanted.

His throat tightened, and as he felt her fading away, he heard himself whisper in his mind.

'Chandra.'

What is it?

'If I had known you wanted flowers that badly, I'd have bought you a fucking farm from the start.'

Her laughter played in the air.

Be happy, Matthijs.

EPILOGUE

God Only Knows by Kina Grannis & Imaginary Future

“Papa?”

Matthijs opened his eyes at the feel of his daughter’s hands on his face.

“You’re crying.”

“Am I?” His voice was rough with emotion, the memories still too damn vivid.

“Uh huh.”

He cleared his throat. “Where...where was I again?”

“You were telling me about the day Grandma went to Heaven first.”

“Ah, yes. It was a very sad day. For all of us.”

“I remember,” his little girl said in a small voice.

So she did.

And so did he.


He remembered how, after making sure that the estate was in order, his father had approached him, saying gruffly, *I think it’s time for me to go, too.*

And Matthijs had snarled, *What the fuck do you think you’re saying?*

You know I love you with all of my heart, but you also know...you don’t need me. And you know...I need her.

Looking back at his daughter, he said slowly, “Because Grandpa was the loneliest of us all on that day, God sent the angels for him. When Grandpa fell asleep, the angels took him and flew him to Heaven. And when he woke up... she was there, the girl he loved.”

And so it was.

She was as beautiful as the first day  he saw her, the same dark-haired, doe-eyed saint that he had fallen in love with.

But as much as he loved her—

“You goddamn broke your promise to me again,” Matthijs gritted out.

She threw herself at him with a laugh, and he caught her, just like before.

Pulling away, she said in protest, “I didn’t leave you. I just came here first, that’s all—” A rueful look flickered in her eyes. “But you didn’t have to hurry. I would have waited—”

He stopped her with a kiss, saying gruffly, “If I had known you were leaving, I’d have hitched a ride with you.”

Tears burned in her eyes.

“You’re my life, Diana.” His voice was faintly exasperated. “We’ve been married for over eight decades, and you still don’t believe me?”

A giggle escaped her. “Eight decades.” She shook her head in wonder. “I can’t believe we’ve been married that long...” She wriggled to make him put her down, but as soon as her feet touched the clouds under her, she snuggled close to her husband, loving the familiar hardness of his chest against her chest.

“We had a good life, didn’t we?”

And because they were in Heaven, he no longer had to speak with his lips. Their minds and hearts could hear each other fine as well now, and a smile curved over her lips as she remembered what he remembered.

Their honeymoon in Teleios...

The day they adopted Matthijs II from a Greek orphanage...

The countless romantic dates, the infinite number of times they argued and made up, and oh, all those crazy, wild instances he had persuaded Diana to forget about her inhibitions and have sex with him in the most forbidden places—

Diana let out a yelp when he suddenly bent down to lick her ear. “*Matthijs—*”

“Where’s the best place to have sex here?”

Oh God.

Heaven really was so, so much better now that he was with her again.

“I’ll show you in a bit, but before that...” She smiled up at Matthijs. “I love you.”

“And I you, my darling.”

The End

DEAR READER,

I started writing this with absolutely no idea that things would end this way, and I would rediscover God along the way. Our world might not be perfect, but it's not reason enough for any of us to lose hope. If you think this book can help someone you know, please do share it with him or her.

And while I usually take this opportunity to ask if you could write a review, this time...how about we all post something nice on social media, something that's just meant to make people smile and feel good? Being polite and kind may not be the cool or fun thing to do these days, but it's still what's good and right, and we need more of that these days. Let's let others know we have each other's back. Sometimes, that's really all it takes to make our world a better place.

Until our next journey,

Marian

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