



Without
Reserve

Lexi Moore

WITHOUT RESERVE

“What is it?” Vance asked as Quinn stood still, staring at him.

“I love you so much I ache,” Quinn said. “Is that what you felt for me?”

“Yes. I loved you with a passion that ruled my life.”

“And yet it ended. Why?”

“Because I knew you didn’t feel the same. That’s why your love for me will fade with time, when I can’t return it.”

“Oh, but you will return it, Vance. My emotions are strong enough to see to that.”

“I do hope you’re right, my darling.”

PRAISE FOR WITHOUT RESERVE

“Jealously, love, anger, lies, pride, lust. What does it take to win love *Without Reserve*?”

—J. M. McKinnon

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—Patricia A. Rasey
Author of *Kiss of Deceit* and *Facade*

WITHOUT RESERVE

BY

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WITHOUT RESERVE
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*Forever and always...
to the man who brings the fantasy to life*

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Quinn Tanner—that most modern of woman of her age, business woman extraordinaire and famed beauty—had fallen in love with her husband of five years.

The realization hit her unexpectedly while she was at work. She'd been thinking about expanding their bookbindery from England to North America. Booming population in the Americas told her the time could be right. As she calculated the figures and planned her strategy, Quinn could hardly wait to share her plans with Vance. After all, it had been her husband who'd encouraged her to start Ecu Press and had helped her find contacts and contracts in the beginning.

She considered the best way to form a new world branch of Ecu Press. "Perhaps Vance and I should make a journey to Boston," she mused aloud. "Or even to Mount Royal."

Her heart beat faster as she thought about Vance. That had been happening a lot lately. She'd find herself wanting to tell him something and before she knew it, she'd be absorbed in a memory of something

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they'd done together. Sometimes it was as simple as laughing together and holding hands in the carriage on the way home from the theater. Sometimes it was as complex as a business coup they'd planned carefully and carried off to perfection.

Sometimes the memories were intimate, and as she relived the sensation of his caressing hands and the whispered words of passion that had sent her soul soaring to meet his, she smiled. Far from embarrassed about her body's response to her husband's touch, Quinn reveled in her reaction as she recognized her incredible attraction to the man who had always championed her desire to succeed.

She tossed down her pen and called for her carriage. She had to tell Vance her news. Yes, she had fallen deeply and completely in love with him.

As she dismounted from the carriage in front of their town house, she saw Colette DuPre's phaeton driving away. Wondering why her friend was calling in the afternoon when she knew to find her at Ecu Press' office, Quinn flew up the front steps to her house and shoved open the door. The housemaid was dusting the foyer and looked up in alarm.

"Where will I find Mr. Vance?"

"Upstairs in his chambers, ma'am," the young Irish maid replied bobbing a curtsy.

"Maureen, you've no need to curtsy or to call me ma'am," she admonished with a gentle smile. "I hired you to dust and do housework for me, not to be my inferior."

"Yes, ma'—" Maureen stopped. "Thank you, then."

Quinn was already halfway up the main staircase, her skirts pulled high to her knees so she could take the steps two at a time. She could barely contain her joy and enthusiasm as she raced down the hall toward Vance's rooms, her thoughts barely keeping pace with her flying feet. Quickly rapping on the solid oak door of his bedroom, Quinn tapped her foot in impatience as she waited for him to open the

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door.

His face was carefully wiped clean of any expression when he saw his wife standing impatiently in the hallway. “Is there something wrong, my dear?” Vance’s eyes swept over his wife, bosom heaving from her race up the stairs.

“No, my darling.” Quinn pressed her hands against Vance and nudged him back into his room. Pushing the door shut with her foot, she leaned her head against his chest. She could feel his heart beating steadily beneath her cheek and she looked up at him, her emotions raging through her.

“I have something so amazing to tell you.” She paused momentarily. “I love you, Vance, with all my heart.”

“And I love you, my dear,” he answered in a neutral tone, stepping slightly away from her.

“Oh, Vance, I don’t mean that social, how-pleasant-to-see-you version of love like our friends have in their marriages. I mean I love you—” Her smile lit up the room. “—with all my heart, my soul and my body. I crave your touch, your glance. I’m shamelessly in love with you, Vance.”

“It’s a dangerous place to be, my dear.”

“Why? Why is being in love with you a dangerous place to be?” Quinn was totally confused. She’d thought Vance would light up with joy at her admission. By now, they should be collapsed in a heap on the bed. She glanced at the bed and was surprised to see the bedclothes rumpled and twisted.

“I don’t want to crush you, Quinn. Finding out you’re in love for the first time is magnificent. But it also makes you vulnerable, my dear. Puts you in a precarious place.”

“But not with you, Vance. Never with you. I remember you telling me how much you adored me. Just last night you made love to me. Couldn’t you feel my response to you?”

“Your response to my lovemaking has always been remarkable,

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Quinn. I've never met a woman who shares my appetite like you do. But what has existed between us recently has been mind-shattering sex and business. It hasn't been love—in the tender sense of the word—for months.” He reached down and stroked her cheek softly. “I was so in love with you, my darling, for so long.”

For several moments, she couldn't speak. Finally, a question clawed into her mind. “And now?” Quinn had trouble drawing breath.

“And now I respect your business mind, and hunger for your exquisite body, but my love seems to have dribbled away through the cracks in our marriage.”

As the pain of what he said registered, Quinn staggered to the dressing table and sank into the low chair. She closed her eyes for a moment to regroup. She'd just discovered her love for this man and he was rejecting her.

No, her heart cried out in agony. He can't be saying he'll *never* love me. For a long time I didn't love him and now I do. He'll love me again.

She opened her eyes and they focused on the table top in front of her. Suddenly, she knew why her friend had been in her home in the middle of the day while Quinn was at the office. Colette's distinctive, twisted gold bracelet lay in the middle of her husband's dressing table.

Quinn met Vance's eyes in the mirror. Hers overflowed with pain; his filled with compassion for her agony. She picked up the bracelet, holding it out between them.

