

The Bet - Epilogue

Good Evening!

Here it is, the epilogue of The Bet!

Just a warning to set your expectations before you read: this short capstone to the series isn't sexy. It's intended to be a short "where are they now" bringing a little closure to the characters. So, in other words, it is tonally quite different from the raunchy series that preceded it!

I hope you all enjoy it anyway! I will be getting started now with Cookie chapter 2, and in the near future I will have a standalone short story ready as well! I also plan to have a retrospective post and AMA about the Bet posted here before the end of the weekend. Thank you for supporting the series!

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"All packed and good to go?" asked Leah pleasantly as she sliced up the apples for Leon's snack.

Dan smiled at her over his cup of coffee. "Just as packed as I was the last time you asked, sweetheart," he said mildly.

Leah raised an eyebrow at him, then snorted, laughing at herself. "Ok, ok, you got me," she said, still chuckling as she brought the plate of apples out to Leon, who was sitting next to Dan, scribbling a red crayon onto a piece of paper with an intense scowl of concentration on his chubby little face. "Maybe I'm a little nervous for you. I mean, how long has it been since you even spoke to her?"

Dan sighed, closing his eyes as another wave of that old nostalgic blend of anxiety and reluctant arousal washed over him. The same feeling he got any time he remembered his ex-wife and how he lost her. "Five years," he said stonily. "We never spoke again after the cruise. Everything went through Zane."

Leah laid a soft palm on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes to see his wife giving him a concerned stare. "You don't have to do this, Dan," she said firmly. "If it's just going to hurt you, maybe it's not worth it." She seemed to realize in that moment that she might be accidentally domming him, and winced, looking a little guilty. "I mean, you can if you want to, of course. You know that I'll support you no matter what your decision is." Leah was very much the leader in their relationship, and Dan was totally at peace with that, but sometimes it did mean that she had a hard time letting him make important decisions on his own.

Dan took her hand in his and kissed it. "I know, Leah. It will be hard, but I have to go. We didn't..." He gulped hard, swallowing a sudden lump in his throat. "I mean, there just wasn't any closure when we split up. I don't think things went very well for her either after the cruise. I think we could both use this."

"You don't owe that B-I-T-C-H anything," said Leah with tight anger in her voice, masked so Leon hopefully wouldn't clue into it. "Just thinking about how she treated you makes my blood boil."

“If I recall correctly, there was someone else there while all of the worst stuff was happening, smiling and holding a camera,” said Dan into his cup before taking another sip. That earned him a raised eyebrow, then an apologetic kiss on the cheek from Leah.

His and Leah’s journey to finding each other had been a strange one, but Dan genuinely thought that she had saved his life. After the devastating events of the cruise, it felt like he had nothing left to live for. He hadn’t just lost his relationship; it had been burned to the ground in the most humiliating way possible. Worse, once his social circle caught wind of the videos that Zane had posted to his website, Dan lost most of his friends and his job as well. The only bright spot during that time had been Leah, who refused to give up on him, and obviously didn’t see embarrassing videos on the internet as a dealbreaker for their friendship.

She was going through harsh consequences of her own at the time. It turned out that her ex-husband Bill had been all for the idea of another man impregnating his wife when it seemed like extreme dirty talk, but when it actually happened, he wanted out. Leon was the product of the unprotected sex Leah and Zane had indulged in during the cruise.

Leah, seeming to remember the apples in her hand, set them down on the table next to the five-year-old boy, kissing him on top of his fluffy blonde curls and saying, “Snack time, little monster.” Leon looked up from his coloring and stuck out his tongue at the apples, firmly saying “No!” before turning back to his work.

He was already turning into a little tyrant. But Dan wasn’t about to let him get away with being rude like that, even if he was just five. “Hey! We don’t talk to Mom like that. Be nice,” said Dan sternly.

Leon looked up and stuck his lip out, but then nodded. “Ok. Sorry, Dad. Sorry, Mom.”

“That’s ok,” said Dan, reaching out to ruffle his hair. “Try an apple, though, buddy. They’re good.”

