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To all the working mums out there.

Statistically speaking, at least one of us must have the perfect balance.

If that mum could get in touch and teach me, that would be very appreciated.

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One Year Ago

“You see, it all CAME down to the data in the end,” I squeal, nervously. “I realized early ooOOOOOOOOOn that there was a statistically significant correlation between the sales of their skin caaAAaaare products and folic acid—a vitamin typically taken by women in their first ... first.... FIRST trimester of pregnancy and then I GoooOOOOOOOOOOOogled it and it looks like many women experience skin changes when they get pregnant because of ... of all the hormones and so they tend to also buy ... OH MY.” I take a deep breath. With my new, fully stocked lung capacity I start again, “Buy extra skin care products at the same time and the Partn-AhhhHHHH! The *Partner* didn’t realize that his facewash was so closely linked to the fertility inDDUUUSSStry but after I shared my findings, they were able to leverage this link into their maaAAArketing campaigns and the profits of their Hydration Face Lotion have nearly douUUUUUUUBLED overnight!”

Without much warning, Jackson looks up from between my legs.

I stop talking instantly, unsure.

His blond hair is styled short. The most mesmerizing ocean eyes you’ve ever seen. Clean-shaven. Shirt rolled up uncovering the leanest set of abs you could witness. He’s literally fresh out of an aftershave ad while I’m—at a push—a nerdier version of the girl next door. Blonde. Squirrel-esque. I’m not sure if my intense frequency of freckles would ever be described as “sexy.” More “cute.” Hopefully.

But this man isn’t “cute.” Oh no. He’s the sexiest man I’ve ever seen in real life.

And he’s looking right at me with the kind of stare that stops time. His hands grip the outsides of my bare thighs so hard his fingers dig into the

skin.

Oh, Jackson.

“Daisy,” he says, his voice like warm drizzled honey. Oh my gosh, my name from his lips. I’m not sure if I’ll ever get used to it. His voice has the silky-smooth texture of the famous M&S ads: *This is not just **any** man between my legs, this is the sexy-as-hell, highly ambitious, incredibly sultry, six-foot-one demigod that is the Director of Marketing, Jackson Oakley, between my legs.*

He takes a deep breath, and I can’t help but take one with him.

“It’s alright,” he says, and his eyes alone shut down my thought process entirely. “We’re not at work.”

I bite my lip, trying to stop myself from letting anything else stupid fall out of my mouth. I’m talking too much. Of course, I am—I’m nervous and I always talk too much when I’m nervous. I’m not used to this kind of thing. I’ve never had the free time to date so I’m not sure what the protocol is. Work has always gotten in the way. But he’s looking up at me with those swirling, hypnotizing blues and he’s just so cool. And relaxed.

That’s what I need to be in his presence. I need to inhabit that vibe. How do I do that?

Well, I don’t know how. But I do know how to be quiet at least.

So, down I bite. Hard.

“Now,” he says to a much quieter room. I can hear my own heartbeat now, hammering away. “We can talk about your meeting, if that’s what you want,” his hands slide down my smooth legs right to my bare toes, “However,” they creep back up them again, higher, and higher. I can feel my whole body react as the electric tips of his fingers tickle right up the insides of my thighs, “I’m thinking there are more pressing matters.”

I gasp as his fingers make contact.

I open my mouth to say something—anything—I’m not even sure yet but like a terrible instinct I feel my vocal cords get ready. Except before I can let any words out, Jackson’s spare hand touches my lips shut.

Sitting up on his knees now, so his face is in line with mine, he moves his hand around my jaw and gently moves my face forward towards him. He could just about take me anywhere like this. I feel his breath against my lips as he whispers: “Relax, Daisy. Because the only words I want coming out of these lips,” his fingers run across them as he whispers, “is my name.”

He lets go of my chin and I fall back, looking up to his ceiling lights as I feel his hands creep back over my thighs. I close my eyes. Overthinking. As per usual.

Because this is amazing. This is unreal.

But why did I talk about data?

Why did I talk about the campaign?

Why did I—Oh MY.

I seal my lips shut. I do. But before I can help myself I feel them pull open one more time:

“JACKSON!” I cry.

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A Year Later

Bailey, the one on the left, the one with “don’t fuck with me” eyes and warm coffee-colored hair cut short and sharp to match, looks up from her tablet. Her eyes are piercing. Emerald green. My nerves hit my stomach like a punch in the gut.

I give her a smile, then immediately regret it when I see her raise her right eyebrow. With that one look, I’m not only worried they won’t take me seriously, but I’m also panicking that there may still be a little bit of my pre-interview Pret almond croissant stuck between my teeth. I knew I shouldn’t have ordered it, but it was so tempting, and I thought a bit of comfort breakfast might bring me luck. Turns out it’s only churning in my tummy while I breathe in a way that hopefully hides the unwelcome swirling noises issuing from my gut.

Oh, why didn’t I check my teeth for bits on my phone outside? Rookie error. I pull my face into a position that hides my gums, just to be on the safe side.

“You’re probably wondering why my CV looks a bit empty,” I hear myself say.

Sorry, what? Did I seriously just say that?

Bailey’s eyes shoot up to me.

Well, she’s definitely wondering about it now.

I take a deep breath. *Come on, Daisy*, I tell myself. *Just breathe.*

“Well, what it really shows is that I’m a very dedicated individual,” I say confidently. There we are, I just need to not panic and I’ll be fine. “I’m a...” oh god, present tense. Slow down, regroup, then speak. “I *was* a senior

data analyst, working for the same marketing agency for just over thirteen years. I got an internship as an office assistant at Branded straight out of high school and worked my way up. They were just a small independent PR firm back then—there wasn't even a data department—but they got bought up by Everest—do you know Everest?"