“Are you in love with *her*?” Quinn could barely whisper the words aloud.

“Oh, God, no.” Vance's tone was raw with the truth.

“Then why?”

“Because she offered herself.”

“But, Vance—” Quinn turned to face her husband directly. “—I gave myself to you every time you reached for me.”

“Colette didn't wait for me to reach for her. She *offered* herself to

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me without me making any move toward her.” Vance stared down at the carpet for a moment. “I didn’t have to seduce her. She made it very clear to me that she desired me. It felt good to have someone need and want me.”

“But I wanted you.” Quinn gulped. “I still do, so help me.” She felt a rush of adrenaline as her body triggered her need for him.

“That flatters me, my dear. It really does, but you have to understand how much being pursued by another increases the anticipation.”

“If I’d known you wanted me to seduce you, I would have.”

“When? After a board meeting? Before your next printing project?”

“Now. What about right now?” Quinn stood up and swayed towards her husband. “I want you, Vance. I love you and I want you.”

She pulled off her hat, allowing it to drop to the floor, then stepped out of her shoes. After her gloves floated to the carpet, she unbuttoned the bodice of her dress.

“Quinn, please—” Vance started to speak.

“Please what? Please come closer?”

Quinn walked across the room to her husband and leaned against him. She could feel his body’s response to her. She slid her bodice down to reveal her small breasts pushed high like offerings by her corset. “Am I close enough now? Is this better?”

“Quinn, stop it now.” Vance’s voice was rough with passion.

“No, I won’t stop it. I’m in love with my husband and I want to show him how much. I’m offering myself to you without reserve, Vance.” Quinn shoved her dress to the floor and began untying her corset.

Vance groaned and turned away. “How can I take you here—on this bed?”

“You mean the bed that’s still warm from you making love to my friend?”

“Quinn, I’m so sorry you found out like this.”

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“I’m sorry I found out at all. But it doesn’t change the fact I’m in love with you. If seducing you in the afternoon, in your bedroom, proves to you how much, I’ll be here every day.”

Her corset joined the clothes on the floor and she stood before him draped in a nearly transparent chemise and petticoat. She unfastened the first ribbon holding them closed. “Do you want me?”

“Yes.” Vance’s confession sounded as though it were ripped from his soul.

“Do you want me here...where you had Colette?” Another ribbon came loose.

“I’d make love to you in the middle of the street, Quinn.”

“Then take me, Vance. I’m your wife and I want you to make love to me.” The final ribbon opened and Quinn stepped free of her garments. Naked, she walked to the tousled bed and threw back the rumpled sheets.

Colette’s perfume wafted up to her and she almost gagged, but forced herself to turn and smile at Vance. “Come to bed, my darling.” She climbed up into the bed and lay down, holding out her arms, welcoming the man with whom she’d fallen in love so unexpectedly. “Make love to me, Vance,” she whispered.

Vance staggered across the room and fell to his knees beside the bed. “Quinn, let’s go to your room.”

“Don’t you want me?” She opened her legs to him.

Vance groaned again and dropped his head onto the sheets.

Quinn rolled onto her knees in front of her husband. “Either you want me, my darling husband, or you don’t. I know you’ve lain here with someone else...why should that matter?”

“Quinn, it matters to me.”

“Why?”

“Because it cheapens you to make love this way.”

“I’ll take you any way I can have you, even if I’m second in your affections.” She leaned into his mouth and covered it with her own,

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searing him with the depth of her pain. She watched him through tear-smudged eyes when he pulled away and stood up.

“I can make love to you, Quinn, but I can’t promise to love you.” Vance’s voice was as filled with pain as with passion.

“I understand.” She reached her arms upward.

Her husband tore off his clothes and stood beside the bed. “One last chance to back away from this, Quinn.”

She didn’t say anything, just gently grasped his erection, pulling him onto the bed beside her. Their coupling was enchanted, filled with the ecstasy of newfound passion and the ease of complete familiarity with one another’s bodies. Quinn tingled and quivered under his attention, anticipating his every touch and rising to meet his caresses. She reciprocated, sampling him in his favorite places and finding new ones to plunder. She smiled as she felt him shudder with his effort to control his body’s immediate response to her uninhibited lovemaking.

As she felt herself losing control, she pulled him deep within her and rocked with him until she saw his eyes lose focus. Then she allowed herself to let go, feeling her love for him deepen as their simultaneous climax united them without reservation.

In the aftermath of their mating—for Quinn could think of it in no other way than a mating—she stretched widely and unashamedly in the bed beside him, grinning in repletion. He answered her smile and tugged her on top of him as he pulled the sheets around them.

“No,” Quinn murmured. “Don’t pull up the covers.” Naked, she scampered across the room and poked at the fire until it flared to warming flames. She glanced across the room at her husband, who lay watching her with an unreadable expression on his face. “I’ll be right back, Vance. Don’t move.”

She pulled open the door to her adjoining bedroom and disappeared from sight. A few minutes later she returned carrying a jar of lotion and several silk scarves. She’d tied one in a jaunty bow around her waist, the long red ends trailing down her legs, accenting their slim length.

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Another secured her long, dark-copper hair on top of her head and yet another was tied around her throat, its bow cascading over her breasts. She'd also looped scarves around each arm.

Vance's eyes opened wide in astonishment at Quinn's attire.

"I've ordered a dinner tray to be sent up." She smiled at him. "But I wasn't sure if you were hungry, so I thought maybe some activity would stimulate your appetite." Quinn's husky voice teased him unmercifully.

Vance grinned. "Is this a sample of what's available?"

"It most certainly is." Quinn began to sway around the room, dancing and flicking her scarves at him enticingly.

Any sense of embarrassment she'd expected didn't materialize as she performed for the man she loved. One by one she dropped her scarves, scattering bright puddles of silk on the dark carpet. When all that remained was the scrap of silk holding up her hair and the bright red bow around her waist, Vance couldn't seem to stand her temptation any longer.

