

# **THE PUMPKIN HOUSE**

**by**

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# **WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *THE PUMPKIN HOUSE***

*Add Here*



## **Chapter 1**

Peter received the email from his wife just before lunch, but he didn't get around to opening it until after his third cigarette break, just before four. Expecting to see a simple request to stop at the grocery store, or perhaps to pick up her clothes from the cleaners, it took several readings before the true contents sunk in. He understood what each word meant, but he couldn't make sense of the whole.

"Julie, can you come in here for a moment?" Peter said into his intercom.

"Yes, Mr. Gourd." The young blonde bustled in, a notepad in one hand, a pen in the other. "What can I do for you?"

Peter liked Julie Summers, a bubbly, eager, talented, exceptionally bright, young woman. She was the best executive assistant he had ever had, but he only liked her as an executive assistant, despite the persistent rumors that spread like wildfire through the building and even into his social circle.

## *The Pumpkin House*

“Can you come over and read this email?” Peter asked. “I know it sounds crazy...but I don’t understand it.”

Julie frowned slightly, visibly perplexed by the request. Ever the professional, she circled the desk to look at his computer screen over his shoulder.

Julie reared back. “Is this some sort of joke?” she asked.

“What?” Peter shook his head, joking the farthest thing from his mind. The situation seemed deadly serious to him. “No.”

Julie put her hands on her hips. “Look, if this is some sneaky way to hit on me, you know I’m engaged and I will contact HR. Just because your dad owns this firm doesn’t mean you can get away with anything you want.”

Peter held up his hand, struck by her icy tone. He hadn’t meant to offend her. “What? No! Julie, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then why would you have me read a *Dear John* email from your wife?” She seemed to relax, concern replacing the anger in her eyes. “I mean, I know we work closely, Mr. Gourd, but I don’t need to know all the details of your life.”

Peter’s shoulders slumped. He hadn’t misunderstood the email, then. “Thanks, Julie,” he said, waving his hand toward the door. “Take the afternoon off.”

“Are you going to be okay, Mr. Gourd? You look a little pale.”

Peter looked up at Julie's sweet, concerned face, grateful that she had calmed down. He didn't need to deal with a complaint to HR on top of...everything. "I'm fine," he assured her, though he knew his face betrayed his words. "I've just got to get this straightened out."

Julie picked up his calendar and flipped through the pages. "I'm rescheduling your appointments for the next week," she announced. "I'll do that before I leave."

"What? No, you can't shuffle my schedule like that. There are too many meetings, and I have a court date next Wednesday." He tried to take the planner from her hands, but she held it above her head, out of his reach. Despite everything, he needed to keep his priorities straight. Why should his clients suffer because he had a problem with his wife? They still had lives and businesses to run, and they relied on him.

Julie could see the conflict in his eyes. "Mr. Gourd...Peter...listen to me. You probably have only one shot to make things right with Emily before she's gone forever. All of this can wait, but she can't." She crossed his large office to the door, still gripping the planner. "*You* take the afternoon off. I've got work to do."

Peter watched her leave, blinking. He could attempt to argue with her, plead his case, but to what avail? She was right, of course. He couldn't argue with her or with the email. He checked the time stamp—10:34:28 AM. It was already past four.

## *The Pumpkin House*

She'd be long gone by now. He wouldn't even know where to look, much less what to do once he found her.

He turned back to the computer screen, and reread the email, searching for any clues.

*Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater*

*Had a wife and couldn't keep her.*

*I'm sorry, Peter, but I finally understand that we wanted different things from this relationship. I wanted a partner and a friend, and you wanted a hostess for your parties. You can hire somebody for that. I need to go. I need to think. Don't bother responding to this email. I won't get it. I'm sorry, Peter.*

*Emily.*

Fresh pain twisted in Peter's heart as he grabbed the framed photograph of her from the corner of his desk, holding it up to the light. He vividly remembered taking this photograph of her at the beach, her long, brown hair whipping around her face. She hadn't noticed him standing above her on an outcropping of rocks with his camera poised, because their new puppy, Remi, had distracted her by chasing seagulls up and down the empty beach.

That had been the weekend they had found the Pumpkin House. Emily had fallen in love with it the moment she'd seen it.

Peter straightened. Of course. She wanted to find a place to think and get away from him. Where else would she go? He had only been to the beach



house once since they'd bought it—Emily had turned it into a sanctuary and went up there several times a week, armed with books or a canvas and paint. It was only about an hour away, and the midday traffic would be light.

He shut down his computer, grabbed his jacket, and hurried out of the office.

"Are you going after Emily?" Julie called as he passed her desk.

"Of course."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, rising from her chair. "I hope you've got something big planned. Because I think you might need a miracle."

"Thanks for the pep talk," he muttered, pulling his jacket on. "I'll think of something when I get there." He stepped to the door, but paused as another thought occurred to him. "Oh, Julie, can you forward my calls to my cell? Henderson should be calling this evening or tomorrow morning and I..."

"Sir?" Julie interrupted. "May I remind you that Emily left because you neglected her? It might not be a great idea to bring your work with you."

Peter nodded. "Right, right. Okay, don't forward my calls, just..."

"I'll take care of everything. That's what I'm here for, right? Now go! Do you know where she is?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

“Call me if you need anything,” Julie said as the phone started to ring. She lifted the receiver, shooing him away with her free hand. “*Gourd and Gourd Associates*...I’m sorry, he’s not in the office right now.” She covered the mouthpiece with her hand. “Will you *go*?”

Peter still hesitated. He was already six hours late, another fifteen minutes wouldn’t make a huge difference, would it? Henderson had been trying to set up a meeting for the past three weeks. “Who is it? Is that Henderson?”

“Do you want to save your marriage or what?” Julie asked.

Briefly, he imagined a life without Emily’s smile, without the feel of her soft hair, without the brightness she brought to a room. He could live without Henderson—he couldn’t live without Emily.

Peter nodded, and stepped into the waiting elevator. He had a dozen other things he wanted to tell Julie—what to do if this client called, or that one needed help, or his father came downstairs looking for him. But he trusted Julie, and he’d have to trust her judgment while he was away.

Still, his stomach churned. He had only left the office for longer than a day once, and that was the weekend he got married. They had never gone on a honeymoon—the Johnson case had gone to court that week, he remembered, after six months of delays and scheduling conflicts. Emily had claimed she understood, and why shouldn’t he have believed

her? There would be plenty of time to go on a honeymoon—a whole lifetime, right?

The elevator came to a stop on the fourth floor, its doors opening to Justin Lennon, a young paralegal who had worked with Peter on a few cases. Justin reminded Peter a little of himself at that age—intelligent, eager, a bright future ahead of him. Peter knew that the younger man could make it far in the firm. Still, there was something about him that Peter just didn't like.

"Hey, Mr. Gourd!" Justin exclaimed, offering his hand. "I was just coming up to see you."

Peter shook it without enthusiasm. A distracted corner of his brain noted that Justin's hands were warm without being clammy. "Yes, well, an emergency has cropped up, so I'll be out of the office for a while."

Justin gaped. "Are you serious?"

Peter arched his brow. "Yes."

"I'm sorry...it's just...you never take time off. You're like an institution!"

"What did you want to see me about, Justin?" Peter asked, uninterested in discussing his working habits.

"Do you mind if I walk with you to your car?" he asked.

"No."

The elevator began its smooth descent to the parking garage. Peter wasn't interested in whatever problems or questions Justin had. He needed time to gather his thoughts and form a plan for Emily.

“So, what kind of emergency? It’s nothing serious, I hope,” Justin started, fidgeting with the knot of his tie.

*Nope, nothing serious. Just the death of my marriage.* “It’s Emily.”

Justin stepped forward, his eyes wide, the color on his face rising. “Oh my God, nothing happened to her did it? She’s not hurt or anything, right?”

Peter blinked, surprised by Justin’s reaction. As far as he knew, Justin had met Emily once, at the Christmas party, but otherwise, didn’t know her at all. Justin moved in a different social circle than the Gourds, and their paths rarely crossed outside of work. “She’s fine.”

Justin blushed, his smile self-conscious. “Good. Good. So, um, I actually needed to get some time off cleared with you...”

“When?” Peter suddenly wished he had a cigarette.

“Right now.”

Peter sighed, growing exasperated. “No, when are you taking time off?”

“Right now. I...uh...have my own family emergency.” Justin looked down quickly, avoiding eye contact. The color of his face deepened, and Peter thought he looked remarkably like a trapped animal.

“Is that so? Is somebody in the hospital?” Peter kept his voice light and curious, despite the alarm bells going off in his head. He had seen that sort of body language in the courtroom countless times—

the silent signals of a man hopelessly guilty and desperately trying to hide that fact.

“No...no, nobody’s in the hospital.” He continued fidgeting with his tie. “It’s not...it’s not that kind of emergency.”

“I see. How much time do you need off?”

“A...a couple of days...” Justin nodded quickly. “Yeah, a couple of days should be enough.”

“Really? So it’s just a minor emergency? Nobody died or anything?”

The doors opened, depositing them in the parking garage. Peter walked the short distance to his Mercedes, Justin following just a few feet behind.

Justin switched tactics now, as if trying to squirm away from the trap Peter was laying. “Look, Mr. Gourd, if you don’t want to give me the time off, I understand...”

“Have you ever been to Farmer’s Beach?” Peter interrupted, catching Justin off-guard.

“Um, once or twice.”

“That’s where I’m heading. Right now, in fact. It’s really a beautiful place. Most of it’s privately owned, so there are no crowds. I don’t get up there as much as I like to. I own a house there. Did you know that?” Peter smiled, waiting for Justin’s response.

“Oh, really?” His voice cracked on the last syllable of *really*. He coughed, shaking his head. “I didn’t know that.”

## *The Pumpkin House*

Peter waited a beat, finally catching and holding Justin's eyes. He allowed the silence to stretch between them, until he thought Justin would snap. "Anyway, I guess you can take a few days, since I won't be around..."

Justin held up his hand, backing away from him quickly. "You know, on second thought, I can't afford to lose the hours. Thanks though."

"You're sure? I mean, if it's an emergency..."

"I'm sure, I'm sure. Have a good vacation." Justin sent him one last, baffled look before hurrying back to the elevator. Peter frowned, watching him go, his suspicions all but confirmed.

"What's going on here, Emily?" he muttered as he settled in his car. "What's going on?"

\* \* \* \*

"Look, it's a Pumpkin House!" Emily had exclaimed as they drove by the squat, orange cottage on the way to Farmer's Beach. The moniker had stuck. "I want to buy the Pumpkin House," she had told him. "I'm going to the Pumpkin House this weekend," she would tell him as he hurried to dress in the morning. "Let's do Christmas at the Pumpkin House this year," she had requested. He remembered that he had promised her they would do just that, but something had come up with his father on Christmas Eve, and he had spent the entire weekend in the city.

The house didn't really look like a pumpkin, but he supposed the name was fitting. The low, round building didn't resemble any other cottage on the

hillside, and the mellow orange color looked out of place, and yet, appropriate. Carefully tended gardens surrounded the fat cottage—orange trees, white and purple flowers, and even strawberry bushes competed for space and sunlight. The gardens took him by surprise. He didn't know Emily had a green thumb, yet he could see the evidence from the road.

He didn't know what he was going to do when he reached the house. He supposed they would talk, but he didn't know if either one of them had anything new to say. She would accuse him of loving his job more than he loved her—and maybe that was true. Maybe he did love his job more than he loved her, or anything else for that matter. But it was more than just a job. The firm was his legacy, his father's legacy, his grandfather's legacy. But he couldn't say that to her. The best he could do was promise that he'd cut down on his hours at the firm, and spend more time with her. A hollow promise he had made a hundred times before.

Peter parked in front of the house. She was there. Her car was parked in the driveway, and Remi was sniffing around the front yard, looking for a place to take his evening nap. Peter got out of the car, instantly assaulted by the sounds and smells of the ocean. He had forgotten how sweet it all smelled that time of year, how soothing the crashing waves could be.

