

1

As the Uber eased into the road, Joe spoke over the Cuban music, “Do you want to talk about it?”

The passing streetlights illuminated his face with a strobe effect. Mary thought, *Fucking, fuck fuck, he’s attractive*. They’d had an anonymous passionate night last year and, since reconnecting with him again an hour ago, the memory of their intimacy had become shockingly vivid, causing an electric flutter of anticipation that it would happen again. But they had left the party because of her fuming anger at her old boss. She didn’t want to seem like a bitter ex-employee—there was so much more to it than that—so she said, “Not really.”

Joe asked, “Were you two an item?”

“*Definitely* not.”

The left half of Joe’s mouth curled upward into a roguish smile. “That’s good. I’d hate to be the rebound guy.”

That expression reminded Mary how adventurous he’d been in bed—the complete opposite of her ex-husband. She was suddenly intensely curious about who he’d dated since their night together, but she didn’t want to let him know that. “What’s the worst date you’ve ever been on?”

He answered almost immediately. “Her name was Sally. She walked into the restaurant in full 19th century English attire—right out of a Jane Austen novel. She spoke in a terrible English accent, acted like an entitled noblewoman, and paraded a small white Yorkshire terrier like it was a handbag.”

Mary, laughing, said, “I’ve got you beat. I went out with a guy who dressed up as a ‘90s *Miami Vice* character—like Ross did on that *Friends*’ episode. He kept talking to someone on his left, but nobody was there. When I finally asked him who he was talking to, he confided—utterly serious—that it was his non-corporeal investment advisor from Kepler 16b.” She laughed so hard that tears came to her eyes.

As the Uber turned into a deserted warehouse district, Joe glanced out the window, his head cocking to the side in confusion.

“What is it?” Mary asked, wiping her eyes.

“We’re going the wrong way.” He leaned toward the driver. “Sir, C-Level is the opposite—”

Everything happened in seconds:

The Uber skidded to a halt, throwing Mary and Joe forward.

The back doors jerked open.

Black clad men in ski masks yanked them out of opposite sides of the car.

“Mary!” Joe said over the sounds of thrown punches landing hard.

Cuban music blared from the speakers as if the driver had turned the volume all the way up.

“Joe!” Mary replied, struggling against her attacker. Her pulse ratcheted into high gear. She started to yell for help—but a needle pierced her neck. Immediately, her muscles slackened like warm putty. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t speak.

The world tilted sideways, and darkness took her.

2

Two hours earlier.

Mary drove down a suburban San Deigo Street. Torrey Pines lined either side of the road, shading the middle-income houses from the afternoon sun. Frank Sinatra played on the stereo and Mary leaned toward her nine-year-old daughter in the passenger seat and sang, “Fly me to the moon...”

Ashley lamented, “Mom, that is so not cool.”

Mary sang louder.

Finally, Ashley cracked a self-conscious smile and, at the next chorus, both women bobbed their heads left and right as they belted out, “Fly me to the moon, let me play, among the stars. Let me see what Spring is like, on Jupiter and Mars—”

Mary slowed and parked in front of a tan two-story stucco house with a green door. The music snapped off and she gave Ashley a quick once-over: brown hair combed—check; yellow shirt on correctly instead of inside out—check; pink shoes tied—damn. *Nothing says “incompetent mother” like letting your child run around with shoelaces flopping about like ribbons.* “Tie your shoes, please.”

Ashley glanced down at her feet, which didn’t quite reach the floorboard. “But I like them like this.”

“You’ll trip.”

“I—”

“You *know* you will,” Mary countered.

Ashely huffed—her entire nine-year old body seeming to slump in resignation—and leaned down and tied the laces.

The green door in the house opened and Dan Reilly walked out with his arm around the waist of an attractive blonde who appeared twenty years his junior. “Fucking, fuck fuck,” Mary said, resignedly.

“Language, Mom.”

Mary leaned toward her daughter conspiratorially. “You’re absolutely right. And make sure you don’t tell your father I said it.”

Ashley’s head snapped toward the house, her face lighting up like the Fourth of July. She grabbed the *She-Ra* backpack in the footwell and bolted out of the car, excitement propelling her tiny legs up the sidewalk.

Mary appraised Dan’s new girlfriend. The woman was a fitness instructor with a porcelain smooth face and broomstick thin waist—the type that made other women run to the

Botox bar and eat nothing but grapefruits for a month. Mary cast a quick glance at her own reflection in the Tesla's rearview mirror. She was thin-ish and *reasonably* fit for a 'forever thirty-nine' technology executive who spent seventy hours a week at a desk—or used to. She was only fifteen pounds heavier than her college days, but forty-three was not twenty-eight, and she'd never been one for exercise classes. "Fucking, fuck fuck," she muttered again, climbing out of the car and walking toward the house.