Obviously aroused, he sprang from the bed and grabbed one of the discarded scarves. As Quinn spun by, he looped the soft fabric around her, halting her motion. He tugged her close and transferred both ends of the makeshift tether into one hand. With the other, he loosed her hair from its restraints.

Long coppery strands fell heavily, draping her to the waist. Impatiently, he pushed them over her shoulders revealing her breasts. He leaned down and kissed them, his lips lingering at her nipples while his free hand strayed lightly across her naked skin.

Quinn's breathing suddenly became ragged. Her eyes slid shut as she tipped her head back and swayed against Vance. He dropped the scarf and both hands roamed across her body sending jolts of sensation through both of them. He moaned as she rubbed against the length of his body. As she felt the slickness of his erection against her belly, she looked into his eyes and knew his excitement struggled against the

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limits of his endurance. Their eager hands met at her waist, pulling restlessly to free her from the knotted silk separating them.

They surged against one another, and were surprised at the feel of silk still separating them. At the same moment they looked down and spotted a red tent suspended between them. Laughter cascaded from both as Quinn sank to her knees. Gently, she pushed back the fabric from his organ. Looking up at him, she began fingering his sensitive flesh, then settled the scarf into the nest of hair where his thighs met.

Quinn's eyes left his as she dropped her head to kiss his throbbing end. Vance's groan rumbled from his chest at the touch of her mouth on him. Unable to resist, Quinn's fingers roamed his long, hard shaft until she found the scarf. Deftly she tied it in a bow around his enlarged manhood and glanced back up at him mischievously, tongue dancing along her upper lip.

"You look ready to unwrap," she teased, plucking at the bow and purposely bumping her hands against his testicles.

"And you look ready to ravage," he growled.

The sound of a tray being set down in the hall distracted them for a moment and Vance looked around, startled. Quinn seized the opportunity to enclose his shaft in the hot, wet grotto of her mouth, her tongue taking him beyond control, still greedily drawing on his full length. As Vance's passion continued to pulsate, she released him and directed his jetting liquid across her breasts.

Quinn closed her eyes in pure pleasure as she felt his heat pour over her tingling breasts. Wanting more of him, she stood dragging the length of herself up his body. Her hands reached to his shoulders, and she clung to him as she captured his lips with hers. Between their bodies, she could feel the final throbbing vibrations of his climax. Her tongue explored him as she caressed him with her body.

Vance returned her kisses and stroked her excited flesh. "Now it's your turn, my darling Quinn," he murmured against her mouth. "Let me show you where passion can take you."

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She trembled with excitement and looked deeply into his eyes. "Take me there."

Vance slid his arms behind her knees and lifted her against his chest. She smiled up into his passion-glazed eyes as he carried her to the hearth. He set her lightly on her feet, turned and pulled the comforter off the bed. In moments he'd made a soft bed beside the fire. He poured water from the ewer and wet a soft washrag. He bathed her, wiping the cloth across her body and between her legs, teasing her with it and with his fingers.

Her knees grew weak and she staggered. Vance pushed her gently to the comforter. He stood above her and smiled down at her. He untied the silk bow he still wore and floated the scarf across her flesh. Quinn felt her nipples tighten at the touch and a surge of moisture between her legs told her she was ready for him.

Vance seemed to know what she expected and he smiled, kneeling beside her. "Get on your knees," he said.

"Isn't that where I just finished?" Quinn teased, loving how his blue eyes darkened with arousal.

"Do as you're told, woman." He grinned and she complied willingly.

Vance stretched the scarf between her legs and softly pulled it back and forth. Quinn gasped out loud.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes," she gasped as he continued to arouse her with the silk.

"Then you're going to love this." He pulled the scarf free of her and dropped it. His hands fondled her lightly and she leaned toward him, brushing her mouth against his.

"Onto your back," he commanded and she quickly obeyed, panting slightly in her eagerness. Vance knelt beside Quinn and explored the length of her with his eyes. "Did you know you have the most perfect breasts?" He touched them lightly, and her nipples rose instantly at his touch. His fingers massaged her and she writhed under his caress.

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“And your tiny waist. I don’t know why you bother with a corset,” he teased. “I’d rather feel you through your clothes than a hard corset.” His hands skimmed over her hips and across the tangle of coppery curls. The moisture beaded out of her at his touch. He leaned forward and sprinkled kisses across her belly.

She felt her passion simmer when he turned his mouth to her breasts, pulling first one, then the other into his mouth. His tongue licked at her flesh and her nipples puckered more tightly in his mouth. She moaned and wriggled as he trailed kisses down her body. Her legs fell open, knowing he was about to mount her.

Quinn was ready for him. Why was he prolonging her suspense?

Vance knelt between her knees. She looked at him, watching him become rapidly turgid again in the face of her desire. “Please, Vance, take me now,” she begged.

He leaned forward and down, kissing a hot path up the inside of her thigh. Then his tongue found her center. Quinn gasped out loud as his tongue flickered across her swollen nub. Before she could control her response, Quinn climaxed.

Her head fell back and she moaned his name in her passion. “Vance, I love you,” she cried softly. “I’ll love you forever.”

Opening her eyes, she looked at her beloved, allowing her emotions to radiate around him and cushion him. How she longed for him to tell her he could love her again!

Vance began kissing his way back to her mouth, and she felt her fading passion flare again. “You think you can resist me, you know,” she said.

“It’s not a matter of resisting you, sweet Quinn.”

“You loved me enough to marry me once. I’ll make you love me again.”

“I wish you could, my dear.”

“I *know* I can make you love me.” She was young, beautiful, confident and sated by their lovemaking.

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“I fear I may have lost the capacity to be in love.”

“I think not.” She leered at him prettily. “Let me get the tray.” She hopped up and trotted across the room, treating him to another view of her. She cracked open the door and peered out before she stepped out into the hall to fetch their dinner. She closed the door and leaned against it, holding the tray.

“What is it?” Vance asked as she stood still, staring at him.

“I love you so much I ache. Is that what you felt for me?”