Remi looked up with only passing interest as Peter hurried up the walk. He whistled at the dog,

but he only circled the ground once and collapsed in the sweet grass. “Worthless dog,” he muttered as he reached the door.

Peter took a deep breath before opening the door, but the knob wouldn’t turn in his hand. He frowned, knocking on the door. He didn’t have the keys to the house, or else he would have let himself in.

“Justin? Is that you?” Emily called as she unlocked the door. “What happened to your key? You’re lucky I wasn’t waiting for you in the shower.” She pulled the door open, her lovely face turning white. “Peter...”

Peter’s heart clenched. It didn’t even occur to her that it would be her own husband at the door. And didn’t Justin have balls of steel—sleeping with the boss’s wife?

“Surprised to see me?”

She composed herself quickly, pulling her robe closed and not budging from the door, blocking him from entering. “I’m always surprised to see you,” she said, her smile sickeningly sweet.

“I got your email.”

“Well, good. What are you doing here? I’m expecting company.”

“Justin? He won’t be joining you.”

“And why not?”

Peter shrugged, not eager to go into the specifics. He wasn’t there to talk about Justin. At that point, he didn’t give a fuck about Justin. “I guess he had a change of heart. Can I come in?”



*The Pumpkin House*

Her face settled in an impassive mask, not even a glimmer of surprise in her eyes. He didn't recognize the hard woman that calmly said, "No."

"Emily, we need to talk. Please."

Emily was unmoved. "Everything I needed to say to you, I said in that email."

"Why did you have to email me? Fuck, why couldn't you call me at least? Don't I deserve to hear it from your mouth?" Peter demanded, unable to rein in his growing anger.

"I did try to call you, Peter. Your *secretary* wouldn't let me through," Emily informed him, crossing her arms across her chest. "She said you weren't taking calls. *No exceptions.*"

"Why didn't you call my cell?"

"I did. Did you check your voicemails? I'm surprised at you, Peter. What if I had been an important client? Wouldn't your face be red?"

Peter pulled his cell from his pocket. *You have three missed calls*, the screen flashed. "I see."

"Go home, Peter. I don't want anything from you except this house. You can have everything else. It's all yours anyway. I was just a guest..." Emily tried to shut the door, but Peter blocked it with his foot.

"Emily, please. I don't want to go home. I came out here because I need to see you, I need to talk to you about this..."

"Why?"

Peter took a deep breath, gathering all his charm and sincerity. "Because I love you."

He had expected her to melt at his declaration, but she laughed in his face. She guffawed, covering her mouth to stop the offending sound, but she couldn't contain it. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry," she gasped, tears rolling from the corner of her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh at you but..."

"I *do* love you."

Emily shook her head. "Maybe you really believe that you do. I don't know. Maybe you think this is love. But I can't live like this anymore. You'll get over it, Peter. Probably by tomorrow. You'll see."

Something snapped in his chest. He knew the words tumbling out of his mouth were true, that they were the most honest words he had ever spoken. "Emily, *no*. No, I won't get over it..."

"Goodbye." A simple word. How could it be so simple for her? Didn't she hear his world tumbling around him?

This time, she slammed the door shut before he could stop it. He could hear the unmistakable sound of the deadbolt, locking him out. He pounded on the door for several minutes, but she didn't return.

"What the fuck am I going to do?"

Peter Gourd was not a loser. He never lost a case, he didn't lose when he played golf, and he would not lose his wife. He had met Emily at a time in his life when he was desperately seeking a stabilizing force, a partner who wouldn't suck him dry and leave him with nothing to give his career. Emily had been exactly what he needed, but for the

## *The Pumpkin House*

first time in their relationship, he understood that he hadn't returned the favor.

He had never asked her what she needed. Companionship seemed an obvious answer, but what else? Did she need a family? A career? Or to travel the world with her boyfriend? He had no idea. How could he find out without directly interviewing her? It would be so much easier if he could force her to sit down and let him depose her.

Peter returned to his car, but he didn't start the engine. Instead, he studied the house and the yard, looking for anything he could use to his advantage. He needed a plan.

The old rhyme from Emily's email floated around his mind. *Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater/Had a wife and couldn't keep her*. How did the rest of that children's rhyme go? He hadn't thought of it in years, but those scraps of poetry and songs that one learns as a child never really leave. *Locked her in a pumpkin shell/And there he kept her very well*.

"That's it," Peter muttered. "That's it."

## **Chapter 2**

Julie seemed more annoyed than surprised when Peter returned to the office. “Did you already win her back?” she asked pertly, the phone in one hand, a Palm pilot in the other.

“No. Get Justin Lennon up here.” Peter marched into his office. “Right now,” he added before slamming the door.

“Yes, sir.”

A soft knock on his door followed five minutes later. “Come in,” Peter called.

Justin shuffled into the office, his shoulders slumped, his head down. He looked so young. Not much more than a boy. For a moment, Peter felt sorry for him. Justin hadn’t asked to be caught in the middle of this—though he should have kept his cock in his pants, where it belonged.

“How long have you been sleeping with my wife?” Peter asked without any formalities. He didn’t have time to bat Justin around like a toy, though he certainly would have enjoyed it. If he had wanted to, he could have tortured the younger man all evening, ratcheting up the tension with each sly question until Justin cracked.

Justin frantically shook his head. “Mr. Gourd, I swear, it’s nothing like that. I mean, I barely know your wife. I’ve only met her once. I don’t even remember her. Her name’s Emma, right? Wait, no, Emily. See, I can barely remember her name...” He tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace of fear.

“Cut it out, Justin,” Peter said, not unkindly. “You’re smarter than that. I’m smarter than that. Talk.”

“You’re going to fire me,” he said, deflated. He shrank a couple of inches, his shoulders slumping, his chest caving.

“I’m not going to fire you. Well, I might, if you don’t answer my question.”

“About four months ago. I ran into her one night...it just sorta happened...” Justin shrugged as if to say *what could I do?* “She assured me you wouldn’t find out, and Mr. Gourd, she was so lonely.”

Peter looked up sharply at the tone in Justin’s voice. Pleading, but not on his own behalf. “She told you that?”

Justin rubbed the back of his neck, purposely meeting Peter’s eyes for the first time. “She didn’t have to tell me.”

“Do you love her?” Peter asked, but he really wanted to ask *does she love you?* He couldn’t fight for her if she were lost. Nothing he could do or say would bring her back if her heart had already abandoned him.

*The Pumpkin House*

“She’s a wonderful person...I don’t have to tell you that....” Justin seemed to relax, taking Peter at his word. “But no...we’re not in love.”

“Justin, I love my wife very much.”

Justin tensed again. “Yes, sir.”

Peter picked up the framed photograph, admiring her beauty again. “I want a second chance with her. I need your help.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said, after a second’s hesitation.

“I’m sure you will. I have a plan, Justin, but it won’t work without you. I need you to see my wife one more time.”

\* \* \* \*

Four months. She had been cheating on him for four months and he hadn’t even noticed. He’d never even *suspected* that she might be unfaithful to him. And with Justin Lennon of all people. What had prompted her to break her vows? Emily wasn’t the sort to sleep around, and even if she was, he was a smart guy, accustomed to exposing fraud and seeing through a smokescreen of lies.

As he waited for the locksmith to finish working on the Pumpkin House, he turned the past four months over in his mind, struggling to remember every minute he had spent with her, every word they’d exchanged, every odd expression and moment. But everything had seemed so normal. Nothing in their daily routine had changed at all.

Every morning, Peter woke up at precisely five thirty to start his morning jog by five forty-five. By

the time he returned home, at six twenty-five, Emily would be awake, the coffee would be brewing in the kitchen, and a warm, buttered bran muffin would be waiting for him on the counter. He'd eat, shower, dress, catch the stock report on CNN, kiss Emily goodbye, and be out the door by seven thirty. When he returned in the evening—often around eight—she'd be waiting for him, with dinner on the table.

Peter hit his hand against the steering wheel, cursing his stupidity. He had brought some of the most powerful CEOs in the nation to their knees. He could see through any lie, any misdirection. He had a reputation in the legal world as a shark, a predator; his senses always attuned to the smallest shift in the wind, the minutest change in his environment.

So why couldn't he see what he had been doing to his wife?

Four months. Had Justin been the first? Or just the latest in a long line of lovers?

The locksmith tapped on the car window. "Hey, uh, Mr. Gourd, you can go in the house if you want. You don't have to sit out here."

"I'm fine. Are you done?"

"Yup. Here's your key and here's your spare."

"Thanks."

The locksmith nodded, wished Peter a good evening, and returned to his truck. Peter waited until the locksmith was out of sight before getting out of the car and hurrying over to the house. He

cut the phone line in the back before checking each window to make sure it was secure. Confident that everything was going to according to plan, he returned to his car, parking it out of sight.

If Justin had followed instructions—and valued his job more than he did his relationship with Emily—they'd be returning from the restaurant in thirty minutes. Justin would discover the spare key for the new lock on the porch—Peter was confident he'd be able to carry off the switch—escort Emily inside, and then lock the door. Trapping her there.

Justin had been a bit wary of the plan at first, but Peter had eventually convinced him that it was a fine plan with a very small chance of failure. Peter knew it was not the strength of the plan that convinced Justin to cooperate, rather the fear of losing his job. Peter did not intend to fire the young man either way, but he didn't bother to let Justin know that.

At nine fifty-five, Peter noticed the glow of headlights winding up the road. He could see the road and front yard clearly from his vantage point, and he hoped Emily wouldn't be able to see him. Justin escorted her to the door as planned. Peter watched as he pulled the key from his pocket, dropped it, stooped, and picked up the new one. Before he had the chance to use it, Emily grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled his mouth against hers.

Peter's chest tightened. He knew the facts, and he accepted them without anger, but he didn't want



to see his wife kissing another man with such passion, such ferocity. When was the last time she had kissed him with anything more than a passing interest?

*When was the last time you kissed her at all?*

Peter growled, resisting the urge to bail out of the car, run up the walkway to the door, punch Justin in the nose, and carry Emily into the bedroom.

They eventually broke apart, and Justin quickly unlocked and opened the door. Emily walked in first, turning to Justin just as he slammed the door shut in her face. "I'm sorry!" he shouted.

That was Peter's cue.

He rushed from the car to Justin's side, already wincing from Emily's frightened screams. Justin didn't speak as Peter approached, just looked at him with sick, sad eyes, and turned away.

"Justin! Justin! Why can't I open the door? What's going on here? Justin!"

"Emily!" Peter shouted. "Emily, it's me!"

"Peter?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"What the fuck is going on? Did you do this?"

"I did, but only because I need to talk to you..."

"This is a crime! I'm calling the police!"

"I cut your phone line."

"I have a cell."

"I cancelled the service."

"You did what?" Emily screeched.

“It was in my name, so I cancelled it. Emily, you might as well relax, I’m the only person with a key, and you’re not going anywhere.”

“This is kidnapping, Peter. You really want a criminal record? This could end your career.”

“*Fine.*”

The single word shocked both of them into silence. He could hear Justin’s car behind him, revving off into the night, leaving the two of them alone. “Emily? Come over to the window, honey, it’ll be easier than shouting.”

“Okay.”

Peter went to the edge of porch, below the small portal window. Emily pushed the glass open and said, “Come closer, Peter, I want to see you.”

Peter obediently moved closer, until he was right below the window. “Now, Emily, I’ve been thinking about this, and I want to let you know I’m not angry...”

Something cold and sticky landed on his head, coating his hair, and rolling down the back of his expensive suit. He jumped back, surprised and blinded by the unknown substance. “What the fuck is that?”

“Syrup. You want some more?”

“Emily, *please.*”

“You had three years, Peter. Now you think you can just lock me up to keep me from leaving you? You won’t get away with it forever, and you better believe I’m going to take you to the cleaners. All I

wanted before was the goddamned house, but now I'm going to make you bleed! You hear that, Peter?"