Still, seeing Ashley race up the sidewalk—something unthinkable two years ago—reminded Mary that what she had now far outweighed what she'd lost in the divorce.

As Ashley jumped into her father's arms, Dan yelled, "Who's the best dad in the *world*!"

"You are!" Ashley squealed, hugging him tightly.

Mary grudgingly admitted to herself that Dan was a good father. Whenever he wasn't deployed, he showed up for all her events, balanced attentiveness with discipline, and was an emotional rock during Ashely's health scare.

Dan set Ashley down, and her face lit up again as she asked, "Will they have *Coral Island* on the ship?"

"No, honey," Dan replied. "But you'll get to see all the fun things Daddy does at work."

Ashley groaned, stomping toward the house. "Fucking, fuck fuck."

"Ashley!" Dan and Mary shouted in unison.

"Sorry!" Ashley said insincerely, now rushing through the green door.

Ms. Fitness booty laughed awkwardly. She stood a respectful distance away and appeared torn between attempting conversation and politely excusing herself. Her eyes flitted between Dan and Mary. "I'll go check on her."

Mary watched Ms. Fitness booty saunter inside and opened her mouth to make a snide comment.

“Don’t start,” Dan said.

Mary gave her ex-husband a quick hug. “I just can’t get over the cliché.”

He didn’t want to talk about his girlfriend with his ex-wife. Besides, he knew what was really on her mind. “How’s everything going?”

Mary met Dan’s eyes and realized—he already knew.

Two weeks ago, when her world had imploded, she had wanted to call him. To talk the way they had in the early years of their marriage. She knew Dan would have listened—he always had—but they were divorced now. And even after a year, she still didn’t know where the boundary was between being exes and being friends.

Now, seeing the concern etched into his face, she understood he still cared. The hurt and anger poured out of her. “The board didn’t even talk to me. They just listened to Hansen spout his lies and voted me out.” She shoved a hand through her hair, her voice trembling with rage. “Fucking, fuck fuck!”

Dan retorted. “It’s an AI company. You publicly shamed them with your white papers while he promised to make them a ton of money. What did you think they were going to do?”

“Pull their heads out of the sand and *help!*” she shot back. “Hansen had disbanded the ethics board, decreased the safety protocols to speed a new version rollout, and vowed to turn our nonprofit AI ethics company into a profit-driven tech firm!”

Dan shook his head, his voice steady. “You still don’t see the difference between what people say and what people do. You should’ve talked to me—”

“You were on your ship!” she shot back.

Dan stepped back, his jaw tightening. “That’s not fair. The Navy requires me to be away.”

His calm tone made her feel irrational, which infuriated her. The frustration boiled over.

“Maybe if you’d stayed onshore more often, we’d still be married!”

They faced off in silence, the comment hanging between them like a wound.

The curtains on the top left window shifted, and Mary saw Ashley staring down at them.

Dan followed her gaze. His voice softened as he called up to her, “Mommy and Daddy just have a difference of opinion, honey. We’ll drive to the airport soon.”

The curtains fell back into place.

“I’m sorry,” Mary said, sighing. “That was unfair.”

“It’s okay,” Dan said. He had always felt guilty about being away from his wife and daughter. Secretly, he thought she was partly right.

Mary admitted to herself that some of her anger wasn’t about Hansen or the board or even about their failed marriage; it was about Dan moving on. She wanted him to be happy—just not with someone younger, fitter, and infuriatingly attractive. She sighed, masking her frustration in the form of a teasing jab. “So, how’d you convince Bambi to go on a Tiger Cruise?”

Dan groaned. “Her name’s Petal, and you know it.”

“Oh, right,” Mary chuckled. “The part of a flower that attracts pollinators. That’s *much* better.”

“Mary...”

Mary’s eyes roamed over Dan. He was still as handsome—tall, athletic, with a great head of brown hair and deep, thoughtful eyes. She remembered the man she’d fallen in love with at Princeton, back when he was in Navy ROTC and she dreamed of pioneering the first conscious AI.

They'd been so focused on their careers, and then on Ashley, that they'd let their marriage slip to the bottom of their priorities. It was hard to overcome the resentment of always coming last. She held up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay." She couldn't stay mad at him. He was a good person—a good dad.

Dan understood Mary's point of view. He shook his head, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. "She's actually looking forward to it. She wants to see what I do."

"Did you warn her about the cramped quarters, no personal space, and zero quiet?"

"It's three days. She'll be fine."

Mary exaggerated an eye roll. "I never was."

Dan laughed. "What about you? You've got a free weekend. Anyone special?"

Mary didn't want to admit that most of her weekends without Ashley were filled with pasta primavera and reruns of *Grey's Anatomy*. "Abbey's throwing a cocktail party."

"That sounds fun. Maybe you'll meet someone."

