

Spring Clean

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His thin lips part into a smarmy smile. ‘The other girls offer the full service.’

‘I’m not like the others girls, sir,’ I say, fixing my gaze on the mirrored wall. The auburn wig was a last-minute decision. I’m not sure how I feel about it. ‘Now, if you could please turn over onto your front, I could get started.’

He narrows his eyes and grimaces. ‘I didn’t come all this way for a massage’

‘Sir, please.’

‘It’s Your Honour to you,’ he barks, but obliges by heaving his large frame over onto his rotund belly; his bare bottom, like two deflated mounds of pizza dough, on full display.

‘Yes, Your Honour.’ Indulging a man’s ego never hurts.

I throw a towel over his offending lower half and dim the lights before I slip on a pair of surgical gloves and reach into my pocket for the tube of lotion. *Special lotion*. I spent the past three months in the lab, testing various essential oils to find one that wouldn’t neutralise the lethal effects of the only untraceable lab-produced virus in existence. When ingested, the virus attacks the target’s weakest vital organ and does its job in a matter of hours, as it did with Thomas Clarence. *Myocardial infarction*, more commonly known as a heart attack. Dead, at seventy-six. No foul play.

Epidermis absorption takes longer and requires patience. It could be weeks before the world learns Justice Brad Cavendish has died of liver failure. The longer this bastard suffers, the better.

Brad lifts his head off the table when I apply the mixture onto his lower back. ‘What the hell is that smell?’

‘Orris oil—derived from irises. The ancients used it for blood-purifying and stimulating endocrine glands. Very effective.’

‘Well, it smells like piss,’ he says, lowering his face into the breathing cradle.

I squeeze the remaining lotion along his spine. More than required. ‘The scent changes when combined with your body’s natural oils in the same way perfume works. I’m sure you’ll find the aroma quite pleasing as I work it into your skin. It’s a favourite amongst my other clients.’

He lifts his head again. ‘Jesus. I didn’t ask for a sales pitch. Just get on with it, will you? And take off those damn gloves.’

‘I can’t, sir. Skin condition.’

‘You’re in the wrong line of work.’ He releases a throaty sigh and drops his head. ‘When you’re finished here, go fetch Amber. She’ll give me a proper massage.’

‘As you wish, Your Honour.’

‘Holy crap!’ Gavin says, looking up from his phone screen. ‘Brad Cavendish, dead, at sixty. Liver failure.’

Eight days. More effective than I hoped.

I set the hairbrush on the breakfast table and pat my five-year-old daughter’s head. ‘Maya, go upstairs and brush your teeth. We’ll be leaving for school in a minute.’

She skips out of the kitchen; her blonde curls bouncing with every energetic step.

Gavin sets down his phone and sips his coffee. ‘That’s two Supreme Court justices dead in five months.’

‘Which one is Cavendish again?’ I ask.

‘Appointed by Forty-five. Leans far right. Don’t you remember the scandal? The protests?’

I shrug.

‘The man was accused of sexually assaulting several women while at Yale—still managed to slither his way into the highest court of the land.’

I stand, gather our breakfast dishes, and set them next to the sink. I click my tongue. ‘Oh, yeah. The frat boy.’

‘The sleezeball douche bag.’

‘So, does this mean President Harrison will need to nominate another justice?’

‘That’s exactly what it means,’ Gavin says, smirking. ‘Whoever she appoints will tip the court in *our* favour, which, if all goes well, will bring about positive changes, once and for all. I expect many of my students will be celebrating this morning.’

‘You’re not actually glad someone’s died, are you?’ I ask, eyeing my husband as I load the dishwasher. ‘Didn’t Cavendish have a family? Think about his wife. His poor children.’

‘Natalie ... the guy was a creep with backward ideologies. He and the rest of the right-wing lot could all go, as far as I’m concerned. A liberal Supreme Court could reinstate *Roe V Wade*, advocate stricter gun laws, support universal health care, bolster climate change measures, protect immigrants and LGBTQ rights. Make America great again ... for real.’

I speak over my shoulder. ‘Is there a limit?’

‘A limit to what?’ He downs the last bit of coffee and brings me the mug.

‘How many justices one president can appoint.’

‘I don’t believe so. Forty-five appointed three, so did Forty-three. Why?’

‘Just wondering.’

He kisses my cheek. ‘I better make a move. Monday traffic is a nightmare.’

‘*Erm* ... I might be a little late this evening,’ I say, returning his kiss. ‘Dr Ferris is back from her trip to South America. She’ll want me to fill her in on the latest lab results.’

‘The sloth-fungus experiment?’ he asks, his blue eyes twinkling.

I nod. ‘We’re so close to developing a vaccine for cancer.’

Gavin wraps an arm around me and squeezes my shoulder. ‘Look at you, making history.’