Peter wiped the syrup from his face, grimacing at the sticky mess and his ruined suit. "I hear you. And you're right. I can't keep you there forever. I don't intend to. But I have a week off work, and neither of us is going anywhere until we talk."

"I don't have anything else to say to you."

"Well, I've got something to say to you."

"You're three years too late."

"Maybe so, but I've got to try. I can't live without you, Emily."

She laughed again, the same hysterical, startled sound as before. "Hire a maid, sweetheart. Get yourself a whore. Then you'll be set."

"Emily, that's not true."

"Why did you marry me, Peter?"

"What?"

"Why did you marry me? Why did you propose? What did you think you were looking for?"

Peter took a deep breath. It was a fair question. "Because I loved you."

"Fine, why did you think you loved me?"

"Emily, I don't know what you want me to say."

"Peter, I'm trying to get you to make your case. You want to go through with this ridiculous arrangement? Give me a reason to believe you're genuine," Emily said, sticking her head out the window.

He noticed immediately that she had cut her hair. It was now styled in a smart bob, framing her

pert face. And were those...highlights? What else had she done to herself?

"I married you because I didn't know anybody else like you in the world. You're beautiful. And you're brilliant. And I loved spending time with you, and talking to you, and listening to you laugh. I married you because the world seems bleak and pointless without you. I married you because I needed somebody like you in my life to keep everything grounded."

"That's a lovely speech, Peter, but I don't believe any of it."

"I've never lied to you."

"Yes, that's true. You honestly believe everything you tell me, so you're incapable of seeing the lies," Emily said, retreating from the window.

"How many lovers have you had?" he called.

"How many lovers? You mean, besides Justin?"

"Yes."

"None, Peter. I waited and I waited until I realized I was saving myself for a man who just wasn't interested."

"But I was interested," Peter insisted. "I'm only one man, Emily, and you're not the only important thing in my life."

"I know."

Those two simple words held so much sadness, he thought his heart would break. They thudded to the ground at his feet, lying there, demanding that he do something. But what could he do? They were both plagued by *acceptance*. She had accepted that

she wasn't a priority in his life, and he had accepted that she had the right to find a lover.

That was no way to conduct a marriage, to live a life.

"I'm going to take a shower," she announced, her voice already fading as she moved away from the window.

Peter didn't try to stop her or call her back. He had really believed it was a simple matter of getting her to sit down and listen to him. If she heard his side of the story, then she'd have to come around. She was a reasonable woman; after all, that's why he loved her. She could be reasonable about this, too.

Peter settled in the rocking chair she kept on the porch, staring across the yard to the beach, and beyond that, the gently rocking ocean. He could hear the water rush through the old pipes in the walls behind him, calling up the vivid image of Emily, soapy and wet, in the shower.

His cock stiffened immediately. She had the most curvaceous, luscious, wonderful body he had ever experienced. Not that he had experienced it very much lately. He'd known from the first moment he saw her that he wanted her, and that he would have her. His need for her simply couldn't be denied.

\* \* \* \*

"Who is that?" Peter muttered, his eyes drawn to the goddess in a blue and silver dress who had just entered the room. He didn't recognize her, but

he definitely wanted to get to know her. She sparkled as she greeted the people surrounding her, her smile and eyes vibrant.

“Who?” His father, Robert, spun around. “Ah yes, Emily St. Claire. Her father is a partner at *Jenkins and Jenkins*.”

Peter coughed, choking on his drink. “Andrew St. Claire?”

Robert tapped the side of his nose. “That’s the one.”

Peter’s eyes widened. Andrew was a pudgy little man with meaty hands and fishy lips. His bald head was always thick with sweat, as were his clothes. In short, Andrew was a rather vile little troll. His personality matched his unattractive appearance. Peter couldn’t even stand to be in the same room as him for more than five minutes at a time. How had he managed to produce such a stunning creature?

“I think I’m going to introduce myself,” Peter said, too curious to wait for Emily to make her way to him.

Robert put a hand on his son’s arm. “Be careful, Peter.”

“Careful? What do you think is going to happen? I just want to say hello.”

“Now is not the time to consider settling down.”

Peter gaped at his father. “Settle down? I’m not going to propose marriage. I just want to meet the girl.”

“I recognize that look in your eye.”

Peter shrugged off his father's words, annoyed by his warning. Not only was it unnecessary, but it was none of Robert's business at all. Peter was a grown man; he didn't need his father to direct his life for him.

"Excuse me? Ma'am, I don't believe I know you," Peter said, sliding up to Emily's side, casually pushing away the older man who had been chatting her up. "I'm Peter Gourd."

"Emily St. Claire," she said with a smile.

Peter took her hand, bringing it up to his lips. She smelled of cinnamon and ginger, as though she had been baking before changing into her dancing gown and joining them at the party. He loved the way her soft skin felt against his lips, and he was loath to let her go.

"Welcome to our home," he said. "Perhaps you would like a tour?"

"Well, it is rather lovely. Do you offer to give all your guests a personal tour of the house?"

"Just the beautiful ones," he admitted, offering his arm.

She took it, returning his smile. "Thank you for the compliment."

Peter nodded to his father as they glided past, choosing to ignore the warning expression in his gray eyes. "You're Andrew St. Claire's daughter, right?"

"Yes."

"Why haven't I seen you around before?"

"I just moved to Los Angeles this year. Before that, I lived with my mother in Chicago," Emily explained.

"Ahh, and what brought you to our lovely city?"

"School. I'll be attending grad school at UCLA in the fall."

"That's wonderful." Peter pushed a door open and ushered her inside the room. "This is the library. Don't get too excited, it's mostly musty old law books."

"It's a very nice room," she said dutifully.

Peter guided her out of the room and down the hall to the door that led to the wraparound verandah. "Would you like some air?"

"Is this where our tour ends?" Emily asked as they stepped out of the warm, crowded house.

"I admit, I just wanted to see what you look like in the moonlight," Peter said, shutting the door behind her.

"And?"

"Enchanting."

He stepped forward, until there was barely an inch between them. She lifted her chin, looking into his eyes with an amused, questioning expression. He reached for the clip holding her hair in place, carefully removing it, allowing her soft tresses to fall around his hand and her shoulders.

"It took me an hour to get my hair the way I like it," she said ruefully.

"It was quite beautiful," he assured her. "But now it's..." The normally erudite Peter struggled to



find the proper words. What he ultimately settled on seemed far too mundane to express the tumult of emotion in his chest. "You take my breath away."

"You don't even know me five minutes before you break out the cheap lines," she remarked.

"Just because it's a cheap line doesn't mean it's not true," Peter pointed out. "May I kiss you?"

"Would it matter if I said no?" Emily asked, tilting her head back further.

Peter acknowledged the invitation, meeting her supple mouth with his lips. He kissed her slowly, almost chastely, keeping his lips closed until she opened hers, welcoming further exploration. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears, and over that, Christmas music from the ever-growing party inside. He knew nobody would miss them for hours if they snuck off somewhere, and he could tell from the way her body moved against his, the way her tongue boldly met his, that he wouldn't regret any stolen time with her.

Peter broke the kiss, pulling away from her slightly. He watched her blue eyes flutter open, revealing an ocean of passion and desire. She returned his stare for a long minute, as if trying to read his thoughts the way he tried to read hers.

Emily put her hand against the side of his face, cupping his cheek with her warm palm. A hint of perfume on her wrist enticed him, but it still wasn't powerful enough to chase away the lower, more intimate smell he had noticed before. He knew he couldn't take her right there on the verandah, but

he could easily imagine pushing her against the railing, trailing his mouth along her neck, perhaps moving down to her breasts.

Peter knew she felt it too. How could she miss the tug of attraction that pulled stronger than the ocean's current? He turned his head slightly, brushing his lips against her wrist. He could feel her pulse flutter, prompting his own heart to skip a beat. Crickets chirped around them, a low chorus behind her slightly quickened breath.

"I have to go back inside," he finally said, trying to break the spell that clouded his mind.

"Yes, I'm sure my father will be looking for me."

"Can I take you out?" Peter asked. "I would really like to get to know you better. I have a yacht..." He knew he sounded more desperate than cool and suave, but he didn't care. He *felt* desperate.

"I'm free next Sunday night."

*Sunday. Almost a full week.* He could drive himself crazy with a million glorious fantasies in a week. He nodded. "Sunday works for me too."

Emily finally broke contact with him, pulling her hand away. Unwilling to part company so soon, he cupped her face, bringing his lips to hers again. He closed his eyes, savoring her pliant lips, her inquisitive tongue, the sweet taste of wine in her mouth. He kissed her like he was drinking fine wine, exploring each taste and fragrance. He could get drunk on her.

*The Pumpkin House*

Peter pulled away from her before he lost himself completely. He searched her face for any clues that she felt the same way—her eyes were now cloudy and heavy. *Bedroom* eyes, he thought, his groin tightening. *I'm not going to make it to Sunday.*

“I think I’m going to like it here,” she finally said, touching the tips of her fingers to her lips.

Peter smiled. “I think I’m going to like you here too.”

## **Chapter 3**

Peter waited on the porch for Emily's return, lost in his own thoughts and memories. He realized, with a flash of pain, that he didn't have very many memories of Emily, especially after their engagement.

When he could no longer hear her moving around the house—the small sounds of her pointedly ignoring him—he stood up on tingling legs, his shirt stuck to his back. As quietly as possible, he unlocked the door, making sure to lock it behind him, and slipped the key onto the chain around his neck. He planned to take a quick shower, change his clothes—if she hadn't thrown out all his belongings yet—and slip back outside before she woke up.

He ducked his head into the bedroom, confirming that she was asleep. She was on her back, lying spread-eagled across the bed, naked but for the sheets that were tangled around her arms and legs. Every piece of him cried out of him to join her. He could already feel her body wrapped around his, her hair against his skin, her breasts heavy in his hands, her thighs thick with desire...

But no. He hadn't locked her up so he could have his wicked way with her. He didn't want anything to muddle the issue or complicate matters. He wanted to talk—his words were his best weapon of defense—and work out their problems. So he ignored the warm invitation of the bed, and ducked into the bathroom.

It looked like a woman's bathroom. There were no male touches anywhere—everything was feminine and smelled of baby powder. He supposed he should be relieved that Justin didn't keep a razor and toothbrush there. To be sure, he checked the medicine cabinet and the drawers beneath the sink—the only spare razor and toothbrush he found were his.

Peter undressed, studying his ruined shirt mournfully. He wasn't overly attached to his clothing, but it still disturbed him to throw out a perfectly good work shirt. He showered as quickly as could, though it took repeated scrubblings to get all the syrup out of his hair. Why had she chosen syrup, of all things?

He emerged from the steamy bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist, expecting to find Emily still deep in sleep. He stood above the bed, water beading down his body, entranced by her again. Peter longed to kiss her, to feel her hot mouth against his. He didn't want to stop there, though. He wanted to kiss her cheek, her chin, the hollow of her neck, her pert nipples, the silky juncture of her thighs.

## *The Pumpkin House*

Peter pulled himself away from her, crossing over to the closet, again slightly afraid of what he would find. Had she thrown out his clothes and replaced them with Justin's? But, as in the bathroom, everything looked the same as he remembered, unchanged and untouched. He chose a pair of sweats from the bottom of the closet, and then hunted around for a t-shirt, unable to spot one in the dark.

"I keep them in the dresser now," Emily said.

Peter spun around. "I thought you were asleep."

"The shower woke me up."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you sleeping in here?"

"I hadn't planned to."

"Oh."

Peter couldn't see her face in the dim light, but he heard her disappointment, her hurt. Why did he keep doing that?

"I thought you wouldn't want me to stay," he said quickly.

"It's your house, isn't it?" she asked.

"It's your bed." He moved across the room, standing over the bed again, but not touching it. Now he could see her easily in the silver light, and lust curled in his stomach. "You brought him here." A simple statement.