After being summarily divorced by Bill, Leah had found herself alone and pregnant, with Zane taking very little interest in her circumstances now that he had found a shiny new toy to play with. Leah and Dan had found comfort in each other’s company. Two broken people who needed support. Within six months, they had fallen into bed with each other, and they had a quiet courthouse wedding just after Leon was born.

It wasn’t a perfect relationship. They both had scars, and their sex life would look fucked up to anyone looking in from the outside. But they didn’t need perfect. They both needed someone who loved and supported them, and they had found what they needed in each other.

For a moment, Leah, Dan, and Leon sat happily together, two parents quizzing the little boy on what he was drawing and what he had done in preschool the previous week. When they first got married, Dan had ambivalent feelings toward Leon. He was a product of the same type of corruption and seduction that had ended Dan’s marriage, and Dan still found it hard to understand why Leah had insisted on keeping him. But watching Leon grow up had changed Dan’s opinion completely. Leon wasn’t Zane. He was innocent of the sordid circumstances of his birth. Maybe that was always how Leah had felt. Or maybe bringing him to term was one last act of defiant allegiance to the man who had once conquered her. Dan had accepted that he would probably never know.

In any case, Dan was the only father Leon had ever known. Zane sent child support checks promptly, but had shown no interest whatsoever in ever meeting his child. Dan had found purpose in stepping up and being a father.

When the conversation lulled, Leah turned to Dan again, and he knew her well enough to know that she was worried about something. "So," she said cautiously, with a hint of a furrow between her lovely eyes, "Are you bringing C-O-N-D-O-M-S with you?"

Dan nearly choked on his coffee. After coughing hard enough that Leon got concerned, and a few back pats from Leah, he finally managed to say, "What? No, Leah. It's really not that kind of meetup. You know how things were the last time we spoke. She would probably laugh me out of the room if I even suggested... that."

Leah gave him a lopsided, sad smile. "I think you would be surprised, honey. That man has a way of making you see things his way... for a while at least. But when he leaves you behind, a lot of his way of thinking goes with him." She laid her hand on his, her eyes serious. "She's not going to see you as some sort of pathetic..." she glanced over to Leon again, who was coloring obliviously, "C-U-C-K anymore, Dan. She never really did. She was just caught up by his reality-bending charisma. I just wanted to let you know that it would be ok." Leah's worried, possessive expression was totally at odds with her words. "If you two need to... reconnect in order to get closure, I'm ok with that. God knows that it would be hypocritical of me to say you can't."

Because of both of their past experiences, Leah and Dan's sexual relationship had revolved around cuckolding almost from the very start. It was partially a way to deal with trauma, and partially a way to relive the dangerous, life-ruining thrills that Zane had masterminded. But they were both careful now, too. They had rules and boundaries that they never broke. They rotated bulls frequently, Dan preapproved each and every one, and Leah was religious in her use of supportive, loving aftercare.

But Dan had never had sex with anyone other than Leah since they got married, and, even if Leah was grudgingly giving her permission, he had no plans to start now. "It's really not like that, honey," he said soothingly, squeezing her hand. "Even if she is interested, I'm not. Not anymore."

"Do or don't, Dan," said Leah, her lip wobbling just a little, her inner turmoil peeking through her usually unruffled and snarky exterior. "Just as long as you come back to me."

Dan pulled her into a hug, surprised at her sudden burst of sincere emotion. It wasn't really like her. Usually, Leah was teasing and snarky, and Dan was the one who had to coax her into expressions of her sincere emotions. If she was on the edge of tears like this, it must be something that was really worrying her. "Don't even think that, Leah," he said sincerely, whispering into her ear. "That's not why I'm going. Even if all of that stuff with Zane had never happened, Claire and I were never good for each other."

He pulled back and wiped one tear away from Leah's eyes, who looked almost angry at herself for losing her composure. "But you and I are perfect together. I would choose you over her every time. No question."

"Are you guys having a fight?" asked a small, suspicious voice from the top of the stairs.

It was Bella, coming down the stairs still in her pajamas. And, with a child who was actually able to spell in the room, that marked the end of Leah and Dan's opportunity for a serious conversation. Bella was already a little annoyed that Dan was leaving for a few days during the

week she spent with her mom instead of when she was with Bill, so giving her any inkling of the adult drama behind her step-dad's trip would not have helped matters.