Mary shrugged, remembering Abbey had mentioned something about a man she wanted her to meet. Still, she couldn't resist one last jab. Backing down the walkway with an impish grin, she said, "Maybe I'll meet a fitness instructor named Stamen."

Dan laughed, the rich sound following her to her car.

3

Mary's stomach fluttered uneasily. This was the first social event she'd attended since Hansen had fired her. She paused inside the massive modern-style mansion, breathed deeply to steel herself, and strolled out the sliding glass door into the crowded lawn party. The subtle hum of conversations formed an undercurrent to the crashing waves. Her eyes drifted past the crowd to the Sunset Cliffs, where the late afternoon sunlight illuminated foam capped waves as they crashed against the sandy brown fingers of rock.

The guests stood in small clusters—parents from Ashley's school, well-dressed hedge fund managers, and AI engineers in designer jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies. Each time she waved or gave a polite nod, her friends nervously looked away.

Her lips tightened. She had hosted playdates with their children, been to some of their homes, or worked with them for years. Now they treated her like she was a pariah. Friendship had taken a backseat to profit—all because of Hansen's lies. The betrayal and sadness stung.

A bright boisterous voice boomed in greeting. "Woo-*hoo*!"

Mary turned in time to see Abbey Sinclair barreling toward her around the kidney shaped pool, red curls bouncing with every step.

When Abbey was within earshot, she yelled, "There you *are*!" as if it was an announcement to the whole world that she was friends with Mary and, no matter what anyone said, she was good people.

Mary's frustration melted as she hugged her friend.

“I’ve been waiting for you!” Abbey said with a bright genuine smile. “There’s someone you *simply must* meet.” She grabbed Mary’s arm and started dragging her back around the pool.

“Is his name Stamen?” Mary asked.

Abbey glanced over her shoulder with a puzzled expression, which resolved into one of recognition. “Ohhh, I get it. Because Dan’s dating Petal—whose only redeeming quality is a body I’d kill for.” She rolled her eyes. “*Men.*”

“So, *is* he a Stamen?”

Abbey flashed a grin over her shoulder. “Not at all. He’s *fantastic.*”

“That’s what you said about the last one,” Mary countered, trailing behind her friend like a reluctant goat to slaughter. “And all he talked about was his Porsche, crypto currency, and his house in the Maldives.”

Abbey shook her head as if dismissing the past. “Which is exactly why you *have* to meet this one.”

As they navigated through the knots of people, Abbey scanned Mary’s outfit like a disapproving stylist.

“What is it?” Mary asked.

“Honestly, I’ll never understand why you don’t spice up your outfits.”

Mary glanced down at her baggy linen button-up blouse, the designer white jeans, and brown flats. They were nice clothes. Her eyes then roamed Abbey’s outfit: coral silk slacks tailored to perfection around her ample figure, a Chartreuse blouse that probably cost more than a California mortgage, and a pair of black leather espadrilles that would make Jimmy Choo jealous. She acknowledged that she was a tad underdressed.

They arrived at a long outdoor bar, set near the edge of the lawn. Six white-jacketed bartenders worked briskly serving a small crowd of patrons. Abbey scanned the people, then spotted her target. She lifted her arm like a New Yorker hailing a cab. “Jo-seph!” she called. “Oh, Jooooo-seph!”

At the far end of the bar, a man waved in acknowledgement.

She knew him. Mary’s heart beat faster and a familiar electric tingle buzzed in her stomach. She watched the man accept his mixed drink from the bartender, put a tip in the champagne bucket, and head toward them. When she’d last seen him, he’d worn a Navy suit that had made him look like a hedge fund manager. Today, he wore a light gray Fresco jacket, beige slacks, and a white dress shirt, open at the neck, which made him look like a businessman from Charleston or Savannah who worked a farm on the weekend.

Abbey started to make introductions, but Joe’s face broke into that roguish smile she remembered so well and said, “Hey, Mary. It’s been a while.”

Abbey exclaimed, “You two know each other?”

“Hi, Joe.” Mary replied. She couldn’t take her eyes off him, so she spoke to Abbey without looking at her. “We met at a conference in Los Angeles a year ago.”

“Thirteen months, to be precise.”

Mary felt a flash of heat realizing he remembered exactly how long it was since they’d been in bed together.

“Oh my god,” Abbey said. “You’re *that* Joe?”

Mary slammed the heel of her shoe on Abbey’s foot.

Joe coyly stared at his hand as he swirled the drink in his glass. “Since you left before I woke up, I didn’t think I had made much of an impression.”

Mary thought of the hard, rough night they'd spent together—the complete opposite of Dan's soft compassionate lovemaking—and she started to sweat. She didn't know how to reply except to tell the truth. "I'd just finalized my divorce and...I didn't want it to be awkward—for either of us."

"I appreciate that, but I had no way to contact you. You never told me your last name or even what you did."