"I did. Do you even care, Peter?"

Peter closed his eyes. "I hurt, but..."

"But?"

"I'm not angry."

“Because you stopped caring.”

Peter’s eyes flew open. “No. That’s not true. I never stopped...I never stopped caring about you.” He hurried to the door, desperate, angry, confused. He paused with his hand on the knob when she spoke again.

“Then why are you running away from me? I don’t know what you want from me, Peter. Do you want me to stay and have my lovers on the side?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to stay and be alone? I miss you, Peter, but you never hear me when I tell you that.”

“No,” he whispered, turning around to face her.

“And you won’t let me go. You’d rather keep me a prisoner. So what do you want from me?”

“I just want you,” he said. “That’s all. Just you. Just Emily. The way I used to know you.”

“Then why don’t you show me?”

Peter heard the invitation in her voice, but he couldn’t move. He wanted to go to her, but his legs would not cooperate, his muscles tense. “Emily, I...”

Emily gracefully swung her legs off the mattress and straightened, standing proud and tall in the moonlight. She crossed the room, moving with a sort of willowy grace that kept him transfixed. He remained as still as stone until her feathery breath tickled his face, and her lips brushed against his. The brief contact broke his paralysis, and suddenly, he needed to consume her. He needed to possess her and love her in every way he could.

Peter wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close against his body as he devoured her mouth. She seemed startled by his sudden change, but it only took her seconds to adjust to his hungry lips. She gripped his shoulders, her sharp fingernails digging into his bare flesh. He barely noticed the pain, caught up in the flood of pleasure that poured down his body, settling in his groin.

Peter spun around, backing her against the door. He held her there with his body while he redirected his mouth, reacquainting himself with the way her skin tasted. He could still smell the sleep on her skin, the vaguely musty smell of sweat in the hollow of her throat, the conditioner the hairdresser used in her hair.

He gently pulled her hair back, exposing the fine curve of her neck. He attacked with a flurry of nibbles and licks, his tongue and teeth working over the sensitive flesh until she moaned, arching toward him. He moved down her body, trailing his mouth over her quivering skin, licking the soft swell of her breast, and finally pulling her nipple into his mouth.

Emily moaned again, sending sparks of desire down his spine. His whole body quaked with lust, every cell, every bit of him hungry for more. Peter felt like a dying man offered one final feast before disease tore him from the earth. There was so much to experience, so many sensations, and a part of him knew that he would never have enough time.



He couldn't take the time now. His cock jerked, seeking her out, and his balls ached. The ache spread through his thighs before overtaking his entire body. He felt like a giant, raw nerve, and every bit of contact reverberated with pain, sending echoes of agony bouncing off each muscle.

Peter lifted her off the floor, carrying her over to the bed without taking his mouth from her body. He fell with her to the mattress in a tangle of limbs, his body slick against hers, moans echoing in the otherwise silent room. Peter tugged at his pants; desperate to be free of the cloth constraints that might as well have been chains.

With Emily's help, he kicked the pants away, finally free. Peter thrust into her without further delay, pushing himself into her as hard as he could. She gasped with the sudden pressure, stretching around him, enfolding him. He had no thought for control or finesse, no thought of anything except finding her again.

Emily moved beneath him, her body doing everything right. She moaned. Her mouth sought his. Their sweat mingled, their ragged breaths blended, the scent of their sex rose above them, mingling with the steam that still wafted from the bathroom. He hadn't intended to, he hadn't meant to do this, and now he could feel the final moment approaching. She arched beneath him, clinging to him, panting his name, encouraging him to the final breaking point.

## *The Pumpkin House*

He came hard, the orgasm crashing his senses, mixing everything up, until he saw colors and heard her sweet moans. He rolled away from her, gasping for breath, a deep exhaustion overtaking him—making him feel human. He needed these simple comforts—needed to sleep in her bed, to be safe with her. Once again, he didn't recognize what she needed from him. Only what he needed from her.

He fell asleep with her draped across his back, blanketing him with her slight body.

\* \* \* \*

Emily watched him sleep until her heart hurt so much she could barely breathe. It hadn't always been that way, of course. It hadn't always made her cry just to watch him sleep. It hadn't always been a struggle to just lie beside him without touching him, without begging him to touch her. That had only been a recent development, but it weighed on her until she felt like an old woman.

She slowly removed herself from him and the bed, dressing without making a sound. She found the key on a chain in the bathroom, resting on the vanity. She still couldn't understand what he had hoped to accomplish. Didn't he understand that she just needed him? That if he had made any sort of effort, she would have stayed, as patient and loyal as an old hound? She hated to think that of herself, but she knew it was true. She loved him, even now, but she hadn't signed up for a life of isolation.

Emily had hoped that he would be angry when he learned about Justin. Hoped? She'd counted on

it. She'd only wanted to provoke a reaction of some sorts, but he had never noticed. Never even gave a hint that he suspected. All she wanted was some signal, some clue as to his feelings. Now it seemed she had it. He wasn't angry...or even put out. She had seen him react more strongly to a baseball game than he had to the news of her short affair with Justin.

Emily put the key around her neck, and fished around in the dark, searching for his car keys and cell phone. Peter never stirred. He slept like the dead—especially after sex. Her heart twisted a little at the thought. Had he even noticed that she hadn't come? Did he even care anymore?

She took extra time to grab all her clothes as she dressed. She wouldn't be returning to the penthouse in Los Angeles, and it wouldn't do to leave any important belongings in the Pumpkin House. She would miss it. She would miss it all.

Emily stopped at the door, picking up the framed wedding photo she kept on the side table near the door. Her heart swelled at the memory. She had been genuinely happy that day, with Peter handsome and strong by her side. What had happened to him? When had she lost him?

Was he lost to her forever?

Emily couldn't bear to think of that. She was prepared to leave him, she knew she should, and start her life again with somebody who had time to be a husband. But Peter wasn't a stupid man, and she believed he wasn't an inherently selfish one

*The Pumpkin House*

either. She fingered the key at her neck, considering her options. He wanted to talk. He wanted a nother shot.

She wanted to give him one.  
On her terms.

## **Chapter 4**

Peter knew before he opened his eyes that he was alone. He didn't have to see the empty bed to note Emily's absence. He was cold. Colder than he had ever been. He called her name, a part of him hoping she was only a few feet away—fixing her hair in the bathroom or making coffee in the kitchen. But there was no response.

Peter knew she had to be somewhere in the house. He had locked the door the night before, and he was the only one with a key. But his neck felt oddly naked, and he didn't feel the reassuring weight of the key against his chest.

"Oh shit," he muttered, jumping out of bed.

He didn't bother to pull on his pants before rushing to the door. Locked. He noticed a piece of notepaper out of the corner of his eye, resting in the frame of the photo she kept on the dresser.

*Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater*

*Had another and didn't love her.*

*I hope you enjoy your time in the Pumpkin House, Peter. Don't worry; you won't starve. There's plenty of food. I'll come back for you in a week. Maybe it'll give you time to think.*

*Emily*

Peter crumpled the letter into a ball, dropping it on the floor thoughtlessly. “Emily!” He pounded on the door, shouting her name until he was hoarse.

“Are you quite done?” she called through the open window once he collapsed on the floor.

“Emily? You’re still here? Let me out!”

“No.”

“Emily, come on, be reasonable.”

“Like you were yesterday?”

“Is this some sort of revenge?”

“Not revenge, Peter. I’m trying to help you.”

Peter stood up, looking out the small, round window. She stood in the yard, smiling back at him.

“Help me? Help me how?”

“You want to win me back, right?” Emily asked.

“You know I do!”

“Well, look, you’ll have all the time in the world to figure out a *positive* way to do just that. No distractions. No excuses. No escape. Good luck!”

“Emily, wait! Are you really going to leave me here by myself for a week?”

“I’m just going down to the beach. It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” She whistled, calling Remi to her side. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Are you going to meet Justin?” Peter regretted the question as soon as he asked it, but he couldn’t call the words back. He knew she had heard him, but she didn’t answer, instead, she turned her back to the house and jogged down to the crashing waves.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked around the unfamiliar living room, surprised by how little of it was recognizable. She didn’t even have a television or a computer. What did she do up there?

Besides carry on affairs.

Peter collapsed on the sofa, covering his face with his arm, blocking both the light and any visual reminders of her. What the hell was he supposed to do? This weekend was not going according to plan. Nothing was going according to plan.

He couldn’t even check his email. What *did* she do with herself all day? Hang out at the beach?

“There’s only one way to find out,” he muttered, pushing himself to his feet.

The cottage wasn’t large. Just one bedroom, one bath, the living area, a small kitchen, and a dining room. A quick glance of the immediate area didn’t reveal anything interesting. With a shrug, he moved into the kitchen.

His grandmother’s kitchen had always smelled of garlic, an aroma so deeply suffused in her cooking and in her life that no amount of cleaning would ever remove it. Emily’s kitchen didn’t smell of garlic, but rather it carried a sharp, spicy smell—one that reminded him of warm, Christmas mornings.

Peter opened the fridge, expecting to find milk, juice, eggs, and maybe some ground beef. Nothing fancy. Emily had never been much of a cook, and he ate most of his meals out—either with clients or

between meetings. He gaped at the fully stocked refrigerator, blinking quickly, as if his eyes needed to be cleared.

There was milk, juice, and eggs, to be certain. But there were also cakes, pies, and tiny, perfectly formed sugar statues. He stared at the delicate, beautifully done pastries with awe, his hunger forgotten. Had Emily made these herself? When? How? As far as he knew, she had never even made a birthday cake, but he was staring at real pieces of art. He carefully lifted a sugar ballerina out of the fridge, holding it up to the light to examine its delicate features. It looked back at him, its hand-painted face expressive and exquisite.

What other mysteries did the house hold?

Deeply curious, he replaced the small dancer, shut the door softly, and prowled around the kitchen. He found her instruments of creation in the pantry—molds, ingredients, paintbrushes, food coloring, and items he had no hope of naming. Why hadn't she ever mentioned any of this?

Peter went into the dining room next, but it was no longer a place for eating food. The room had been completely cleared of furniture, except for a stool and an easel placed in the center beneath a newly installed skylight. At least, he assumed it was newly installed. It certainly hadn't been there when he bought the house.

Curious, he crossed the room to study the half-done portrait resting there. At first, he had assumed the male figure was Justin, and his heart twisted



## *The Pumpkin House*

with the fresh emotion of bitter jealousy. But on closer inspection, he discovered that the portrait was of him—the still faceless man had his build, his haircut, and even his clothes. Behind the figure was the wide expanse of ocean, the waves almost real enough to touch.

Peter found more surprising touches in the bedroom. Small landscape portraits lined the walls—each containing her signature—and he noted that the bedspread he had spent the night under was hand stitched. When he returned to the living area, he saw it with new eyes. Handmade pillows, paintings, carvings—all the colors delicately balanced, held together with a careful, talented eye.

The Pumpkin House was her masterpiece.

He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, surrounding himself with her perfume, her touch, her delicate sensibilities. Peter had never felt so close to his wife, and he couldn't even touch her.

Peter pulled a chair over to the open window, settling himself there, listening for Emily and Remi's approach. He could hear the breakers crashing against the beach, the seagulls shouting overhead, and Remi's distant bark on the fresh breeze that drifted through the window.

"Emily," he whispered, hoping her name would float along the wind and find her. "Emily."

He hadn't been able to sleep the night he'd met her. Every time he'd closed his eyes, he'd seen her dazzling smile, laughing eyes, and soft hair. He vividly recalled the way he'd ached to touch her—

hold her, kiss her, be with her. That ache had never really dissipated; even after the first night he had fallen asleep with her supple body in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Peter watched Emily's eyes light up with relieved satisfaction. Bringing Emily to the yacht had been a gamble, but it paid off in spades when she smiled.

"Oh, I love the ocean," she exclaimed, dancing onto the deck. "Are we going out into the harbor?"