After getting the kids fed and dressed, it was already time to drive Dan to the airport. Leah thought it was a little unreasonable that Dan had to fly to Vegas to meet with his ex-wife, but Dan was pretty sure that otherwise the meeting would never happen.

It would feel good to finally get some closure.

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Claire grinned from ear to ear under the hot stage lights, shimmying a little to give her big natural tits an enticing wobble. Her muscles complained, burning from the pole routine she had just wrapped up, but she was used to it by now. Besides, she was almost done. All that was left was the big finale.

She swung her hips from side to side, swaying dramatically on her tall, slutty platform heels before turning entirely, giving the cheering crowd a good look at her plump, tempting butt, covered only by the thin strip of her g-string. She hooked her thumbs through the waistband of the tiny panties, then eased them down slowly and teasingly letting them fall to her ankles.

She kicked them toward the horny men crowding the stage to her left, then bent forward again, spreading her legs this time so that all of the horny patrons of the club could get a good look at her pussy.

When she had first started at the club, her pussy had been wet every night at this point. The roaring approval and horny attention of the crowd had still been enough to make her blood sing with lust, reacting to the fetishes for humiliation and exhibitionism that Zane had fostered in her long ago. But anything can get boring with time. After doing her routine night after night, stripping had become just another job. And punching the clock wasn't enough to make her horny anymore.

But, of course, the crowd went nuts as usual. Claire had years of experience drawing male attention at this point. Zane had wanted a slut, and he had trained her well. Claire waited for the men to get their fill, bills raining down on the stage.

But not as many dollars as last month. And less still than the month before. The men still cheered. They still packed the seats. But the cheers seemed less loud. The gaps in the crowd yawned wider and wider. Claire didn't let the annoyance show on her face. She gave the boys a naughty wink and a teasing smirk as she pranced off the stage in her platform heels and the announcer boomed out, "Give Claire Bear a big hand, everybody! And come back to see her! She's here eeeeevery night!"

The smile dropped off her face as she got backstage, replaced by a sour expression instead. It was practically her natural state of being these days. Who could blame her with the direction her life had gone? She stepped into the dressing room, which was mercifully empty right now since most of the girls were working the floor, and looked at her face in the mirror.

She still had it. Obviously. One thing that had never slipped was her skincare routine, and she was using makeup to pick up the slack. But she was moving past mid-thirties into late thirties now, and there was nothing she could do to stop the march of years. She grimaced at the faint crow's feet that were forming at the edges of her eyes. To anyone who hadn't known her five years ago, her tits would probably still look stunning and perfect... but she could detect the

tinest bit of sag that she was certain would only worsen with time. She shrugged on a robe so she wouldn't be reminded, but her mind gnawed at the issue all the same.

Claire Bear was already in the "milf" category now. And once she stopped looking attractively mature and just looked old, then stripping would no longer work. The only old-looking strippers were novelty acts. She wasn't imminently on her way out. She still had a couple of years. But she didn't imagine all of those years would be spent as a headliner. She couldn't stay top-billed at the club forever. There were dozens of younger women who were eager to take her place.

"Have you given any thought to my offer?" came a gravelly voice from the doorway, making Claire jump.

"Jesus Ray, don't fucking do that to me," she growled, reaching for some foundation to touch up the edges of her eyes. "You're going to give me a fucking heart attack."

The slimy little balding weasel only chuckled in response, sidling closer and latching onto her in an unasked-for shoulder rub. God, Claire hated him. Once upon a time, any man that treated her this way would get cut down to size in an instant by a sharp look and sharper words. But Claire wasn't in a position to do that anymore. As shitty as it was, she worked for Ray, and she couldn't afford to get on his bad side.

"So?" said Ray, working his thumbs into her shoulders in a way that hurt much more than it helped. "Don't deflect. What do you think? You ready to make the next move?"

Claire was hoping to put this conversation off. She didn't even want to think about it, honestly. Ray had found her a spot in a... well, it was what he called a "premium escort service". But everybody knew what he was talking about. Maybe she should be grateful. Not every stripper aging out of the business had that available as a next career step. It was only because she had been a pornstar that the offer was even on the table. There was a hope that former fans could make up a decent clientele.