“Yes. I loved you with a passion that ruled my life.”

“And yet it ended. Why?”

“Because I knew you didn’t feel the same. That’s why your love for me will fade with time, when I can’t return it.”

“Oh, but you will return it, Vance. My emotions are strong enough to see to that.”

“I do hope you’re right, my darling.” He smiled sadly.

* * *

Vance looked at Quinn standing naked across the room from him. She was taller than most of the women he knew and built much leaner, like a teenage boy. Her breasts were not as large as fashion dictated and her waist was much smaller. Her legs were long and trim, and her hips carried no excess fat.

If his friends knew this beautiful creature, his wife, had spent the afternoon naked and unabashedly seducing him, he’d be the object of their envy. This was an era in which many women withheld the sight of their bodies from their husbands, servicing their conjugal needs as a duty, not pleasure.

But Quinn had always astounded him with her disregard for society’s views of what was appropriate for women to do. Not that she’d ever stepped outside the bounds of good taste or moral propriety. She’d just ignored society’s beliefs women were not supposed to be good at business, that bookbinding was a man’s profession, and that a woman’s place was in the home, not at a factory.

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When they'd been married for two years and no children had been forthcoming, she'd refused to consider herself a failure. She'd decided to start running Ecru Press, the business he'd helped her found before they were married.

He felt his blood begin to rise again as he stared in fascination at the woman who'd been his wife for more than five years. Each time he'd turned to her for physical love, she'd welcomed him and had satisfied his marital needs. But for excitement, Vance had turned to affairs like many of his cronies. To discover his wife could arouse him so thoroughly amazed him.

Even his coupling with Colette had occurred behind drawn curtains and in the dark. She'd excited him by offering herself, but had shown no creativity in their union. After only a short time, he was beginning to tire of her. Vance knew he'd be looking around for another partner within a few weeks. Had he found her, right here at home?

Quinn stared at him from across the room. It was as if she could read his thoughts. Stooping she set the tray on the floor and rose. She smiled and looked pointedly at his again-burgeoning erection.

Turning to the night stand, she retrieved the jar of lotion she'd brought with her. She traced her lips with her tongue as she unscrewed the lid and dipped four fingers into the cream. She set the jar on the bed and rubbed her hands together, warming the lotion and spreading it across both hands. Quinn tipped her head back slightly and began at her neck, massaging the cream into her skin with soft, swirling circles. As she reached her breasts, her nipples crested under her own touch.

Vance was on his knees by the fireplace, staring at her incredulously. He swallowed as he watched her hands slide across her belly and down the sides of her hips. He was fully distended as he charged across the room to his wife. His arms wrapped around her and he fell to the bed with her on top of him. His hands glided over her, and he marveled at the softness of her skin.

Quinn smiled into his eyes and kissed him deeply. "Let me love

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you.” She raised herself off him and dipped her hand back into the cream.

As her hands began to massage, she straddled him, mounting him and riding him as she stroked the cream onto him. Her head fell back as his hands caught at her breasts bouncing with her rhythm. Eagerly, she stroked his shaft’s length with her body, driving the two of them to climax until she collapsed against him in sweating ecstasy.

A short time later, cuddled in his arms, Quinn told him of her plans for expansion in North America. “Every day there are people emigrating to the United States and to Canada. They’ll want books.” She paused, as if a new thought had occurred to her. “And their own magazines.”

“Don’t forget the thousands of forested acres.” Vance traced her face with his finger and smiled at her enthusiasm.

“Our own paper mill,” she breathed the words in awe and flipped over resting her chin on his chest. “Do you think it’s possible?”

“It makes more sense than paying the high price of paper here, then adding to its cost by shipping it across an ocean, don’t you think?” He grinned at her.

With a squeal of excitement, Quinn dashed to her own room and immediately returned clutching pen, ink and paper. Within moments, she was wrapped in the comforter making a list at his dressing table. Her quill scratched over the paper and she chewed unconsciously on her lip.

Vance relaxed in his bed, arms behind his head as he watched his beautiful wife making her plans. He took in every detail—how her long hair trailed to her waist, how its highlights danced with flashes of copper in the firelight.

He smiled, even though a corner of his heart ached. How much he had loved her! How much he longed to love her again.

Just as his eyes clouded with sadness, she turned to him. As if reading his thoughts, she stood and began walking to the bed, the

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comforter dropping on the floor unnoticed.

In seconds, she'd rejoined him, naked and ready.

* * *

For several weeks Quinn continued courting her husband. Slowly, day by day, she felt his love returning. It didn't manifest itself in a cataclysmic outpouring of affection. But gradually, Vance began spending more time with her. Fewer evenings found him leaving for his club as she was returning from Ecu Press. They dined together in the formal dining room and had impromptu picnics on the hearth of his or her bedroom. Laughter and a great deal of touching defined their playful rediscovery of one another.

By the time their reconciliation was nearly three months' old, Vance often spent the entire night in Quinn's bed, his arms holding her close, even in sleep. Many times, they woke during the night to make quiet love to one another. Their passion seemed to ignite from its own ashes and build as their closeness grew.

* * *

Vance offered Quinn invaluable advice as she began planning a business expansion across the ocean. And, as a surprise, he organized a summer trip for her to Boston and Canada. He wanted her to see for herself the differences between England and the brash, new land on the other side of the Atlantic. He knew it would be a land that suited his wife—without pretense, full of ambition and indescribably beautiful.

Unable to resist the temptation to tell her about the upcoming trip, Vance was awake before Quinn the morning he decided to spring the news. He'd ordered breakfast brought to them in her room, including her favorite—a pot of rich hot chocolate. He carried the tray to her dressing table and pulled open the curtains, letting the morning sun tease her eyes open. Quinn stretched and grinned at her husband.

“Hungry this morning, Vance?” Her voice was husky with sleep and echoes of passion.

“Ravenous, my darling. And you?” He picked up the tray and

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carried it to the bed. He set it on the floor while he made a pretense of fluffing up pillows behind Quinn and adjusting the bedclothes. His hands skimmed under the covers and across her skin, teasing her with his promise of love to come.