"Of course. There's nothing like seeing the stars from the ocean. Stay here, make yourself comfortable," he invited. "I'll be right back."

Peter left her to explore the deck as he went down below to find the champagne chilling in the galley. He arranged it on a tray with strawberries, acknowledging with a rueful grin that he was bringing to life a hundred clichés. But clichés worked, and he had never met a woman who could resist a slow seduction on the ocean beneath a canopy of stars.

He found her sitting against the railing; her shoes casually tossed aside, her feet curled beneath her legs. She looked casual and sophisticated all at the same time, like a supermodel who managed to be coy, yet accessible with a curve of her lips.

"Champagne?"

Emily smiled. "That sounds divine."

"You get started on this while I cast off," he said, leaving the tray beside her.

"Is this your yacht?" she asked.

*The Pumpkin House*

"My father's. But he hardly uses it anymore."

"The house is your father's as well, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Don't you want something that's just yours?" she asked, her tone friendly.

"Well, it'll all be mine...eventually," Peter said.

"You mean when he dies."

Peter smiled as he raised the anchor. "Well, yes."

"I mean owning something now. Possessing it without somebody else's approval."

Peter nodded. "I know what you mean. It's never been that important to me."

"What is important to you?" Emily asked, sipping the champagne. She giggled, wrinkling her nose. "I'm never prepared for the bubbles."

"Bubbles are important," Peter said as he guided the yacht away from the dock.

"What else?"

"Family is important. Heritage. Being a part of something...something special."

"Is that why you joined your father's firm?" Emily asked.

"Well...what else could I do?"

She uncurled her long, shapely legs, and stretched like a cat. "Strike out on your own. You're talented enough, smart enough certainly."

"How do you know that?" Peter asked without a hint of false modesty.

"I know a great deal about you, Peter Gourd. It seems people can't stop talking about Harry Gourd's talented young son and his bright future."

Peter smiled. "Is that why you're here? Wanna get in on the ground floor?"

She winked, standing up. "Of course. That and you're kind of cute. Handsome, even."

Peter finally blushed, looking down as she approached. "You're not too bad yourself."

"Champagne?" she asked, holding out her glass. He took it from her silently, preparing himself for the bubbles that would hit his nose.

"What about you?" Peter asked.

"What about me?"

"Do you own anything? Is there anything that's just yours?"

Emily's slow smile held a hint of mystery. "Not yet. But there is something I've had my eyes on."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Who."

"Who?"

Her smile deepened. "A rather fetching young man..."

"Should I be jealous?" he murmured, taking another sip from the champagne.

"Perhaps. What's below the deck?"

Peter nodded. "You're more than welcome to explore."

"I think I'll do that."

Soon after, she disappeared below deck, soft jazz flowed from the speakers. He dropped anchor

near the mouth of the harbor, and then sought her out, finding her in the galley, peeking through the fridge.

“Hey, hey, the picnic was supposed to be a surprise.”

Emily turned around, startled, her mouth full. “I’m sorry,” she said, smiling sheepishly. “I was hungry.”

“Why don’t we finish this up on the deck?” Peter asked, lifting the basket from the fridge.

“You’ve pulled out all the stops, haven’t you?”

“I’m very thorough.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Is that true?”

“I also never lie.”

“Maybe I’ll have to take your word for it,” she said, slinking past him to the stairs.

“Maybe you won’t have to,” he said beneath his breath.

Peter laid out the picnic with a flourish, but he wasn’t interested in eating. Emily’s clear enjoyment of the food entranced him. Everything Emily did entranced him. He tried to gauge his chances with her, and he thought he had a pretty good shot. She definitely seemed interested. The way she flirted with her words, her eyes, the slow smile she flashed when she noticed him staring at her.

“You aren’t hungry?” she asked.

“Not for food.”

“Oh?”

Peter smiled, refilling her champagne. “Emily, what would you say if I told you I wanted to kiss you?”

“I’d ask you to wait until I finished eating.”

He chuckled. “That’s a fair enough request.”

Emily continued eating with exaggerated slowness, a playful smile on her lips. She glanced at him with twinkling eyes as she chewed each bite for what must have been a thousand times.

“You know,” she said after swallowing a dainty forkful of food. “My mother always told me I should chew my food one hundred times to help with digestion. Do you think that’s true?”

Peter eyed the rather large portion still left on her plate. “I think such rules are meant to be broken.”

Emily sipped from her champagne. “Break the rules?” Wiping the corners of her mouth with the edge of her napkin, she added, “If you say so.”

“I do.”

She tilted her head slightly, her gaze boldly meeting his. “You may kiss me now.”

Peter didn’t waste any time. He buried his hands in her hair, holding her in place as his mouth descended. He had turned their first kiss in his mind over and over, remembering every moment, every detail, but he still wasn’t prepared for the shock of her soft lips against his. Kissing her reminded Peter of eating rich chocolate—the way the taste of her coated his lips and tongue, the way she melted beneath his touch.

He kissed her slowly, coaxing sweet moans from deep in her throat. He controlled the tempo with his lips, refusing to deepen the kiss even as she clutched his shirt, pulling him closer against her body. He could feel a hot blush rise up her cheeks, the heat radiating through his own skin. He tasted her frustration as she squirmed. She undid him when she begged him wordlessly, her small moans and body communicating every desire she longed for him to fulfill.

The salty sea air mingled with the perfume on her skin, creating a heady aroma. Peter finally broke their kiss, burying his face against her neck, inhaling more of her wonderful, intoxicating perfume. He sucked on her sensitive skin gently, careful not to leave a mark, as he sought the zipper to her dress with clammy fingers, his skin slipping against the small zipper several times before he could get a good grip.

Peter pulled the zipper down slowly, exposing her back to his touch inch by inch. He caressed her with the tips of his fingers, but he got the best response from her when he scraped his nails along her spine, leaving three parallel red marks against her light skin. She shivered with delight, her back arching like a cat's.

Emily grabbed the back of his head, guiding his mouth back to hers. She kissed him with an intensity born of lust and desperation. Her tongue probed his mouth, exploring it boldly. Peter increased the speed and pressure of the kiss, and

she responded in kind. No longer restrained, he tore heedlessly at her clothes, and she his, until their chests were exposed in the night air. Her soft breasts were pressed against his skin, her chest heaving as more of their skin was exposed, came in contact, finally touched.

Peter pulled the dress from her arms, leaving it hanging off her waist, and goosebumps erupted across her skin. "We could go downstairs if you're cold," he offered.

Emily shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

He ran his fingers up her arm to her shoulder, where he traced a small pattern of interlocking circles. "You're shivering," he murmured.

"That has nothing to do with the temperature," she said, bringing his mouth to hers again. "I promise you."

Peter cupped her breasts in his hands, enjoying the weight of them against his palms. Her own hands were busy as she pushed his shirt away before setting to work on his pants. She unzipped the fly, but had difficulty pushing the pants down. Peter stood up, pulling Emily to her feet as well. He pushed her dress past her hips, letting it slide down her thighs, until she stood before him in nothing but a lacy bra and panties. His pants met the same fate, joining her dress on the deck.

Emily smiled as he admired her body. She didn't move when he began to circle her, admiring her fine physique like he would admire an Italian sculpture, noting every beautiful detail with



delight, committing every mark, every curve to his memory, not taking for granted that he would get this chance again. Emily looked like a goddess, the moonlight and waves reflecting off her skin. But it wasn't her perfect body that made his cock throb, and set his teeth on edge—it was her calm confidence. She didn't blush from the weight of his gaze on her skin, she didn't avoid his stare, and she never lost control of the situation.

Peter finally approached her, pressing his chest against her back. Emily leaned against him, her hair a curtain of silk between them. He dropped a kiss on the top of her arm before sliding his mouth along the slope of her shoulder, brushing her hair away with one hand as he continued his exploration, his mouth gliding down her spine. She gasped, tensing, signaling that he should go further. He wrapped his hands around her trim waist, holding her as he moved lower.

When his mouth reached the thin barrier of her panties, he took the edge between his teeth and pulled it down her legs. She laughed, surprised, but the laughter died in her throat as his mouth returned to the plump roundness of her exposed bottom. He licked the delicate skin at the top of her thigh, drawing his tongue along the curve of her full cheek. She whimpered, her legs trembling.

He put a steadying hand against her calf, using his other to explore the area between her thighs. Her juices were slick against his fingers; the soft curls at the juncture of her thighs damp. Peter

swallowed hard, his breath coming in quick gasps. His balls ached, the head of his cock was wet with desire, and he just wanted to bend her over the railing and thrust into her until they were both delirious. But he also wanted to taste her, everywhere.

Peter gently forced her legs apart, exposing her pussy to his eyes, his fingers, his mouth. He found her clit with the tip of his finger, applying just a bit of pressure. She jumped, gasping, her hand going to his finger, holding it there. Peter smiled, allowing her to guide his finger in small circles. While she focused on that, he slid his tongue between her full pussy lips, lapping up her sweet juices, eliciting louder moans from her.

“I can’t...my legs...” she gasped. “I need to sit down.”

“Not yet,” he said, licking his lips. “Not quite.”  
“Ohhh.”

“Come on, baby,” he said against her skin. “I want to taste you come.” To prove his point, his tongue delved back into the soft folds of skin. She tasted like maple syrup, thick and sweet. Her whole body shook around him, her thighs trembling against his head as his tongue moved deeper, and she forced the finger against her clit to move faster.

Emily tensed around him suddenly, a harsh scream ripping from her throat, echoing across the water and back into his ears. Her clit jerked and throbbed against his finger, her body convulsed, and she seemed to melt into his mouth, like sticky,

*The Pumpkin House*

sweet chocolate. He finally released her, standing up just in time to catch her as she slumped forward.

“What did you do to my legs?” she murmured. “They don’t seem to be working.”

Peter lifted her into his arms effortlessly. “Now I’m taking you below deck.”

Emily only nodded, resting her head against his shoulder.

## **Chapter 5**

Peter was pulled from his sweet memories by the sound of Remi barking outside the door. He jumped to his feet, looking out the window for any sight of Emily. He saw her sitting on the hood of his car, staring at the cell phone as if she expected it to ring any moment.

“Emily!” he called.

She looked up, shielding her eyes against the midday sun. “What?”

“Come over, please.”

She hesitated, and he thought she would ignore his request, but she jumped off the car and sauntered over to the house. “I hope you’re not getting restless in there. You’ve still got a lot of time left in your retreat.”

Peter waited until she was on the porch before speaking. “I didn’t know,” he said.

“You didn’t know what?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“I thought this was just a weekend getaway, you know? I didn’t realize it was...it’s a masterpiece. It’s beautiful,” Peter said, genuinely excited.

“Well, I suppose if you had...”

“If I wasn’t such a selfish bastard and I paid attention, I would have known. I know. But I know now. You know, if you want, I could contact Gracie Kimbell. She’d be more than willing to see some of your work.”

“Wait...Gracie Kimbell as in the *Kimbell Art Gallery*?” Emily asked.

“Yes. Her father is a client of mine. You know, she’s always looking for new talent and I...”

“Don’t bother,” Emily said, cutting him off.

Peter frowned, confused. “Don’t bother? Emily, you’re one of the most talented people I have ever seen. Your work should be out there...”

“Not everything is about money,” she snapped.

“Of course it’s not. I’m not talking about selling your work, Emily.”

“Then what are you talking about?” she asked, sounding interested despite herself.

“The world should see how magnificent you are. Look, even if you hate me and you don’t want anything to do with me, please let me help you with this.”

He could see that she was beginning to soften to the idea. She dropped her arms to her side and took another step forward. “You really think I’m that talented?”

Peter gaped. “What? You don’t?”

“It’s just a hobby. I picked up a painting kit one day to bring up here with me, and everything snowballed from there. I kept picking up more and

more beginner's kits...to keep myself busy. To keep my hands busy."

Peter nodded. "I understand. You have such a great eye for detail."

She snorted. "Sometimes I wonder."

