“Are you sure you’re alright?” Ryan asked.

“I told you, I’m fine.” Anna replied.

“It’s just you seem a little…” Ryan drew the last word out.

“Apart from living in hell I’m absolutely perfect.” Anna snapped. She immediately realised what she had done and shook her head, “I’m sorry. You deserve better than that.”

“It’s OK.” Ryan said, “I’m just worried about you. You’ve not been like yourself.”

It was true. Anna had been much snappier recently. She had first noticed it at the horrid party a week previously when she had been a bit short with Jane but when she thought back it had started before that. After the initial high of being granted some measure of independence by Ryan and her mostly successful potty training she had quickly found herself frustrated again.

Anna was now sitting with her husband on the couch. It was about as close as she allowed him to get to her. It had been a while since he confessed how he felt about society and she no longer suspected him of trying to trick her but there were years of built up distrust of men to overcome before anything else could happen. She had to admit that she found him to be a sweet guy though. After all the awkwardness the two were gradually getting more comfortable talking with each other, even a simple conversation like this one would’ve been impossible a couple of weeks before.

“I’m just… bored.” Anna finally said, “You have no idea what it’s like sitting in here all day every day. I think like I’m going stir-crazy. The only times I leave the house I end up getting humiliated.”

“Anna…” Ryan started nervously.

“No, it’s OK, I know what’s out there.” Anna quickly continued, “I know it’s dangerous and I really do appreciate what you’ve done for me, more than you can ever know. It’s just me being silly.”

“I don’t think it’s silly.” Ryan said.

“Well, maybe silly is the wrong word.” Anna shrugged, “I feel ungrateful though. Like, you’ve done so much more for me than I could ever expect and yet I want more.”

“I think that’s normal.” Ryan replied, “Everyone wants more than they’ve got. It’s why billionaires strive for more billions.”

Anna looked down at the couch between her legs. It didn’t really matter what Ryan or anyone else said, she would still feel like she was being selfish. When she thought about Jane across the hall and the millions of other women out there in Sallas she knew she should be happy with her lot. She felt terrible that she didn’t.

“And I don’t think you’re ungrateful.” Ryan continued after a few seconds of silence as he slid across the couch towards Anna, “Every time I see you smile when you go to the bathroom or just sit down to relax I can see how grateful you are…”

Anna was listening but she was now looking between herself and Ryan with wide eyes. She saw him look down as well, they both stared at the spot where his hand now rested. He slowly lifted it up to see Anna’s hand underneath. With a gasp Ryan quickly withdrew his arm and slid away from Anna again.

“Oh, I’m… I’m sorry.” Ryan apologized profusely, “I didn’t want… I mean, I couldn’t…”

“It’s alright.” Anna practically whispered. Her cheeks were looking a little rosy, “Thank you.”

The awkward silence that had made up their early relationship returned. Like a couple of young teenagers in love the tiny show of affection had rendered them both far too embarrassed to even look at each other.

“I should put dinner on.” Anna said after a couple of minutes.

Anna stood up and went out to the kitchen. She was still getting used to the lack of huge bulk between her legs when she walked these days. She had been in pull-ups whilst at home for a little while now but after years and years of thick diapers it would take some getting used to. She started getting out the pots and pans when the shrill doorbell suddenly rang. She immediately went into high alert. Ryan got up and tip-toed over to the door. He looked through the peephole and then swore under his breath.

“Hello?” Ryan called out.

“Mr. Manning? It’s Howard from the office.” The voice called out, “May I come in?”

“Erm, yes… Hold on a minute.” Ryan called out. He spun around with a wild look in his eyes. He quickly ran around to the kitchen area where Anna was looking at him with concern.

“You have to come with me!” Ryan practically whispered, “Right now!”

“Ryan? What’s going on?” Anna asked as her arm was taken and she was practically dragged out of the kitchen and towards the bedroom.

“Shh!” Ryan whispered urgently. Anna thought they were going to the master bedroom but her husband pulled her instead to the locked door that hid the nursery.

Anna was alarmed as Ryan fumbled with the lock before opening the door and pushing Anna inside. He looked extremely stressed as he looked around. For a second he gripped his hair and muttered to himself. He only stopped when there was another knock on the door.

“I’ll be right there!” Ryan called out, “I’m just… getting changed.”

“Ryan, you’re scaring me.” Anna said as calmly as she could manage with all the anxiety surging through her. She had so rarely seen Ryan this panicky.

“That’s Howard at the door.” Ryan hissed as if that name should mean anything to Anna. When he saw Anna frown he continued, “He works for my father!”

“That’s… bad?” Anna asked. She was still a little confused about Ryan’s reaction.

“Please trust me.” Ryan said as he ran out the door.

Anna was left watching the doorway wondering if her husband had lost his mind. He wasn’t gone for long though and less than a minute later he was back carrying a disposable diaper and a pink onesie. He ran over and put them on the edge of the changing table.

“Put these on.” Ryan said as he turned back to Anna, “Quickly!”

“I’m not putting on a diaper.” Anna replied simply. After the last time at that party she was keen never to wear that thick padding again.