She smiled mischievously as she joined in the game, sitting up and nestling into the pillows as she allowed the sheets and comforter to drop low enough to tantalize him with hints of the swelling curves still concealed from view. He loved the fact that she'd begun sleeping nude. It was so much more convenient when she could turn to him without the burden of clothes to remove in the dark.

Vance adored her coquetry and her daring.

* * *

She reached for the cup of hot chocolate and sipped, watching Vance eat his breakfast as he sat on the bed next to her. She knew he was up to something. Because she trusted him, she gave herself up to the thrill of suspense, knowing he would reveal all when the time was right.

The emotions growing between them were real, strong and lasting. Even how Vance made love to her had changed over the past weeks. His passion had grown along with his commitment to her. Whether inside the bedroom or out, a bond connected them, and they were closer than ever.

From the moment Quinn had turned her back on the conventional definition of love and seduced her husband moments after he'd slept with his mistress, the link had been forged. They both knew he'd been unfaithful. Neither cared in the face of what they felt for one another.

Vance never knew the high price Quinn had paid to surrender to him in his bed that day. She swore he never would. She loved him with all her heart and would fight for him with any tool at her disposal.

Vance put down his cup and smiled as he reached forward to brush some crumbs from Quinn's lower lip. His fingers lingered, caressing her face. She leaned into his touch and her tongue flicked his finger,

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pulling it into her mouth. She sat up and let the covers drop, releasing his finger to capture his lips with hers. Her tongue slid into his mouth and explored as if for the first time.

Her nipples crested against the silk of his robe. With expert fingers, she loosened the belt and the robe dropped away. She pulled him against her, moaning low in her throat as she felt his skin connect with hers. Quinn sank into the joy of making love to her husband and the sun was well up before they were sated with one another.

She was half asleep when she felt his hands over her body. She writhed under his touch and her eyes fluttered half open. "Again, Vance?" she offered smiling.

"In a little bit, Quinn, darling," he responded even as the evidence of his rising desire twitched between them. "I have something for you."

"You said that before."

"No." He grinned. "I have a present for you."

"A present?" Her eyes lit up. This was the first gift he'd offered her since their reconciliation. While she cared little about trinkets and baubles, this was a breakthrough in their developing relationship.

"Where's my damned robe?" Vance muttered and sorted through the mussed bedclothes. He found it where it had tumbled off the end of the bed. He pulled something from one pocket and crawled back up beside Quinn. He smoothed out the crinkled paper as he lay on his side.

"These past few weeks have been like magic, Quinn. I had loved you so much when I met you I thought I could never feel anything like that again. And I was desolate when it faded in the light of day. Your passion for business seemed to overshadow any feeling you had for me."

"Va—"

He held up a hand as she began to speak. "I understand that. But now I also know you have the depth to be ambitious in business *and* love me totally. When you gave yourself to me while my bed still lingered with Colette's warmth, I realized your feelings for me were

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real. You told me you'd make me fall in love with you again."

"Please, Vance," she pleaded, "I don't care if you don't love me the way I love you."

"A marriage can't succeed with only one person loving. That's what I have to talk to you about today."

A cold wave of fear passed through her chest. If he was bored with her, she would die of humiliation. She'd played the wanton every way she could think of. He'd always responded to her, but maybe that was what he wanted in a mistress, not in a wife. She longed to cover herself. The cold settled in her chest, making every breath an effort. She swallowed hard and looked up at him, refusing to hide from what he had to tell her

"Quinn, you know many of my friends and colleagues keep mistresses. All that's required is discretion. They can make the right marriage and find love outside of it. I didn't really want that lifestyle, but I fell into its trap, anyway. Colette was not my first mistress," he confessed, "but she will be my last. I never want another woman but you, my darling Quinn."

He paused and looked down at the paper in his hand. He looked back up and met her eyes brimming with tears. "I love you, Quinn. I love you more now than the day I married you."

For a moment what he'd said didn't register. She'd been expecting him to tell her that he liked the sex but couldn't promise to love her ever again, then to push some meaningless trinket into her hand.

She blinked. "You love me?"

"Yes, I love you, Quinn."

She threw herself into his arms covering his face with kisses. She tossed back her head and laughed out loud with the pure joy of his revelation. Then she reached for his mouth and covered it with her own.

Her kiss opened her soul to him and took possession of him, all in one effort.

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As she nestled against him, still kissing him, she opened her eyes and stared deeply into his. This moment would be branded on her mind forever. She couldn't stop holding him close and caressing his lips with hers. She felt as though time had stopped. They would be here, in this bed, in each other's arms, forever.

Quinn needed him as she'd never needed him before. She wanted his physical declaration of love, too. She cuddled against him and stared straight into his eyes.

"I want you," she murmured, her lips a breath from his.

"I want you, too," Vance answered.

Quinn smiled and pushed him onto his back. One glance told her how ready he was and she straddled his legs. She rose onto her knees and moved forward and up his body. He stopped her, holding her waist. Quinn felt him throbbing under her and bumping against her belly. He smiled up at her and let go. She sank down onto him.

Just as Vance entered her, he looked deeply into her eyes and murmured, "I love you so much, Quinn, my wife."

"As I love you, my husband."

They showed one another the depth of emotions coursing between them, climaxing time and time again. Vance made love to her in her bed and tumbled amongst the bedclothes on the floor. Finally, he stretched her the length of her chaise longue beside the fireplace and showed her another use for it besides lounging.

"I forgot about the present," he said just before noon. He scrambled around the bed searching for and finally finding a wrinkled piece of paper. He knelt beside her where she lay on the chaise and presented it to her.

Curious, Quinn unfolded it. It was a trip itinerary to Boston, then up the St. Lawrence River and into the Great Lakes of Canada. She stared at it, not understanding.

"Will you come with me?" Vance teased.

"Of course. But why are you going to America?"