Peter let the barb pass without comment, muzzling his lawyerly instincts to reply in kind. "Let's discuss this over dinner."

Emily turned away, stepping off the porch. "Ha. Nice try, Peter."

"Emily, wait. Please, I'm serious. I want to discuss this with you over dinner. I won't try anything. Look, I'll even cook."

She turned to face him again with a dry grin. "You don't know how to cook. You've always had somebody around to do it for you, remember?"

Peter nodded. "You're right. Well, why don't I order some food to be delivered? Anything you like."

"How about this...I'll go pick up some food and bring it over tonight."

"Now."

"What?"

"Let's eat now," Peter said.

"It's not dinnertime."

He rolled his eyes. "Then we'll discuss it over lunch."

Emily walked up to the window, now amused. "You know, for a guy at my mercy, you're awfully bossy."

Peter tried to find his most charming smile. “I just can’t stand the thought of being away from you.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Peter bit his tongue, keeping his smile in place. “Maybe I did fool you before, but I have no intention of doing it again.”

She nodded. “Fine. I’ll be back in an hour.”

Peter smiled genuinely, his hopes rising. “I’ll be waiting.”

\* \* \* \*

Emily ignored the tears stinging the backs of her eyes as she navigated Peter’s car along the coastal highway. It shouldn’t have meant so much to her that he’d noticed her work. She didn’t do it for him, or anybody else, for that matter. When she sat down with a new project, she only wanted to please herself. It never occurred to her to show her paintings or her cakes to anybody else—it never occurred to her that anybody else would want to see them.

So why did it matter that Peter said she should be in a gallery?

*Maybe he’s just trying to trick you. He’s a lawyer. He knows how to find a weakness.*

Emily shook her head at the thought. He wasn’t a manipulative person—clueless and career-driven, but not manipulative. She thought she still knew him well enough to know when he was being honest, and he had sounded genuine in his assessment of her work.

## *The Pumpkin House*

It still shouldn't have made her cry.

Though, if she were honest with herself, she could admit that she had always fantasized about bringing him to the Pumpkin House and sharing the experience with him. The painting she had started of him months ago languished undone because she couldn't get his face quite right—she needed him to model for her. Emily also knew that he had a healthy appreciation for the visual arts and the education to make it meaningful—he could be a very helpful critic, if she allowed him to be.

If he wanted to share her world with her.

Emily stopped at a small seafood shack on the edge of Farmer's Beach. It didn't look like much to the ignorant eye, in fact, it didn't look like a restaurant at all. It literally looked like a shack. But it was Emily's favorite place to eat, and she knew the proprietors—an elderly couple from New England—quite well. Well enough to simply place an order for two of the usual, and wait at the small bar with a cold beer.

"Two, eh?" Bonnie asked, a warm smile on her plump face. "You have your young man with you this weekend?"

Emily sipped her beer. "My husband."

Bonnie looked as shocked as Emily had felt when she first saw Peter's car. "Your husband? What's the special occasion?"

"I'm divorcing him."

"You are? Catch him with another woman?" Bonnie asked, wiping the bar down.



“Not at all. Bonnie?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Do you believe in second chances?”

Bonnie leaned over the bar. “Is he asking for one?”

“He is,” Emily said, looking at the amber liquid in her mug instead of Bonnie’s gray eyes.

“Is he worth it?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Emily answered honestly. “I think so. But what if I’m wrong? Then I’ll have to go through all this again, and I’m not sure I can. I thought a clean break would be for the best, but I didn’t count on...well, I didn’t think he’d fight me.”

“Sometimes men don’t know what they want until you tell them,” Bonnie said. “Perhaps he just needed a warning, eh?”

Emily nodded. “Perhaps.”

“Ahh, here’s your food,” Bonnie said, handing her a large plastic bag. “I’ll put it on your tab. You go on home.”

“Thanks.”

“Good luck,” Bonnie called after her.

Emily waved. *Luck?* She would need a bit more than luck. First she would need the assurance that Peter wouldn’t look at her like...well, like he had the night before, when he’d stepped out of the bathroom and thought she was asleep. A little desperate, a little lonely, and very hungry. He had a certain spark in his eye that never failed to warm her, making her damp between the legs. Even

though she was fully aware of the effect he had on her, she was helpless to fight it.

What if he looked at her like that over lunch? Could she ignore it?

Did she really want to ignore it? After all, it wasn't a sin to sleep with one's own husband.

When she returned to the cottage, she found Peter in the kitchen, putting the final touches on the table. He had even found and lit her tall candlesticks. She couldn't help but smirk. "You usually add romantic touches to your business lunches?"

"I was hoping this could be more than just a business lunch," Peter admitted. "What did you get?"

"Cracked crab salad and crab cakes," Emily said, pulling the food from the bag.

"Sounds delicious."

"Do you want to get a couple of beers from the fridge? I think there's some behind the cakes."

"I didn't know you drank German beer," Peter said, returning to the table with two open bottles.

"Oh, I don't," she answered without thinking. "Justin picked..." Her voice tapered off, fresh shame filling her. "I think I should explain or something."

"No," Peter said, waving his hand. "Don't worry about it."

"Well, I think I *should* worry about it. I broke our marriage vows, Peter, and I can be all blustery and defensive, but that doesn't change the fact that

I did something wrong,” she said, the food forgotten on the table.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Peter said mildly.

“Why won’t you get angry?” Emily demanded.

Peter exhaled slowly. “Do you want me to get angry? If I yell and threaten you, maybe even get the best divorce lawyer in the state, would that make you love me again?”

Emily hesitated. “No. But I don’t understand. Most men in your situation would be livid.”

“Emily, sit down. I guess I could try to explain. I don’t know if it would do any good though,” Peter said, sitting across from her. “My life is about finding winning strategies. That’s it. That’s all I know how to do. When we first met, you told me you knew my name because everybody talked about the brilliant young Peter Gourd, right? I’m not that brilliant. I caught their attention because I know how to strategize. That’s all.”

“And yelling at me isn’t a winning strategy,” Emily stated.

“Right. But then again, neither is ignoring you, is it?”

“Ignoring me is a poor strategy,” she agreed.

She watched as Peter dug into his food, her appetite suddenly lost. “This is really good,” he exclaimed.

“It is.”

He chased his food with his beer, making no further comment on its origin. “Okay, I’ve been

thinking about it since you left, and I'm not sure a gallery show is a good idea."

"Oh?" She felt oddly deflated. Apparently, his opinion had meant more than she even realized.

"I think you should open your own bakery," he continued.

"My own what?"

"You know, for cakes and stuff. Do you know how many weddings I've been to in the past ten years? Probably a hundred. I've never seen a cake as beautiful as the one that's just sitting in your fridge right now," Peter said.

Emily blushed. "What? Lying to me isn't going to help your case."

"I'm not lying, Emily. Look, I'm not saying I'm going to force you to open your own shop. But if it's something you enjoy doing, and something you want to try, I'll be more than happy to invest in the venture."

She shook her head. "I don't feel comfortable taking your money, Peter. You know that."

"No, listen. I said I'd be more than happy to invest. I expect to make a profit."

Emily tilted her head, studying the man across from her. He looked serious, his eyes narrow and shrewd. This was a businessman, offering a partnership, not her husband trying to win back her affections.

"My own shop," she whispered, trying the words.

“You once asked me if I wanted to own something without somebody else’s approval. Neither of us has ever had that, have we?” Peter asked.

“I remember.”

“I want to own something with you, Emily. I want to build something with you. I just...” He shook his head. “I don’t know if I can explain this properly.”

“Try,” Emily encouraged.

He smiled. “I will. I told you I joined my father’s firm because it was his heritage, and his father’s heritage before him. What’s mine? I haven’t created anything. I haven’t done a fraction of what you’ve accomplished.” Peter leaned forward, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. “I want to work with you. I want to create something with you.”

Emily caught her breath, unsure of what to think. “Does that mean you’re...leaving the firm?”

“It can get on just fine without me.”

“But the firm is your life, Peter.”

“It was. But that didn’t work out too well for me, did it? So what do you think of having your own bakery, Emily? A place where you can shine?”

Emily stared at him, unable to speak. She couldn’t comprehend what he was telling her, only half of his words were making sense. He wanted to leave the firm? He wanted to disrupt their entire lives? He wanted to invest in her so-called talent? Was this some sort of dream? Or worse, a sick game?

Her shocked silence stretched too long. Peter's face fell, his enthusiasm banished. He turned back to his food, muttering, "Yeah, I guess it was a stupid idea anyway."

A lump formed in Emily's throat. "Peter? I just...I just can't believe what I'm hearing. You've said everything that I ever wanted you to say, but..."

"But it's three years too late," he provided.

"No. No. But this is a huge decision, Peter. It's going to change everything in our lives. Everything. Can you deal with that? Can you handle risking losing everything you own?" Emily asked. "We have to be realistic about this."

"I am being realistic," Peter insisted. "I'm not going to burn my bridges, Emily. I'm taking a vacation, a sabbatical. I didn't sign my soul over to *Gourd and Gourd*, and I don't have to feel guilty if I want to do something else with my time. It is my time, after all."

Emily took a deep breath. She could see that he meant every single word. Of course, she didn't know the first thing about running a business, but then, she supposed they could hire somebody who did. And she had never seen him so excited about anything. The idea had lit some spark in his imagination, some fuse deep within him, and now he glowed.

"Then I'm with you one hundred percent," Emily told him.

His bright smile returned. "You're serious?"

"As serious as you are."

Peter jumped to his feet, putting his hand out to her when he reached her side. "Come on, then."

"Where are we going?" Emily asked, taking his hand.

"I still owe you for last night, don't I?"

"I don't know. Do you?" Her stomach dropped to her toes. There was *that* look.

He pulled her to her feet, and leaned over her, brushing his mouth against her ear. "Did you think that I didn't notice that I left the job, uh...unfinished?" He lowered his voice further, his words just a breath of air against her skin. "I do want to see you come."

"Oh..."

Emily allowed him to lead her to the bedroom, her stomach suddenly twisting with nerves. Her legs were heavy, numb. She tried to swallow, but her throat was too tight. Her hand felt clammy in his, her face hot, and her blood on fire. She hadn't felt that heady combination of fear and lust since she was a teenager, fumbling like a fool in the backseat of her boyfriend's Ford.

Peter pushed the bedding to the floor, leaving only one crisp sheet and the pillows. "I don't want anything to get in the way," he explained.

Emily nodded. "Of course."

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You look a little warm."

She fanned her face with her hand. "Well, it is a little warm in here, isn't it?"

“Let me help you out with that...” He wrapped one arm around her, pulling her close to him. She looked up, expecting him to kiss her, but he focused his attention on the buttons of her shirt. With deliberate slowness, he unhooked each button, revealing her braless breasts an inch at a time.

“Better?” Peter asked, tossing her shirt away.

Emily shivered, chills racing down her back, the hair on her neck standing on end. The sunlight caught his face, and she studied him with a critical eye. He looked so much older than she remembered. Deep lines furrowed his forehead and there were dark bags beneath his eyes. Frown lines marred his mouth, exhaustion made his entire face droop. He was still a young man, but he looked at least a decade older, if not more.

Emily watched his face as he touched her, noting the intensity of his eyes, the concentration with each move he made. She tingled everywhere he touched her, her body happy to respond to his expert ministrations. He knew each sensitive area—the small area on her neck beneath her ear, her inner arm, the pulse point on her wrist—and he knew how to touch her. On a purely physical level, everything was happening as it should, but something nagged at her, held her back.

Peter took his time undressing her, pausing often to kiss and caress each bit of flesh he uncovered. He created a chaotic path of fire across her body; making each bit of skin he touched burn with need. She wanted to lose herself to that



sensation, let her brain be consumed by the same heat that ravished her body. She wanted to close her eyes, focus on the feel of his body, the smell of him, the way he responded to her.

“Are you with me?” Peter asked, kissing the corner of her mouth.

She nodded. “Of course.”