"I'm still thinking about it," Claire said sourly, turning her head to apply the makeup. The worst part was that it was the truth. If she was going to be forced into it eventually, maybe it was better to get her foot in the door while the escort service was still eager to snap her up.

Ray snorted in exasperation, and his greasy hands finally dropped off her shoulders. "Well, don't think too long, sweet cheeks," he said gruffly as he ambled toward the door. "You've done well here... but I won't be able to give you prime spots forever."

Claire silently flipped off the door when he had closed it behind him. It was the only measure of defiance she could afford nowadays. A wave of frustration and bitterness swept over her again as she contemplated how her life had gone. In another world, she could imagine herself now, her interior design business successful, hobnobbing with the rich and famous. It was an image she thought about too often nowadays. It felt all too realistic. It had been the path she was headed down. Before him.

Claire glanced sharply at her purse, thinking about the phone inside. The website on that phone that she practically kept bookmarked. It was bad for her mental health to subscribe to Freaks in the Sheets. It would be much better for her to just forget about Zane and try to move on with her life. But she had given up even trying years ago. How could she forget the man who had singlehandedly uprooted her entire life and sent her hurtling toward rock bottom?

Like always, she failed her battle of wills. She had a free minute. It wouldn't hurt anything to quickly check the website for updates. Well... it wouldn't hurt anything besides herself.

It only took a few seconds to take out her phone and open the website. Zane had just posted the new update he had been teasing for the past week, and, with a hollow, bitter feeling filling her chest, Claire lost herself in it.

Zane had been seducing a personal trainer lately. Her name was Kiki, and she was even younger than Claire had been when Zane seduced her. Lithe and tanned and muscular, with dyed blonde hair perpetually in a ponytail. And, of course, she was married. Zane had a type, after all.

Claire clicked through to the video and felt herself fill with buzzing, frustrated heat as she watched Zane's thick cock ruin yet another woman. Just like he had ruined her. Zane seemed to be aging a lot faster than Claire was. He wasn't all that much older, but he already looked middle-aged, and his gut had only grown. But it worked for him. Zane's ugliness had always been part of the draw. It was hot to his viewers that an ugly creep like him was able to dominate women out of his league.

Sometimes Claire fantasized about contacting the women Zane was pursuing and ruining his seductions. But if she was being honest with herself, she knew it probably wouldn't do any good. When Zane was focused completely on you, you felt like the most important slut in the world.

Kiki wouldn't learn the hard truth until it was too late. Just like Claire. For a bright shining period of about six months after the cruise, Claire believed she was special. That she was the one who would finally tame Zane and be his number one forever. And by all accounts, she made it longer than most.

But Zane never stayed satisfied for long. It wasn't in his nature. Zane was built for the chase, and he always got restless for fresh meat in the end. Even though Claire had refused to believe the warnings, they came true for her just like they had for every woman before her. After those first six months, she stopped being Zane's woman and just became one of his employees.

They still had sex, but more and more it became a work thing, only done in front of the cameras. Zane was friendly as always, but she stopped receiving late-night texts and invitations to his house. For a while, Claire had been in denial, but after a few months, cold, disappointing reality set in. She had given up her whole life for Zane. And in return, she got a career as a pornstar, and not much else.

The porn star career was hardly impressive either. Before long, she was getting fewer and fewer scenes with Freaks in the Sheets. Its content model focused on seduction, and while the users were happy to see a collection of professional videos from the girls after they had been conquered, it was normal for videos to begin having diminishing returns before long. Summer had explained apologetically. It just didn't make good business sense to slate another scene from Claire when a video from a new girl who had been seduced a month ago would get twice the views.

And so Claire was faced with a choice. She could quit and try to find her way in the regular workforce, knowing that the door to success in high-class interior designing was probably closed forever. Or she could switch studios and try to pursue success as a real porn star, rather than a conquered mare in Zane's stable. The first choice might have been better long term, but it

would have required Claire to admit how badly she had fucked up by giving in to Zane, and at that point, she still wasn't able to swallow her pride to that extent.