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“If you’re expanding Ecu Press, we’d better scout some sites for your new factory and paper mill.”

“Oh, Vance,” she cried, throwing herself into his arms. “What a wonderful present.”

For the next several hours, they pored over every detail of the trip. Finally Quinn took a quick break and ordered bath water. As she hurried through her bath, she bubbled over with excitement about their trip, calling out details she wanted to remember until she got to the office the next morning.

When she realized they’d be leaving in less than three weeks and be gone for the whole summer, she launched a flurry of activity, starting with her wardrobe. It would need to be completely updated for travel.

Quinn also planned to arrive at her office early the next day and begin going through the books. Then she’d sit down with her manager, George Upton, and detail everything to be done until her return in the fall. It wasn’t until it was nearly teatime that Quinn remembered they were due for dinner at the Suttons’. When she called out to remind Vance, he groaned aloud, muttering about social niceties and sending his valet with regrets.

“You know we can’t do that at this late hour,” she chided gently.

“But I want to spend the evening with you,” he replied reaching for her.

Lightly she ducked away from him and danced across the room. She smiled as she swayed seductively and pouted over her shoulder at him. “Just think how good it will be for your soul to deny yourself for a few hours.”

* * *

By the designated time, they were ready for their evening. Quinn was dressed in an very low-cut evening dress that showed off her figure to perfection. While she lacked the generous curves many men liked, she knew the dress flattered her. When she met Vance in the hallway, his wolf whistle confirmed her opinion.

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“You sure we have to go?”

“Positive. What would our friends think if we didn’t show up?”

“They’d think I was home making love to my wife.”

“Not this time. We’ve turned down too many invitations over the last couple of months.”

“I found the company much more stimulating at home, my dear,” he said.

Quinn laughed quietly and reached up to stroke her husband’s jaw.

In the carriage, Vance pulled her close and whispered indecent suggestions in her ear. Quinn responded by trailing her hand down his belly to his groin. His immediate hardening told them both it would be an early evening at the Sutton dinner. They were laughing when their carriage eased to a halt in front of the Suttons’ town house. Vance handed his wife down from the carriage.

“James, please be back in front at eleven,” he said to the driver.

As they walked to the front door, Vance slid his arm around her waist and his fingers traced a pattern up her ribs. His palm nestled against the side of her breast and he paused on the pathway, turning her to him.

He looked down at her. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” she answered.

Vance ran his hands across her body as if needing to hold the intimate sensation in his mind throughout their public evening. She smiled and leaned forward, letting her evening cape hide their activity from passers-by. As she leaned toward him as if talking, her small breasts were revealed to him as she’d meant them to be. Vance sucked in his breath audibly and glanced around. Unable to resist, he dipped his right hand into the bodice of her gown and fondled her.

“Oh, and Vance,” she whispered innocently, “it seems this gown fits better without any undergarments.” She turned away from her husband and swept up the path to the house. It was a few moments before he could comfortably follow.

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It had been almost a month since she and Vance had accepted any invitations, and Quinn realized how much she'd missed the society. It was even more fun tonight when she knew Vance's eyes would be on her everywhere she went.

She visited with friends and chattered brightly, catching up on the town gossip and rumors. She was standing with a group of women she'd known since childhood when she sensed the first hint of trouble.

"And you know Colette is coming here tonight," said Amelia Sutton, censure in her voice. "I know times are becoming more modern, but I mean really, it's hardly decent."

Quinn felt her heart start to pound heavily. She hadn't seen her former friend since the day she'd almost met her in Vance's bed. And she had no interest in seeing Colette tonight or any other time. She glanced across the room. Her husband was watching her, a private smile on his face. Quinn felt naked and aroused by his glance. She smiled back. If he could do this, so could she. She turned back to the conversation.

Jenny Wilson was speaking. "And how could it possibly be her husband's? We all know Colette is Harold's third wife and they've been married for years. He never managed to get any of his other wives in the family way, either. Why would it be different with Colette?"

Quinn felt the room shift. "Colette is in the family way?" Was that her voice, so calm and cool when her world had just imploded?

"Yes," answered Amelia. "That's why I really didn't expect them to attend, but Harold himself accepted our invitation. I suppose it's acceptable here, since we're all old friends. But I hope she doesn't embarrass herself with too many public appearances."

"I'm sure she just wants to enjoy an evening with friends before she shows too much," offered Quinn. "How far along is she?"

"Well, when I stopped by for tea last week," said Anna Poole, "you could tell she wasn't wearing her corset. Her waist is just starting to thicken, so I'd guess maybe four months along. Sometimes it's hard to

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tell with a first pregnancy.”

Quinn felt the room tilt. It had been three months since she discovered Colette’s bracelet on Vance’s dressing table. Three months ago, her husband had been with her former friend more than one time. Three months ago, it seemed very likely her husband and his mistress had conceived a child—the only child Vance was likely to have. Quinn swallowed deeply and forced her mind back to the conversation at hand.

“And if it were me, I’d go out as much as I wanted,” stated Jenny in a matter-of-fact voice. “Times have changed. I’d refuse to hide inside just because I’m expecting a baby.

“Well said, Jenny,” praised Quinn. “The fathers don’t hide. In fact, just the opposite. Such a fuss they make with each other when one of them announces his wife is expecting.” She glanced across the room to Vance. She had to warn him. “We women shouldn’t have to hide either.”

He looked her way and she glanced pointedly to the hallway. Almost immediately Vance excused himself from his friends and exited.

“Would you excuse me a moment, please?” said Quinn.

In the hall, Quinn grabbed Vance’s hand and headed for the privacy of the library. He trailed behind her willingly. Once inside, Quinn looked around to make sure they were alone and pulled the door shut.

“Can’t wait until we get home, my dear?” Vance teased.

“Colette is coming here tonight,” she blurted out.

“I told you, my darling. That is long over. Colette was an unfortunate episode during a time in my life when I’d lost touch with you.”