“You just seem a little distracted.” He ran his fingers down her ribs, not quite tickling her.

“I’m not...I’m not distracted. I just don’t know what...” Emily shook her head, blurting, “I don’t know what to do with you anymore.”

Peter lifted his head, confused. “Well, I think it’s all pretty straightforward...”

“I don’t know how to explain.” She sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed. “You know how and where to touch me, you do everything right. You always have. It’s just...I’m really nervous.”

Emily expected him to laugh—she knew she was being terribly silly—but he didn’t. He sat down beside her, his face thoughtful. “If you’d rather not...if you don’t want to, I understand.”

“I think I do.”

Peter smiled. “You sound so sure of yourself.”

She looked down, staring at her hands. “I’m not sure of anything anymore, Peter. This time yesterday, I was sitting on the edge of our bed, crying because I didn’t think I had the courage to walk out, even though I had already emailed you. Now, here I am, just twenty-four hours later, and

*The Pumpkin House*

you claim to be a completely different person. I don't know if I can trust it..."

"You mean, you don't know if you can trust me," he said.

"No, I mean, I don't know if I can trust this, us."

Peter hooked his finger beneath her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Let me make it easy for you. Just follow my lead."

## **Chapter 6**

Peter pushed Emily until she was lying flat on her back. She held her breath as she watched him undress. Despite the extra years on his face, his body still looked trim and defined. Once his clothes were out of the way, he crossed the room to open the window, letting the sound of the water's rhythm and the smell of the ocean into the small bedroom. Emily could hear Remi barking in the distance, but besides that, the world was eerily quiet.

Peter stretched out beside her, his hand hovering over her body, the tip of his cock pressing against her thigh. She guided his hand to her breast, silently encouraging him to begin. He rubbed her nipple with the flat of his hand until it hardened and then pulled the stiff flesh between his lips, allowing his teeth to delicately scrape against the tip. She shuddered as her body responded to the gentle coaxing—her legs opened, her throat clenched, and her other nipple hardened.

Peter worked on both breasts, alternately rubbing and licking, taking his time. The sharp pleasure coiled in her stomach, winding tighter and tighter as he continued the slow torture. His tongue moved like a snake's, flicking over her throbbing

flesh just enough to heighten the tension in her body without providing any relief. Emily moaned, trying to find the words to tell him to stop, or go faster, or never stop. She didn't know what she needed, but she knew she wouldn't be able to tolerate his quick tongue and playful fingers for much longer.

He put one hand flat against her rapidly rising and falling chest. "Your heart's beating like a jackrabbit's, and I haven't even done anything."

She groaned. "I know."

"Would you like me to do something more?" Peter asked, his clever fingers abandoning her rock-hard nipples and moving south.

Emily's clit throbbed from the implicit promise in his question. Unconsciously, she spread her legs further, granting him easier access.

"Is that a yes?"

She could only nod.

His finger brushed against the throbbing flesh between her legs, igniting a sharp flare of desire so intense, it knocked the breath from her lungs. Emily wanted him. That second. She didn't want to wait, didn't want to play games. The chemistry of her body changed as thousands of years of programming overtook her—her mind shut down, blood rushed to her lower stomach, her pussy grew slick, its lips swollen and sensitive.

Emily reached between their bodies, curling her fingers around the shaft of his hard cock. She jerked her wrist, pulling him closer to her. He

gasped, closing his eyes, his mouth opening and closing as she stroked him, her hips jerking forward in time with her hand.

"I'm gonna climb the wall here soon," she muttered thickly. It was difficult to find and form words, even harder to push them past her lips. "You need to do something here..."

"What would you like?" His words were as thick, almost impossible to understand. He slid his finger over her clit again, sending more sparks flying through her body.

"Don't...care," she gasped, pumping his cock harder, as if to punctuate her point.

Peter gently freed his cock from her fingers, pulling her hand away. "I think...I have something. Don't move."

He positioned himself over her body, his head between her legs, his cock dangling over her mouth. She gripped the base, near his balls, and guided the head to her mouth. Just as her lips closed over his shaft, his tongue darted out over her clit, circling it quickly. Her hips bucked at the contact, pushing her pussy closer to his mouth.

After a few hesitant seconds, she found his rhythm, bodies and heads rocking in tandem. Emily always enjoyed this position, though they rarely used it. She liked the sensation of his cock sliding down her throat, the weight of his body on hers, the musky way he smelled, the feeling of being completely overwhelmed by his masculinity, but at the same time, completely in charge.

It was also the best angle for his mouth. She didn't understand how or why, but she always climaxed faster when he licked from above...when he pulled her clit between his lips, sucking with gentle strength...when he stuck a finger into her wet channel, finding her g-spot.

Emily gripped his thighs, kneading her fingers into his thick muscles as he pumped his cock into her mouth. She marveled at the way his muscles tensed and clenched around her, the way she could feel his pounding pulse against her face, hear his ragged breathing that echoed hers so closely. He tasted salty and sounded hungry as he moved his mouth over her wet lips, sucking and licking her clit.

"God," he gasped, lifting his head to catch his breath. "I can't... Honey, I'm going to..."

Emily didn't let his words disrupt the rhythm she had established. She continued to move her mouth over his shaft, letting the tip of his cock brush against the back of her throat. She moved her hands away from the back of his thighs, cupping his balls with one while massaging his inner thigh with the other. His body jerked at the new contact, his muscles tensing.

Peter pulled out of her mouth, stroking his cock one final time before coming on her chest. She ignored the warm, white liquid dripping from the side of her breasts, completely distracted by the growing ache between her legs. The pain spread through her body, honing the pleasure to a sharp

edge. Emily knew she couldn't stand it for another minute.

"Please, Peter," she whispered.

He pushed himself away, turned until he faced her, and straddled her body again. She could see that he was ready for her again. He didn't waste any time, and for that she was undeniably grateful. He thrust into her as soon as she wrapped her legs around his waist, leveraging herself for the most pleasure. The head of his cock hit her g-spot, sending fresh spirals of red bliss through her. Peter thrust into her with short, sharp jerks of his hips, creating just the right amount of friction to make her scream with every movement, the pleasure boiling in her body until she was unable to contain it.

Peter leaned over, his tongue lapping at her breasts, circling her nipples, cleaning his come from her skin. She gripped the sides of his head, holding him against her chest, while jerking her body, trying to force him to move even faster. He obliged, and then bit her nipple hard enough to make her yelp. As soon as she released his head, he claimed her mouth with his, the taste of her sweet juices and his salty cum sliding over her tongue, surprising her, making her muscles clench with fresh pleasure and lust.

The orgasm didn't hijack her body until he broke the kiss and met her eyes. She could see herself reflected in his brown eyes, could see her pleasure, her need, her yearning. The heat of his

gaze scorched her, the weight of it made it difficult to breathe. Flashes of light went off behind her eyes, her whole body—every cell—hummed with electricity. She clenched around him, gasping his name, clutching him so she wouldn't be carried away.

Emily fell away from him, her body slick and red, her heart hammering. She sighed, satisfied, tired, vaguely sore and a little sticky. She rolled her head, watching Peter struggle to catch his breath.

"I think we need to shower," she finally said.

"Together?"

"Somebody needs to wash my back, right?"

Peter closed his eyes. "Mmm."

"Well?"

"You go on and get started. I'll be right in."

Emily nodded, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "If I can even walk."

She stumbled into the bathroom, noting the slight twinge between her legs. She was satisfied, but she could definitely stand to go another round or two. Smiling at the thought, she turned the shower on as hot as she could stand it before stepping under the harsh spray.

\* \* \* \*

Peter's cock twitched as he watched Emily sashay across the bedroom. He smiled to himself, not surprised that he was already responding to her again. And the thought of her hot and soapy, waiting for him, only made matters worse.



But before he joined her, he needed a drink. Preferably a stiff one, if she had anything strong in the house. He pushed himself out of bed, resisting the initial temptation to join her in the bathroom when he heard the water start. He needed a few minutes to himself before he joined her again, even if he couldn't find that stiff drink.

Ultimately, the best he could find was a bottle of wine, chilling in the back of the fridge. He pulled the cork, looked around guiltily, and then guzzled the wine directly from the bottle. The cold liquid burned his stomach, the alcohol instantly racing to his head, making the room tilt beneath his feet.

Peter leaned against the counter, trying to find his bearings. When Emily had returned with lunch, the epiphany had hit him. It had all made so much sense that he didn't know why he had never thought of it before. But he hadn't known what he'd planned to say until he'd opened his mouth and the plan about the bakery had flowed from his lips. As he spoke, he had realized it made sense. It was what he wanted to do.

He could tell she had been shocked, but no more so than he had been himself. Quit the firm? Walk away from his success? Turn his back on everything he knew and had been groomed to accomplish? It was terrifying. He had never considered anything so frightening in his life, but it felt right too. He took another swig of the wine. It was already settled, he was already committed, so it didn't matter how it felt, right?

Peter grabbed two glasses with his other hand, and returned to the bathroom. "I brought you something to drink," he announced. "If you need it."

"Oh?"

"The wine in the fridge."

"Thanks."

He set the wine and glasses on the sink before joining her in the shower. He appreciated that it was big enough for two, but he wished they had a bathtub as well. The thought of reclining in hot water and pulling Emily on top of him, sliding into her...

"Hey, be careful," she warned. "You're going to slip."

"Turn around. Let me get started on your back," he said, reaching for her bottle of body wash. He poured a healthy dose in the palm of his hand, working it until he had a handful of suds.

Peter slid his hands over her shoulders, down her back, and along the slope of her bottom, cupping her cheeks in his hands and massaging them with his slick fingers. He slowly worked the tips of his fingers in the crevice of her cheeks, running his fingers up and down the flesh, cleaning it with the gentle soap. Emily slumped forward, resting her head against the cool tile wall, showing her appreciating with small mewls from the back of her throat.

He repositioned her under the spray, washing all the soap away until nothing but clean water ran

down her back and off her legs. Peter put his mouth against the base of her neck, sucking on her softly, before sliding his tongue down her spine, smoothing his hands along her slick body. He knelt behind her, the hot water pounding on his head and rolling over his face. Peter could barely hear her panting breaths over the water crashing around them, but it was enough to let him know she wanted him to continue.

When he reached the top of her ass, he didn't stop; he didn't even slow the onslaught of his mouth. He slid his tongue down the line of her body, the tip barely dipping into the area between her cheeks. He hesitated, giving her the chance to resist. She tensed, the muscles of her thighs taut and quivering, but she didn't try to push him away. Emboldened, he pushed his tongue deeper, licking her most sensitive, hidden area. She squirmed against his face, as though she couldn't decide if she wanted him to continue or if she needed him to stop.

Peter made the decision for her by sliding two fingers into her pussy, smiling against her flesh as she contracted around his fingers, thrusting against his hand. Sufficiently distracted by the expertly applied pressure against her g-spot, she didn't stop Peter when he spread her fleshy cheeks apart and attacked her with his hungry mouth, using his lips, his tongue, and even his teeth to make her scream.

He moved his hand and mouth furiously, using speed, friction, and pressure to make her

incoherent, to make her body alternatively tense and relax, to make her flesh quiver, her pulse race. The hot water poured down her back, over his head, and to her feet, making each second they spent in there treacherous. Peter knew she could lose her balance—knew he could lose his balance himself—but that didn't make him stop. It didn't even make him slow down. He had no intention of releasing her until he felt her orgasm rip through her body, heard him cry his name again.

Emily finally shouted his name when he thrust three fingers into her while he tongued the small, tight circle of flesh. Her pussy flexed and throbbed around his hand, drenching it with her natural liquid as she climaxed. He quickly pulled his naturally lubricated fingers from her and slid his index finger between her ass cheeks, into her puckered opening.

Emily made a strangled, choking sound, her shout of surprise caught in her throat. He slid his other finger in between her pussy lips, brushing against her hard clit.

"Peter...Peter...I can't...you've got to stop...please..."