So she had jumped ship from Freaks in the Sheets, looking for a better offer. For about a year, she had a semi-successful run as a "milf" pornstar at a big studio. The experience had wrung her out. Fucking strangers felt a lot different from fucking Zane, and the sleazy exploitation had corrupted her even worse than Zane's torrid, whirlwind seduction. When Claire found an exit route, she took it, even if that route was stripping in Vegas.

Claire tossed the phone back in her purse with disgust. Mostly at herself, but for Zane as well. She had been right about him at the beginning. It was just that he had a talent for making women ignore their instincts. Claire got up and instinctively started toward the costume rack, ready to get dressed up and walk the floor, offering private dances. But she stopped herself and shook her head ruefully.

She was heading out early today. She was going to meet up with Dan. She still wasn't sure how she felt about that. She knew she had been horrible to her ex-husband, and, with the benefit of hindsight, she recognized that her anger and blame toward him had been misdirected anger at her own failure. But the years of bitter disappointment since then had taken away any reserves of empathy she once had. Even her fantasies of a life that had gone differently didn't include Dan. Zane's influence had been poisonous and corrosive, but she still didn't believe that she and Dan had been right for each other. She wasn't sure how much longer their marriage would have lasted, but the foundation had been shaky enough that something would have toppled it in the end.

Claire had considered just refusing the meeting. She wasn't sure what either of them would get out of it. Claire hadn't followed her ex-husband's activities closely, but she was under the impression he was doing a lot better than her. She could do without a gloating session from a man she had utterly crushed for fun. But she didn't think that was why he wanted to meet. She had been married to Dan for years; she knew him pretty well. He wasn't the kind of man to do that. In the end, she decided that it couldn't do much harm to accept the meet-up. Maybe it would soothe some of her bitter anger to talk a little and close the door on a relationship that had ended badly.

But that didn't make her enthusiastic. Nothing did these days. She wore her habitual scowl as she pushed her way out of the side entrance into the dull heat of the desert evening, on her way to an awkward meeting with a man she had wronged.

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The bar wasn't... ideal as far as Dan was concerned, but it was probably better than the crowded, touristy places near his hotel. Still, the rough-looking clientele gave him unimpressed glares as he nursed a beer, waiting for Claire to arrive.

Somehow, when the door swung open, he knew it would be her. He looked up, and his eyes met with the woman who had crushed his heart. The woman he had only seen getting fucked on computer screens since he had gotten off that life-destroying cruise. Some echo of an old emotion rose in his chest as their eyes locked. A ghost of pain and love and humiliation. Maybe those feelings would never fully disappear, but they were old, well-worn, and faded now. Even just five years later, Dan's wounds had already scarred over.

Claire was still beautiful, but the years since they last saw each other had stolen the confidence and life from her eyes, replacing them with raw anger and bitterness. She was wearing a tight top and leggings that were sexy enough to turn heads, but nothing inappropriate. Still, it was the kind of outfit that Claire wouldn't have been caught dead wearing while they were married. But a lot of things had changed since then.

Claire's lips quirked up in a thin smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, then began to approach.

Claire gave the thin, pale man she had once loved a look up and down as she crossed the sticky floor of her regular watering hole. He looked out of place in his polo and plaid shorts, but that actually spoke well of him in this case. Despite the fact that Claire had viciously emasculated him, Dan had somehow held on to some sort of dignity and pride that set him apart from the losers who frequented this shitty bar.

Finally, she stood in front of Dan, conflicting emotions roiling inside her. She felt guilty for the way she had treated him the last time they met. But on the other hand, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of disgust when she studied his face. Once or twice, she and Zane had laughed during that six-month honeymoon period over the fact that Dan maintained his beta edition subscription and watched her videos. There was something weak in Dan that Zane had uncovered, just like there was something submissive in her. It was hard to respect him now that she knew how far he could fall and still get off on it.

She hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to greet him. Was a hug too intimate at this point? A handshake couldn't possibly be right. Finally, Dan let her off the hook, waving awkwardly and gesturing toward the stool next to him. "Hi Claire. It's been a while. Glad that we could do this."