“Hush,” Quinn whispered, pressing her fingers against his mouth. She heard the noise of new arrivals in the hall outside the library. “There’s something else you need to know before she and Harold get here.” She looked up at him, dreading the words she had to speak.

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“Colette is in the family way.”

“How wonderful for them both. Through all his other marriages and years with Collette, Harold’s always regretted never having children. I’m sure he’s thrilled.”

Quinn could think of no delicate way to phrase it. “The baby isn’t Harold’s.”

There was a moment of silence while Vance mulled over this information. “There’s no way to know that for sure, my dear. Perhaps something has changed...”

“What changed is the person with whom Colette was intimate up until three months ago,” she blurted out, pain driving each word from her throat. She watched the realization hit home.

“Mine?” The word was torn from his throat.

“I don’t know.” Quinn paused. “Were you the only man she was seeing then?”

“That’s what she told me and I have no reason to disbelieve her.”

“Of course not,” Quinn stated. “I’m sure she was faithful to you.”

Pain stretched Vance’s features tight, but he held his tongue.

She reached out to him with frozen, limp fingers. Gently he took them and tugged her to him. Quinn staggered and collapsed against his chest, attempting to control her pain.

“Quinn, we’ll face this together,” he promised, tilting up her chin. “Let’s just get through this evening.”

She nodded, trusting that somehow their newfound love could overcome all obstacles.

Hand in hand they left the sanctuary of the library. Just outside the drawing room doors, Quinn paused and Vance stopped by her side, looking down at her. She smiled bravely and stretched up to kiss his lips quickly and lightly. He stroked her hair and she leaned into his caress.

Her smile turned sad and she whispered, “Vance, why couldn’t it be me carrying your child?” Then she lifted her head high and swept into

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the drawing room without giving him time to respond.

Conversations stuttered to a halt as dinner was announced. Taking Vance's arm, Quinn prayed they'd be seated at the opposite end of the dining table from Colette and Harold DuPre. But as they found their place cards, she discovered they were going to be eating dinner directly across from the DuPres. Quinn glanced at her husband, but his expression gave away none of his internal turmoil. She took a deep breath and sank into the chair Vance held out for her.

As they were served soup, the conversation swirled around her ears, but Quinn could make no sense of what was being said. It was as if everyone spoke in a foreign language. Suddenly Harold's words pierced her consciousness.

"I want to thank our hosts for tonight's invitation," he stated rising to his feet and forcing Colette to stand beside him.

He lifted his glass and thrust Colette's into her hand before tugging at the shawl she'd swathed around herself. It fell away from her and slipped to the floor.

Colette had always been known for dressing provocatively, but her ensemble was daring, even for her. She was wearing a gown of the finest golden silk that molded itself to her body like a second skin. Its deeply scooped neckline revealed far more than was polite. Her full breasts were pushed high out of the neckline and what there was of a bodice, was virtually transparent.

When Colette attempted to fold her arms over herself, Harold stopped her. "My darling, don't be shy," he scolded. "These are our friends. At least one of them has seen much more of you than this." He raised his glass in a mocking toast and dashed back the wine. "Everyone—a toast to my wife and her attributes."

Colette dropped her head in shame and began to turn away. There was an audible gasp. In profile, the swell of her belly was betrayed by the candlelight, as was the fact she was wearing absolutely nothing under the thin silk of the dress.

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Harold stared across the table at Quinn, a strange light in his eyes as he watched her watch his wife. “The dress is a little snug, isn’t it, Quinn? But then, all my wife’s clothes are fitting like that these days.”

He forced Colette to turn around until she faced Quinn and Vance. As he ran his hand intimately over his wife’s slightly distended belly, Harold smiled at Vance.

Colette shuddered in humiliation at her husband’s treatment, but stood her ground, obviously too afraid of what Harold would do next to move or cover herself. Practically topless in a dress that accentuated her pregnancy, she waited for the censure to wash over her. Once she glanced in despair and apology toward Quinn, then simply hung her head.

“My boy, when I encouraged you to get a little on the side, I didn’t actually mean my own wife, you know,” he said, leaning toward Vance. “Quinn—” He nodded to her. “—excuse my crassness. This discussion, unpleasant as it is, is not meant to hurt you in any way.”

“You say that, Harold, but your every word and action dispute that.” Quinn rose to her feet and stared at her former friend’s husband. “How dare you trot this out in front of all of us this way?”

“But I thought you, and of course they, should know.”

“Did you, Harold?” Her icy voice cracked through the room. “You felt this would be the best forum, did you?”

Harold stared at Quinn. “Just a minute, here, young lady—” he began.

“Don’t ‘young lady’ me,” she interrupted coldly. “Your friendly advice to my husband was to take a mistress. And you’re now angry that one of the mistresses he chose to take was your wife. It occurs to me you’ve received your just desserts.”

“What?” The air rushed from Harold’s lungs.

“The fact my husband slept with your wife offends you. Well, it offends me too, I’ll admit. But the fact is, I knew about Colette and Vance.” She paused as a gasp welled up in the room. “Vance and I

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have since discussed the matter and moved beyond it. But it hasn't been easy for either of us.

"Did you realize that three months ago, Collette had relations with my husband for the last time? Their tryst took place in my home. She and I practically passed each other on the street that day. Her perfume still lingered in his bed and her gold bracelet rested on his dressing table when I entered his room minutes after she'd left.

"Harold, when you advised Vance to break our wedding vows and be unfaithful to me, did it not occur to you I might find out and be hurt? Or did you just assume I'd accept his betrayal like a good wife?"

Quinn leaned forward, and Harold backed away from her. "Is that how your home life works? It's fine for you to cheat on Colette. You encourage other men to thus betray their wives, too. But your wife finds pleasure in another's arms and you trot her out like some kind of a trollop at a society dinner among friends.

"I can understand what drove her to the loving arms of my husband if that's the kind of husband you are. While I may never forget her betrayal of my friendship and trust, I will never forgive you. And so, you concocted this ugly scene tonight. Why, Harold? To hurt your wife?" Quinn gestured at her husband as she continued. "Was it to embarrass or hurt Vance because of what he did to your wife? While he might have been embarrassed in this dining room, I'm sure his cronies would pound him on the back at the club and tell him how well he's done.