‘*Pfft*. I’m just a lowly lab assistant, Gav. I only do what I’m told. You, on the other hand, are enriching the minds of the future generation. You win.’

‘I’d like that in writing, please,’ he laughs. He moves across the floor and picks up his laptop bag. ‘Well, don’t worry about rushing home. I’ll pick Maya up from the sitters and cook dinner tonight. Take as much time as you need.’

‘Thank you, sweetie. I love you,’ I say.

‘Love you, too, babe. Good luck with Ferris ... and the fungus.’

I stand at the sink and listen for the front door to shut behind him.

Right. First things first. Drop Maya at school in time for Morning Club. My contact will be in touch soon, and God knows where she’ll want to rendezvous. With any luck, I won’t have to travel far or set foot in D.C. I haven’t the headspace to deal with tourists. Not today.

The digital clock on the wall reads 11:22. What the hell is she waiting for? Cavendish is dead. Mission accomplished.

I’m about to slip into a fresh hazmat suit and reenter the sealed lab when my burner phone rings. *Number withheld.*

I bring the phone to my ear.

‘Red?’ the woman on the other end says.

‘Affirmative.’

‘Ford’s Theatre. Fourteen-hundred hours. LOL.’

The line goes dead.

I drop the phone on the floor, stomp on it, put the pieces into a sealed bag, and pop it into the biohazard incinerator before I head out.

Two Ladies of Leisure enjoying a Starbucks coffee while window shopping along D.C.’s busiest shopping street. A common tourist wouldn’t do a double-take, not in a city steeped in history—both in the past and in the making. A passerby would never suspect that one of us defected from Russia a decade ago and turned herself in to the Secret Service armed with an arsenal of biochemistry knowledge.

It’s me. I’m the defector.

Russia's top virologist and Foreign Intelligence Service agent, now working for the CIA at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases under the alias, Natalie Prudden, neé, Gibson.

'Two down, four to go,' Blue says as we round the corner from Sephora onto a less populated side street.

I shake my head. 'What?! No. I've completed my mission. Clarence, Cavendish, in that order. We'll have a five-justice liberal block the moment President Harrison nominates and appoints a new justice.'

'Of the nineteen justices confirmed since 1969, fourteen have come from Republican presidents. That's nearly sixty years of conservative rule,' she says. She sits on a bench and takes the lid off her cappuccino. 'What happens a decade from now when one of the Democrat-appointed associates can no longer serve? We'll be back to square one. The Dark Ages. A Handmaid's Tale dystopia. Is that what you want for your daughter?'

I perch on the bench beside her. 'No.'

'The only way to ensure the Court remains liberal for our future generation is to Spring Clean. A complete Tidy Up before the next election. The order comes directly from the Top.'

'You don't mean ... *Madame President*?'

Blue laughs quietly. 'Haven't you learnt anything these past ten years? The Commander-in-Chief ranks several rungs below the Top. The President is not involved.'

'In that case, you'll have to recruit someone else to do your dirty work. I've fulfilled all of my obligations. The Agency can't hold anything over me. Not anymore.'

'Natalia'

'Natalia's dead,' I snap, side-eyeing Blue.

She slurps her coffee. 'Natalie ... *darling*. Must I remind you your parents are still paying for your crime in your homeland? They're not getting any younger, you know.'

Mama and Papa, serving life sentences in Black Dolphin near the Kazakhstan border for crimes neither committed. Imprisoned. Because of me.

‘We have contacts. *Cooperative* contacts.’

I narrow my eyes and study Blue’s face. ‘What are you saying?’

‘You do this for us, for America, and Gospodin and Gospohza Glazastov Well, let’s just say, they’ll soon be given new identities and be living the American Dream ... like you.’

‘Mummy! Are we there yet?’ Maya shouts from the back seat of our rental SUV.

I twist in my seat and smile at my daughter, who’s dressed as her favourite Disney princess.

‘Nearly. Just a few more minutes.’

She folds her hands into prayer. ‘Can we go to Cinderella’s Castle first? Please, Mummy, please?’

‘Of course, sweetheart. Anything you want.’

Gavin takes a hand off the wheel and points straight ahead. ‘Look, Maya. You can see the castle from here,’ he says, grinning.

Maya straightens in her booster seat, peers through the windscreen, and squeals. ‘Disney World!’

‘How about that, Maya!’ I say, facing forward. ‘Not long now!’

I glance at Gavin’s phone screen when it chimes a news alert. My heart skips a beat. ‘Oh, my God.’

‘What is it? What’s happened?’ Gavin asks.

I tune the radio to a news station and turn up the volume.

‘And this just in ...,’ the presenter announces. ‘Justice Anne Conan Barnett, the fifth woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court, has died of an apparent cerebral aneurysm at the age of fifty-three.’

Three down. Three to go.