Claire smiled weakly and sank into the stool he had indicated. "Right... yeah, this will be fun," she lied. This was going to be harder than she thought. Old ways of thinking about and interacting with Dan kept rising up into her mind. She had almost called him "honey" a second ago! The feelings she once had for him were dead, but habits died harder. They had never had a cooling off period where they wound down their marriage, so she didn't know how to treat him as just another person. "Two beers!" she called down the bar. She pointed at Dan and added, "He's buying."

When they arrived, she took a long swig from one, keeping the other at her elbow. "So how was the flight?" she asked, searching for something she could actually talk about with that man she had once known that wouldn't be painful for both of them.

Dan gave her a strained smile. "Boring. Just listened to some podcasts and played sudoku."

Claire couldn't help but laugh. "Oh God," she said with a genuine smile, "I hope you've gotten better at them! Remember how you used to leave those half-solved books all over the fucking house?"

"Well," said Dan with an answering chuckle, "Let's just say that they might find a half-finished surprise waiting for them when they clean the plane. Anyway, I hope it wasn't too much hassle getting out of work for this. I would have waited until you got off shift, but I thought that might be pretty late."

"It's fine," said Claire flatly, the smile disappearing from her face. She didn't want to talk about her work with Dan. It was one thing to have a light conversation, but quite another to humiliate herself in front of the man she had looked down on and utterly crushed. If this devolved into an

“I told you so” type of conversation, she would happily leave. Instead, she changed the topic to something safer. “But how have you been doing? Ended up getting together with Leah, huh? I saw pictures on social media.” She could hide a little twist of distaste in her voice as she mentioned the name of that fat-assed skank. In some ways, based on the social media snooping she had done, Dan had ended up in just a pitiful situation as herself. In another female-dominated relationship and raising Zane’s child as his own.

But, to Claire’s surprise, she didn’t get any avoidance or shame from Dan. Instead, a beaming smile crossed his face. “Yeah! Leah’s been great. She helped me through... well, a hard time. I’m sure you can imagine. As far as how things are going, it was tough for a while. I even played stay-at-home Dad for a year or two. But now that Leah’s bakery is up and running, she needs someone to help out with the books and supply ordering and that kind of thing, so I keep busy enough.”

Claire couldn’t help but feel a surge of jealousy, which she brutally shoved down as soon as she recognized it. She had nothing to be jealous of. Dan had ended up with Zane’s sloppy seconds in a dull domestic grind of kids and small-business ownership. In fact, if this was Dan’s small-minded view of happiness, perhaps she had dodged a bullet. She could be looking at a version of what her relationship with Dan might have looked like at this point.

No thanks. She thought bitterly. Why was she suddenly swallowing down a lump in her throat?

Dan must have noticed the upset look on her face, because his smile faded to an awkward, apologetic frown. “Look, Claire, I didn’t just come here to catch up, necessarily. I wanted some closure on how things ended between us, I guess.”

Claire stiffened a little. Here it came. She should have known. The whole reason that Dan had called this meeting was to rub her failure and disgrace in her face. She didn’t blame him for trying. Claire certainly hadn’t hesitated to kick Dan while he was down. It would probably be cathartic for him. Too bad that Claire didn’t feel like hanging around just to get shit on by a cuck. She lifted the beer to drain it in one chug, clutching her purse tighter to her and preparing to make a swift exit.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I’ve been holding on to a lot of guilt since we last saw each other. So I was really glad to get this chance to apologize to you face-to-face,” said Dan sincerely.

Claire lowered the beer, squinting at Dan suspiciously. But this was no joke. He was actually apologising. To her. Claire couldn’t help it. The laughter bubbled up from inside her, shaking her with mirth. She howled, her face reddening, slapping the bar top and making disgruntled patrons half-turn to give her the stink eye.

Dan just stared at her with a frown as Claire worked her way through the first good laugh she had had for a while.

Finally, she managed to fight back the gasps of laughter. “What the fuck, Dan!” she giggled. “I mean, I know that you’re a fucking doormat, but this is silly. Are you really so much of a pussy that you can’t recognise when someone fucked you over?”

Dan shrugged uncomfortably. “Well, yeah, I mean, I know that you treated me badly. Trust me, I’m well aware of that.” He laughed bitterly, shaking his head. “But that doesn’t make me innocent. I had submissive tendencies and a cuckolding fetish that I just couldn’t admit to

myself. If I had been honest with myself and you, I could have saved us both from... a lot of trouble.”