Something about Bailey's unmoving expression makes me think no, she does not know Everest.

"Well, they were one of the largest agencies in the UK—still are in fact—and since the merger, Branded has expanded its offering and is now seen as one of the advertising elites. I founded the Data Department myself actually. I realized that we could harness the insights of our social media posts in order to create better, more profitable campaigns. It was my old flatmate who gave me the inspiration to be honest, she's a math professor over in..." I'm looking at their faces. They don't care where my ex-flatmate teaches. Fair enough. "Well, a few online courses later, and what began as a side project became an integral part of the whole business. I specialize in social media insights, but I've been able to deep-dive into sales data too, showing cross-product correlations for clients that have helped them with their marketing."

Bailey seems completely unimpressed and, quite frankly, bored, but at least Cara is smiling at me. I wonder if it's in sympathy more than anything else. Perhaps she senses I'm a bit out of my depth here and is taking pity on me.

She's the smaller one of the two, her hair long and curly but not too dissimilar in color to Bailey's. If they're playing good cop/bad cop, then it's clear which one she is. But perhaps she's *too* good cop. Maybe her purpose is to disarm. I reshuffle my tooth-hiding smile in an effort to regain composure.

"Well, my tenure there should show just how dedicated I can be. I'm not someone who just quits or walks out at the first sign of trouble. I'm a loyal employee, through the good times and the bad."

Bailey turns back to her tablet and a small silence settles in the room.

After the first minute, I pride myself in riding out the wave. After the second, I feel my nose twitch. I've had enough time to think about what I've just said and realize how it must have sounded. In the third minute I

suddenly feel the urgent need to correct myself, but I must stay strong. I must not do something stupid and say something like:

“You’re probably wondering why I left then, given I’ve just told you how loyal I am.”

Except I do. I say exactly that. What is WRONG with me?

It captures Bailey’s attention again alright. Oh jeez. This interview is not going well and all three of us know it. Plus, I now owe them an answer.

Suddenly my mind peels back. To two weeks ago.

To one of the worst moments in my life.

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“It’s bad bitch o’clock,” I say, out loud.

Gosh, that’s unlike me.

I don’t usually say things like that. Only, I’m looking in a mirror, and I don’t usually look like this either, so maybe this just *isn’t* me anymore.

I switch my Spotify playlist to Lizzo’s “About Damn Time” for the third time this morning while my eyes trail up my half-naked body. Black stockings stretch up my legs, topped with lace roses clinging on for dear life to my newly shaved thighs. “Low-rise geo crochet thong-cut” panties wrap around my hips, which is the longest name possible for what is really just a thread of material covering the bare minimum needed to still qualify in the “knickers” category. My top half is only partially concealed by the small slither of fabric included in the “Elodie Corset and underwire brassiere,” and tying the whole outfit together (quite literally) is the *piece de la resistance*: the midnight black, FKME string bodysuit with detachable neck collar.

What it really is, is a logistical nightmare. The thing comes with no instruction manual and has more clips and holes than an IKEA shelving unit. But here it is, a geometric headache of strings that wrap around my body, centered by one long string that runs right up my chest and wraps tightly around my neck with the sole purpose of making me look “Sexy AF.”

I look across to my discarded girl boxers and perfectly regular underwired bra on my duck egg blue bed. That’s more me. Both of them are at least a decade old, but although their colors might have faded, they’ve still held the test of time. No holes means no reason to upgrade. Except, as

I've discovered, the upgrade literally is holes. Lingerie these days is apparently the absence of lingerie. Who knew?

"It's bad girl o'clock," I say, and then—getting all flustered—switch off my music and correct myself: "Bad *bitch* o'clock."

Lizzo said it, and she knows. So, come on. Confidence, woman.

Except, when I look at myself in the mirror, I don't see a confident woman staring back at me. I just see me. Playing dress-up.

I think about taking it all off again, and I almost physically have to stop myself. Because maybe this is the new, improved Daisy Peterson.

The Daisy that's going to leave the genuinely "sexy AF" Jackson Oakley absolutely and completely speechless in the ninth-floor boardroom when she strips down and guides his hands to NSFW places with a panoramic view of Soho below.

The one whose left bottom cheek appears to be considerably bigger than her right.

Wait, really? That can't be a thing?

I check the mirror, sashaying left and right. It does, it definitely does.

Oh bollocks. I must have done a strap wrong.

I open the Instagram post I bought it off to cross-check.

When Bae's mum thinks you're the cutesy type, the caption reads, followed by multiple fire and devil emojis.

The post shows a beautiful, flawlessly smooth-skinned woman wearing what I am now. Her ass, of course, in this bodysuit, is out of this world. The dream bottom. The behind of all behinds. Probably photoshopped, but like, who actually knows? Some people might just look like that.

Luckily, the image shows me exactly where I've gone wrong.

With a delicate pop, I unclip the rogue suspender strap and switch it to its rightful side. Bottom evened out again, I take an awkwardly-shallow-based-on-corset-restrictions breath.

I quickly top it with one of the only non-pastel-colored outfits I own: a black pencil skirt I once bought to look uber-professional matched with a sheer white shirt, just clear enough to see the outline of the bodysuit below. Then I stuff a thick jumper and jeans in my backpack for after. Obviously.

I check the time: 6:01 a.m. I'm pushing it now, but I still stall by that mirror. Coat on, headphones in, ready. My long blonde hair, usually styled with zero effort, is pulled up in a tight ponytail for once, showing I mean