Abbey chimed in, "It's Cantor. Dr. Mary Cantor."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "GP?"

"Not that kind of doctor," Mary replied. "My PhD is in machine learning."

Joe let out a low whistle of appreciation.

Mary was used to people being disappointed that she wasn't an MD. Joe admiring her accomplishments, especially after others had recently vilified her, made her smile. "And you're a private equity investor?"

"Nope. A Consumer Protection Lawyer."

"You protect people from corporations?"

"That's part of it, but I mainly stick a thumb in the eye of the big guys."

He steeped closer to her and she felt the same intense electric chemistry that had taken them from the hotel bar to his room in less than five minutes. Her cheeks reddened.

Abbey's eyes bounced from Joe to Mary and said, "I think my work here is done. You two have fun!" Before she left, she embraced Mary and whispered, "I want *every. Single. Detail.*"

Their conversation soon became light and effortless. They swapped stories about moving to California for work, marrying good people, and how life and careers had ended their marriages. Mary spoke of her daughter, while Joe admitted he had always wanted children, but didn't have any.

They laughed often—the carefree laugh you had with someone you truly connected with. As white-jacketed waiters lit Tiki torches, sending the smell of kerosene and citrus into the air, Joe asked, “Why’d you get into AI?”

It was a question she’d been asked before and had thought about a lot. “When I was little girl I read *I, Robot* by Issac Asimov, and then my dad rented *The Terminator*. Experiencing those two stories, so close together, really effected me. I wanted to make sure AI helped us, rather than hurt us. That’s been my focus since college. What about you? What made you become a consumer protection lawyer rather than a corporate one?”

His roguish smile returned and Mary’s stomach felt like warm honey.

“The short version is I hate people telling me what to do.”

Mary raised her eyebrows, wondering if that’s why his marriage broke up.

Joe seemed to read her thoughts, because he said, “No, not with relationships or friends, or anything like that, but people with power over me.” He appeared pensive. “I think it started with my dad. We didn’t really get along. I always felt...trapped, I guess. So, I rebelled—a lot.”

“Bit of a wild child?”

A cloud passed over his face and she could tell he was remembering some past trauma. She thought of her own problems with her father and the terrible way he ended his life. Instinctively, she rested her hand over his. “I understand about problematic fathers.”

He gave a weak smile and nodded. “Anyway, I thought the army would be different—”

“Really,” Mary interrupted. “The army? My ex-husband is in the Navy. I can’t think of a single occupation that controls more aspects of your life.”

Joe chuckled. “I know, I know. But I had no money and nowhere else to go. I thought, since it was my *choice*, that it’d be fine with people telling me what to do. And, for the most part, I was. They had rules. I understood the rules and, generally, agreed with them. But I saw so many servicemen and women get beat down by the massive bureaucracy of the military, and felt powerless to help. As a grunt, I couldn’t do anything, so I went to college on the GI bill, then law school with GRADSO—”

“GRADSO?” Mary interrupted.

“Graduate School Option. I finished my time as a JAG lawyer, did what I could, and then thought I could help more people in private practice.”

A murmur swept through the crowd near the lawn entrance. Mary glanced in that direction and, when the crowd parted, she saw Chad Hansen. He moved through the guests with the smoothness of a politician, shaking hands with a plastic smile. She had tried to warn people about him through her papers, but no one had listened. They all bought into his manufactured reputation that he, and only he, could teach them how to make AI print money.

She threw back the rest of her Moscow Mule in a single gulp. Across the pool, Abbey caught her eye, mouthing an apology—*I didn’t know*. Mary nodded, understanding. Abbey would never have invited the wormy little man; most likely it was her husband, always eager to ingratiate himself with the rising stars.

Joe asked, “You want to get out of here?”

Mary thought Joe’s voice was a lifeline. “Very much.”

Joe pulled out his phone and swiped his thumb across the Uber app. “Drinks at C-Level?”

Memories of their Cold Blooded Martini flashed in Mary's mind. It sounded perfect.

"Several."

When the couple stepped outside, the Uber was idling at the curb, its headlights cutting bright cones of light into the night.

4

The Zhangzhou Air Base was an anthill of activity: Fighter and cargo planes took off from the runways with thunderous noise, tools clanged as mechanics repaired drones and aircraft, and squads of soldiers chanted battle songs as they ran along the service road. Every building was newly constructed or recently renovated and had knots of people running in and out—except one.

The dark green hangar was an island of calm on the base. It appeared deserted except for one side door left ajar, allowing a breeze to circulate. Inside, nine men stood at attention—members of the 73rd Special Forces Brigade, the Flying Dragons. Their equipment rested at their feet. Their eyes focused on a podium fifteen feet away, where General Huang Rongzhen spoke in clipped, precise language devoid of emotion. "This technology is a matter of national security.