"Stop? Why?" He didn't slow down.

"Because...I'm...I'm so sensitive," she told him between gasps.

"Sensitive? Isn't that a good thing?"

"Noooo," she moaned. "Stop. Stopstopstopstop."

Peter smiled, gently removing his fingers from her body. "Is that better?"

"No," Emily whimpered.

Peter carefully pulled himself to his feet. Steam billowed around them, making it difficult to breathe, and the room tilted beneath him again. The hot water, the wine, the freedom to lick and touch Emily anyway he pleased, it all made him heady. He thought he would pass out right there, except for the fresh pain in his groin, indicating that he needed to be inside her again.

Peter backed up against the wall, leaning against it to support his weight, and pulled Emily against him. His cock strained against her, slick and red. "Are you too sensitive for this?" he murmured in her ear.

She shook her head.

Peter reached between them, guiding himself into her slick channel. He pushed his cock into her completely, and then held himself there. He didn't move. He just wanted to hold her against his body, glory in the feel, the texture, the give, the firmness of her body. He rested his forehead against her shoulder, the cooling water running into his eyes and mouth, goosebumps erupting across his skin. His chest felt tight, like his heart would burst right from his ribcage. He pulled out slightly, and then thrust forward again, his moan matching hers at the movement.

"I love you," he breathed, gathering himself to thrust into her again. A part of him feared that she

*The Pumpkin House*

would laugh at him again, that even now she refused to believe him.

“I know,” she whispered. “I love you, too.”

Peter reached around her, turning the faucet off. He stood there, tense, shivering, silent, loath to move just yet. He wrapped his arms around her with a brief prayer of thanks, vowing he would never give her a reason to question him again.

## **Chapter 7**

*Nine months later*

Emily gave up the pretense of sleeping as the clock chimed four times. She had to be up in an hour anyway. She quietly rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb Peter, and pulled on her robe. She padded into the kitchen groggily, despite the fact she hadn't slept at all, to make a big pot of coffee.

She had a feeling they would both need regular, large doses of caffeine to get through the day.

Emily stared at the coffee maker while the dark liquid brewed, her mind wandering far away from the kitchen. Four miles away, to a small building that waited for her, tucked between a hairdresser's and a dry cleaner's, its renovated kitchen full of everything she would need to make the most divine cakes Los Angeles had ever seen.

It didn't seem real. Surely, she was still asleep. Dreaming.

Peter had used his connections to secure four clients for her before the bakery opened, and that morning, she would unveil her custom-designed cakes to a flurry of camera flashes and dozens of onlookers. It didn't hurt that her clients included

some of the most well-known movers and shakers in the Southland.

She would also conduct several tours and interviews to important guests throughout the day, and it would all culminate with a small cocktail party at her father-in-law's home. Peter had planned all of it, pouring his energy into the entire process, leaving her free to work on her various designs.

The light flashed on the coffee maker, pulling her from her thoughts. She poured a large cup of the rejuvenating drink, leaving out the sugar and cream. She needed it black today.

Glossy eight-by-ten photographs lined the counter, each one featuring a different angle of several cakes. They were meant to be examples of her work, though now that she had settled on which photographs to use, she hated all of them. Too traditional, too radical, too colorful, too bland, too derivative, too everything. Peter had looked at the same pictures with unmistakable pride on his face, clearly impressed with her work. He had absolute faith in her.

Emily was glad somebody had faith in this venture, because she couldn't seem to call up the same enthusiasm he expressed.

"Preshow jitters?" Peter asked from behind her.

Emily spun around, lifting her cup. "Coffee?"

"It's four in the morning."

"I know. I couldn't sleep."

"I know. Coffee is good."



Emily grabbed the large mug he always used, filling it to the brim. "Black?"

"Is that how you're taking yours?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's fine."

Emily slid the mug over, careful not to spill any. She sipped from her cup, looking at him over the brim, to see him looking at her over his.

"You have nothing to worry about," Peter said, setting his cup down. "Everybody is going to love you."

"That's what you say," she said.

"That's what I know."

"Have you ever actually failed in anything, Peter?" Emily asked, setting her cup aside as well.

"You mean, have I lost cases? Of course, everybody has..."

"No," she said, putting her hand up. "I mean, *failed*. Have you ever been a failure?"

"No," he answered slowly. "What are you getting at?"

"Well, neither have I. Not really. What if we don't know how to fail?" Emily demanded, her words laced with fear.

Peter shook his head. "I'm not following you, sweetheart. Why don't you worry about what a great success you'll be?"

"I'll try. But it won't be easy." Doubt still filled her mind, but she could see Peter didn't have room for it.

“Come back to bed,” he invited, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “You’ve still got an hour before you need to leave. Let me help you take your mind off things.”

Emily nodded. “Yeah, I guess that sounds good.”

Peter led her back to the bedroom, instructing her to stretch out on the bed, facing the mattress. Emily did so, first removing her nightshirt and robe. She closed her eyes, listening to him move around the room, trying to focus on him, that moment, rather than the long day that stretched ahead of them.

After a few moments, he returned to the bed and straddled her thighs, supporting his weight on his knees. She tensed, slightly nervous. Peter had become far less predictable in the past nine months, and she knew that he could be preparing to do virtually anything behind her. Emily shivered with anticipation.

She hissed with surprise when he put his hands against her shoulders, the cold lotion on his palms shocking her skin. He began working her skin, gently kneading her tense shoulder muscles. The momentary pain distracted her from the usual pleasure of his touch, and she nearly pushed him away. Her muscles were far too tight, the knots too large for any contact to feel good, much less the pressure he was applying.

“I know what I’m doing,” he murmured. “Relax.”

“It hurts,” she gasps.

“It will for a minute, but it’ll stop...”

Emily buried her face in the pillow, willing herself to relax. Steadily, the pain lessened, replaced by sharp relief. She moaned, a long, shapeless sound that hovered about their heads. Peter decreased the pressure, and the rest of her body caught up with the initial rush of pleasure. Her toes curled, her stomach clenched, and her clit began to throb.

“Like that now?” he asked.

Emily nodded. A question suddenly occurred to her—one she had meant to ask about a thousand times before, but had never had the courage. For one thing, she didn’t want to know the answer. If he said yes...well, that just opened a new can of worms she didn’t want to deal with. If he said no...wouldn’t she feel like shit?

“I feel you tensing up again. What’s on your mind?”

“I have an...odd question. But I don’t know if I should ask,” she admitted.

“Go ahead.”

“Okay, but you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to...”

“Just ask, Emily.”

“Did you ever sleep with anybody else?” she blurted, before she could lose her nerve.

Peter’s hands paused on her shoulders for a heartbeat before continuing. “You want to know if I cheated on you?”

“Well...I was curious. There was a lot of talk, you know. Gossip.” Emily paused before adding. “It won’t change anything between us now. But I will understand if you don’t answer.”

“No. I didn’t cheat on you.”

“Really?”

“Did you expect me to say yes?” Peter asked.

“There was Julie...”

“I never slept with Ms. Summers. She was my assistant, Emily, that’s all. But I know about the rumors. I heard them myself.”

“Oh...well...good....”

“Now it sounds like you *wanted* me to say yes,” he observed. “Emily, if this is about you and Justin, I already told you....”

“It’s not,” she said quickly. “Okay, well, maybe it is. A little.”

Peter pushed himself off her thighs, stretching out beside her. He put his arm around her to pull her close, and she curled naturally against his body, enjoying the way it fit against hers.

“Emily?”

“Hmm?”

“Let it go. I have. That’s ancient history now. I don’t want anything getting between us now.”

Emily took a deep breath. “You’re right.”

“Anything else been plaguing your mind these past nine months?” Peter asked, his mouth against her forehead.

“Yeah. What if I fail and you lose all your money?”

*The Pumpkin House*

“That’s not going to happen,” he assured her.

Emily lapsed into silence, soothed by his reassurances, if still a little nervous. She was on the verge of being very happy. The happiest she had ever been in her life, thanks to him. “Peter? I think I’m glad you locked me in that house...”

“Not as glad as I am,” he said, nibbling on her lower lip. “Not nearly as glad as I am.”

\* \* \* \*

Peter watched Emily from outside, peeking in through the large window that bore the name of the shop—*The Pumpkin House*—to catch an uninterrupted glance of her. She moved from behind the counter, a broom in one hand, a weary smile on her face. The day had been a long one, a whirlwind of activity from dawn until midnight, and she deserved a chance to rest, but when she snuck out of his father’s party, it wasn’t so she could return home. He didn’t need to follow her to know where he’d find her.

Emily looked up then, catching him standing outside the window. With a smile, she beckoned him to come inside. He pulled on the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Her smile turned sheepish as she hurried over to unlock the door.

“How long have you been out there?” Emily asked, letting him in.

“Just a few minutes. Hey, why don’t you leave this for now?”

She shook her head. "No, I've got to have the shop ready for tomorrow. It's our first full day of business, after all."

"You were glorious today," Peter complimented, moving behind the counter. "Coffee?"

"In the back. And thank you."

"Did you get any new orders?" he asked, stepping behind the curtain to the small kitchen. He planned to buy her a second location—one with a much larger kitchen—as soon as possible.

"Yeah, actually. Two weddings and a birthday."

Peter nodded. "I think you'll get a few more calls tomorrow. I had several interesting discussions." He poured coffee for both of them, balancing both cups in one hand and a box of sample pastries in the other. Somehow, he had been surrounded by food all day, but had never had the opportunity to eat.

"I hope you won't be too busy though," he added. "I have a very special project for you."

"Oh?"

"I'd like to order a cake myself. I'll need it about six months from now."

She took her coffee from him. "What kind of cake?"

"A wedding cake," Peter said, hiding his smile with a pastry.

"You need a wedding cake?" she asked. "Is there something you haven't told me?"

“Oh, I’m getting married again. If she’ll have me, of course,” he said around a mouthful of food. “On June 18.”

Emily tilted her head with a confused smile. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m going to have to do this properly, aren’t I? That’s fine.” Peter moved around to the other side of the counter, and then dropped to his knees in front of her. He took her hand in his, bringing it up to his mouth. She laughed nervously, trying to pull away from him, but he tugged her forward, tightening his grip so she couldn’t get free.

“What are you doing, Peter?”

“Emily St. Claire, will you be my wife...again?” Peter asked.

“You’re crazy.”

“That’s not an answer. I want to renew our vows...start over...see if I can do it right this time.”

She threaded her fingers through his hair. “You’ve been doing things pretty right these past nine months, Peter. Starting over isn’t necessary.” She crouched in front of him, bringing her eyes level with his. “Besides, we won’t have the time to get away from this for awhile.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Emily nudged him on his shoulder until he fell backwards, his back on the ground. She straddled him, pressing her breasts against his chest, kissing him hard on the mouth. He gripped the back of her head, deepening the kiss until they were both moaning for more.

*The Pumpkin House*

Peter's hands moved to her clothes, struggling with her zipper as she worked on his buttons. Hands and flesh already slick, he pushed and shoved until they were no longer restricted, the barriers between them gone.

Emily brought herself down on his cock slowly, guiding it deep into her body. "Did you lock the door?" she gasped.

He nodded, though he honestly didn't remember. He didn't care very much either—especially since they were both in full view of the picture window. Emily looked up, realizing the same thing.

"We have to move..."

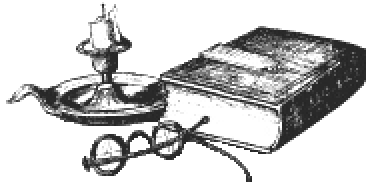
"No," Peter said, his hands splaying across her thighs. "Let's just stay right here."



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Pepper Espinoza has been writing books for many years, but just began her professional writing career in 2005, with the publication of her first erotica romance novel, *New Frontier*. Since then, she has sold several more novels and novellas. She also continues to work on her short fiction, recently selling a short story to Oysters and Chocolate. Pepper writes full-time, and hopes to attend graduate school in 2006.

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