The humor drained out of the situation for Claire. Dan was putting a polite and kind face on it, but he was still looking down on her. She sneered at the weak man in front of her, saying, “Get over yourself! Dan, I crushed you. I totally emasculated and humiliated you, a guy who, yeah, was probably not the right partner for me, but had never been anything but nice. I didn’t do that because of some accident or miscommunication.” She leaned forward, getting right into Dan’s face so there could be no confusion. “I did it knowing exactly what I was doing. Because it was fun. Because it turned me on.”

But something had changed in Dan. He wasn’t as weak as he once had been. He didn’t flinch back as she got in his face, instead staring calmly into her eyes and saying softly, “Because he told you to.”

Fuck! Why are my fucking eyes watering? I don’t need this little cuck’s pity! I did what I did, and if he doesn’t like it, who gives a fuck! I’m not sorry! I’m...

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Dan reached out and hugged her. Claire was stiff and angry in his arms for a second, and then it was like a dam burst inside of her. She slung her arms around Dan’s neck and pulled him close. Tears that she thought had dried up forever gushed out of her eyes. “I...” she gulped. “I’m sorry, Dan. I really fucked it up back then. It was my fault.”

It hurt to admit that, no matter how obvious it was. Claire had been running from the fact that she had ruined her own life almost from the moment it happened. She had blamed Dan at the time because she was too proud to blame herself, and took it out on him in the cruelest way imaginable.

“No,” said Dan, patting her on the back, “like I said, I fucked up too. For what it’s worth, I forgive you.”

Claire pulled away, glaring at him again through tears. “Don’t fucking say that, Dan,” she warned. “You don’t mean it. What I did on that cruise doesn’t deserve forgiveness. You should fucking hate me forever.”

Dan sighed heavily. “Maybe I should,” he admitted. “Maybe you do deserve it. I admit that I’ve woken up in a cold sweat on a lot of nights since then, remembering what you did to me. For a few years, I cheered on every humiliation you went through, I’m sorry to say.”

Claire laughed bitterly and grabbed the second bottle of beer, taking a long drink. “Well, I gave you plenty to cheer for.”

“But hating people is exhausting. I’m better now. I have a life I’m happy with, even if it isn’t perfect. Why waste my time with anger and hatred when it won’t change the past and is just going to make me feel bad?”

The idea was stunning to Claire, and so foreign to her way of thinking that she nearly recoiled. She knew that, personally, she would carry her bitterness and hatred against Zane in her heart for the rest of her life, no matter how painful it was. Again, she felt a wave of jealousy for Dan. Maybe he was weak, but that had let him bend and bruise rather than shatter like she had.

“Anyway,” added Dan with a lopsided smile, “The one who deserves all the blame is Zane. Fuck that guy, am I right?”

Claire scrubbed her tears away with the back of her hand, annoyed at her outburst of emotion. She signalled the bartender for another beer, this time actually for Dan. "I'll drink to that! Have you... Had a similar meeting with him?"

Dan snorted, accepting the cold beer and taking a sip. "Well, I'll be honest, I tried. It would have been a lot easier than this, considering we live in the same city. I was surprised he even texted me back, so at least I got that far. But it was always false politeness about how he would love to meet, and we should set it up, but that he was just so busy lately that he wasn't sure when might work for him. I haven't managed to pin him down yet."

"Don't bother," said Claire in disgust. "I learned the hard way that that's how he deals with people he has no interest in anymore. He's such an oily little weasel that he can't even give the courtesy of a straightforward 'fuck off'. He's moved on from the situation even more than you have."

Dan nodded glumly. "Yeah... I mean, for us it was our whole life falling down around our ears, but I'm sure that ruining a marriage happens to him every other week."

"A monster," agreed Claire darkly. She just wished she had stuck to that assessment consistently instead of succumbing to his charms.

"I don't know," said Dan, staring at his beer thoughtfully, rotating it in his grip. "Sometimes I think he's been living in his own personal hell since before we met him. He has a hungry hollowness inside him that he won't ever be able to fill."