"Did you even care who you wounded? Of course not....as long as someone got hurt. Your pride is the driving force behind this cruelty. You're determined someone else suffer. Well, it's not going to be me."

Quinn stared around the room making eye contact with each person there, including Colette who dropped her eyes. She stopped when she got to Vance and smiled.

Vance returned her smile and stood, taking her hand. He looked hard at Harold as he spoke. "I accepted some very bad advice years ago

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from a man I thought was my friend. Instead of working at making a marriage to a woman I loved, I took the easy way out. Because I wasn't the immediate center of Quinn's life, I took a mistress." He squeezed her hand. "I took more than one, but I want everyone here tonight to know how much in love with my wife I am. And how much and how deeply I regret my past unfaithfulness. I've confessed and begged her forgiveness and she's granted it to me."

He looked around the room. "It's worth falling in love with your own wife, gentlemen. You just might be surprised at how happy you can be."

"Be that as it may, Vance, you've gotten my wife pregnant," snarled Harold coldly. "I have no intention of raising your bastard brat as my own."

"Indeed, I wouldn't permit it," said Vance calmly.

"The moment it's born, if it's not stillborn, off to the poor house it goes."

"I think not," said Quinn quietly. "If you do anything to harm Vance's child, you'll live to regret it."

Harold stared at her in shock.

"If I hear one word of you inflicting cruelty upon your wife, if there's even a hint of physical mistreatment, I will not hesitate to deal with you myself," she vowed. "You are an impotent, barren, old man who has caused much grief for many people. Do not deceive yourself that I won't be watching you. You won't visit your vileness on Vance's child."

"Fine. Live with the proof of Vance's betrayal every day of your life," he retorted. "And since that's your choice, you may as well start tonight. I've had my fill of the little tramp anyway." Harold turned to his wife and slapped her sharply across the face.

Colette staggered under the force of his blow, and that prevented her from blocking her husband's next move. Rapidly his hand snaked forward and he grasped the bodice of the dress' thin material. With one

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jerk, he tore the dress to the waist. Before anyone could move, he reached out and ripped the rest of it to the hem. There was a wordless gasp of shock as the shredded gold silk slid into a heap around Colette's feet.

The shawl, dress and shoes had been all Harold had allowed her to wear. Colette stood naked, her breasts and belly swelling with the growth of Vance's child. Tears streamed from her eyes, but she didn't have time to raise her arms over herself before Harold threw the contents of his wine glass across her naked body.

The red wine looked like blood dripping from her face and chest, onto her belly and her legs. Without a word, Colette crumpled in a heap on the floor, heaving with sobs of humiliation and self-disgust.

Harold drew back his foot as if to kick her.

Quinn reached for a carving knife.

The movement caught his eye. Without another word, Harold stepped over the prone woman he'd ruined and stormed out of the town house.

Colette's quiet sobs filled a room that had been swept free of sound by the performance of Harold DuPre. She looked up through tortured eyes before she began gathering her clothes. Pulling them against her, Colette crawled forward in an attempt to escape under the table.

Without a moment's hesitation, Quinn strode around the table pulling her own shawl from her shoulders. She knelt beside the stricken Colette and draped her with the wrap, its generous size covering the woman from shoulders to knees. Quinn helped her to her feet.

Quickly Jennie came forward, tugging her own shawl free and swirling it around their half-naked friend as well. Amelia led them out of the dining room as she asked her husband to take the men to the drawing room for port and cigars.

The women bundled the weeping Colette through the foyer and up the staircase. Within moments she was in Amelia's bedroom. Amelia quickly grabbed a velvet robe and helped her into it.

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“May I have a moment with Quinn?” whispered Colette. The others left them alone with nothing more than a few backward glances.

“You don’t need to say anything, Colette,” began Quinn, her throat tightening in sympathy for what her friend had undoubtedly endured at the hands of Harold. She’d noticed the bruises on Colette’s legs and buttocks.

“Yes, I do. I have to beg you to forgive me. Please, you have to understand I never set out to hurt you. And neither did Vance. What was between us just...happened.” Colette took Quinn’s limp hands between her own. “Vance dropped by to see Harold one afternoon, but Harold wasn’t home. He’d finished his form of making love to me and had gone to his club. Vance came in as I was crying. He was concerned I was hurt.

“We didn’t mean for it to happen, I promise you, Quinn. But after I’d been with him, I couldn’t stop seeing him. Even though I knew it could destroy our friendship, he was my lifeline to kindness.

“Harold often has...trouble in the bedroom.” Colette paused and looked at Quinn, who nodded encouragement to her. “He compensates for his lack of ability by degrading me. What you saw tonight is just one example. He particularly liked to make me dress and act the whore around the house.

“My maid is a former madam he hired to teach me the skills he needed to be excited with me. You can’t imagine the things I’ve had to do.” She shuddered. “But that’s no excuse for my betrayal of our friendship. I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

“Ssshhh, Colette, don’t think about that now. It happened in the past, and it’s over and done with. But I have to ask you one question and I need an honest answer from you.”

“Anything.”

“Are you still in love with Vance?”

Colette paused, then smiled slightly. “I was never in love with him. I know that now. He was a man who showed me respect when I

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couldn't bear to look at myself in a mirror. What I feel for Vance is intense gratitude."

"You feel *grateful*?"

"Yes. He treated me like a lady when I couldn't remember what it felt like to be human."

"That's Vance."

"I can see how much he loves you, Quinn. It's incredible."

"Yes, it is, but I don't take his love for granted."

"I don't blame you."

"We've got a long road ahead of us, Colette. Tonight is just the beginning."

Colette nodded in agreement and the two friends linked arms, bound now by the child of the man who had rescued them from lives without love.

The future held many challenges for their unusual family, but Quinn knew she and Vance would make it work. It would be their labor of love.

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