Claire shook her head. "Comforting. But you're overthinking it. He's just a perverted asshole who doesn't care who he hurts," she said dismissively. "Let's talk about something else."

The conversation shifted to happier things, although still tinged with the pain of what had happened between them. They laughed and reminisced about the good times in their relationship. About their wedding. The first time they met. The disaster that had been the one and only time Claire had tried to bring Dan along on a business dinner.

As they went on, Claire's eyes pricked with tears for the second time that evening. She knew in her heart that this really was closing the book between them. Claire and Dan had never been right for each other, but their relationship had been real. There had been love there, at least for a while. And, even though that love had ended years ago, it was like they were hosting a funeral to finally mourn its passing. In theory, nothing would stop Claire from picking up the phone and calling him again next week to have another similar conversation. But she wouldn't. They both knew it. Even if Dan was a big enough person to forgive her, too much had happened between them to ever be friends.

Finally, the words wound down between them. The night was drawing to a close. Spontaneously, Claire reached out and grabbed Dan's hand. "Hey..." she said hesitantly, "are you headed back to your hotel, or would you like to get another drink at my place?" She wasn't sure why she made the invitation. She and Dan had never been very sexually compatible, and the years hadn't made her more attracted to him. She just had a sudden impulse to make up for the cruel way she had deliberately wounded him before. To show him that she hadn't really meant what she said about his sexual worthlessness.

Dan gave her a tight smile and shook his head. “No... I appreciate the offer, but I work for a bakery! I’m always up early, so this is already way past my bedtime.” His tone was light, but it was obvious that her offer had been understood and firmly rejected.

He had found healing on his own and didn’t need the weak version that she was offering.

That seemed to have wrapped up the evening, and, by extension, their relationship. Dan stood and opened his arms in invitation for a hug. Claire accepted. It was a better goodbye than she deserved, but at this point in her life, she would take any wins she could get.

Afterward, Dan hesitated, and for a second, Claire wondered if he would take her up on her invitation after all. But then he got out his wallet. Claire bristled. If Dan thought it was a good idea to act like she was a charity case and give her money, she would be happy to show him the error of his ways, no matter how cordial the rest of the meeting had been.

But instead of taking out money, Dan pulled out a crisp white business card and set it gingerly on the bar. “I... Listen, I know that I’m probably out of bounds with this, Claire, but I happened to run into your old assistant Perlah the other day. She has her own party-planning business now. Bachelorette and Bachelor parties mostly. The kind of thing where having some naughty videos on the internet isn’t really a dealbreaker. Your name came up, and Perlah said that she would love to catch up with you. Maybe talk about how she might be able to use your design skills in her business. She gave me her card to pass on to you. If you’re interested.”

He looked terrified. And he had every right to be. In a fit of rage, Claire snatched up the card and tore it in half. “I don’t need your fucking charity, Dan Harrison!” she growled. “And I don’t need Perlah’s charity either! If you’re so certain my life sucks bad enough that it needs a smug savior to pull me out of it, then you can get back on your fucking plane and go back to your slut wife! I don’t need you, Dan! I never fucking did!”

Dan stared at her for a few silent seconds, then nodded with a sad smile, turned, and walked out of the bar, leaving Claire seething as she stared at his retreating back, probably for the last time. When he was gone, Claire slumped back onto her stool and buried her head in her hands. Maybe this meeting was a mistake to begin with. Slut or not, Dan was headed home to someone who loved him. And where was Claire headed? Home to drink herself to sleep? Then back to the strip club tomorrow for a few weeks until she finally caved in and became a whore for real? She felt more hollow now than she did before the meeting.

After she finished another drink, this one on her tab rather than Dan’s, Claire reluctantly bent down and picked up the two halves of the torn-up business card and set them on the bar in front of her. She could still make out the number when she put them together.

She wasn’t sure she could do it. Her stubborn pride still told her that begging for work from her former assistant was unacceptable. But then again, she had swallowed her pride so often these past few years. Why couldn’t she do it when it might improve her life? Dan had shown her that accepting ‘better than nothing’ could be a significant improvement over ‘rock bottom’.

She tucked the torn card into her purse. Maybe she would call Perlah tomorrow. Tonight, she was going to wallow in her misery just a little more.