“You have to.” Ryan walked over and held both Anna’s upper arms, “I will explain afterwards but you MUST get dressed up.”

“After that party you said-…” Anna started. She had been intending to bring up Ryan’s promise that she wouldn’t need to wear another diaper.

“I know what I said.” Ryan was clearly getting impatient and the longer Anna stalled the more erratic he was acting, “But this isn’t a discussion. Put the damn diaper on!”

Anna was about to demand answers but there was another loud knock on the door which made Ryan jump. She looked from the doorway to the hated diaper and then to her husband. She sighed and nodded her head. Ryan blew out a little air and looked somewhat relieved.

“Get dressed really quickly.” Ryan said as he walked towards the hallway, “I’ll try to stall him for as long as I can.”

“OK, I’ll-” Anna was quickly cut off as the door to the nursery was closed and she heard Ryan’s footsteps going towards the door.

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Ryan was sweating and trembling as he made his way to the living room. He looked around trying to make sure there were no signs that might make Howard suspicious. Anything that was out of place was a potential giveaway and he was sure Howard would see it. He was like a hawk and whether it was searching through endless contracts or scanning a room he rarely missed the little details.

Ryan reached the front door and tried to stop his hand from shaking. He could feel sweat on his forehead as well. The consequences for failure right here were terrible, for both himself and Anna. He reached out to the handle and opened the door at last.

“Howard!” Ryan tried his best at a genuine smile, “What a surprise.”

“Ryan.” Howard didn’t return the smile. Instead he stepped past Ryan and into the living room of the apartment.

Howard was an older man in his sixties. Ryan had seen a lot of him growing up but they had never been particularly close. Howard was one of his father’s closest advisors and as such had been a common visitor to the Manning household. He was balding and what remained of his hair was as white as snow. He had a pair of rimless glasses perched on the end of his short nose and was dressed immaculately in a suit. Despite knowing Howard for all of his life Ryan couldn’t remember ever seeing him smile, he was a very dour man. He wasn’t the type to make social calls and Ryan wondered if he and Anna had somehow been rumbled.

Ryan closed the apartment door and saw Howard looking around. He had to stall for as long as possible. Ryan walked away from the door and towards the kitchen.

“Can I get you anything?” Ryan asked, “Coffee?”

“No, thank you.” Howard replied without looking at Ryan.

“Orange juice? Milk? Tea?” Ryan continued.

“Nothing.” Howard answered shortly.

Ryan busied around the kitchen making coffee but he was spending a lot more time watching Howard. The visitor to the apartment was now examining the living room table in front of the couch. Ryan’s mind went to the nursery and he prayed Anna had listened to him. He had no idea how long she needed.

“It’s a bit of a surprise to see you out this way.” Ryan said with faux-cheeriness, “Didn’t think to call or text first?”

“I’m here on business.” Howard replied, “Your father sent me.”

“Cool.” Ryan did his best to pretend that he wasn’t absolutely freaking out, “And how’s mom?”

“She’s as happy as always.” Howard said as he bent over and moved a newspaper with a single finger as if it might be contaminated.

Ryan felt a darker side come over him. He knew his mom wasn’t happy, or at least if she was it was only because she had been brainwashed into it. The person walking around wasn’t his mom, she was a plaything, a toy for her father. As far as Ryan was concerned the mother he had known had died long ago. His father had modified the poor woman so much she barely looked anything like Ryan remembered as a child.

“And what business did father send you on?” Ryan asked as he cleared the bad thoughts from his mind.

“He just wants to see how you’re getting on.” Howard said.

“Uh huh…” Ryan wasn’t convinced as he poured himself a cup of coffee and sipped it, “And he sent you all the way out here to have a look, did he?”

“Well, he’s received some disturbing reports.” Howard said as he turned to face Ryan.

“Reports?” Ryan faked a laugh, “He has spies here, does he?”

“Something like that…” Howard replied cryptically.

Ryan’s laugh turned to a frown. He immediately started spinning his mental rolodex and wondering who might’ve seen something unusual. It was impossible to say, like old European royal families the rich and powerful were all connected, any of the people he met here could know his father by one or two degrees of separation. It might’ve been a bluff as well.

Ryan knew his father had long been suspicious of him. Theirs was a strained relationship, Ryan desperately wanted and needed that executive job that was dangled in front of him like a carrot yet at the same time he couldn’t forgive his father for what happened to his mom. It was no doubt his sympathies for his mom that made his father suspicious.

As Ryan considered what Howard said he watched him walking over to the balcony. The visitor opened the door and looked around before closing it again. Howard checked a notepad he was holding as he walked back into the living room.

“Maybe you could tell me what you’re here for.” Ryan suggested, “You seem to be looking for something…”

“I’m looking for signs of deviancy.” Howard answered.

“Deviancy?” Ryan scoffed at the word and tried to ignore the sweat he could feel under his arms.

“Where’s Anna?” Howard asked, “I’m not seeing many signs of a baby living here.”

“Well, in all fairness, a baby doesn’t live here.” Ryan replied with a chuckle.

“You know what I mean.” Howard wasn’t amused, “You know what your father expects.”

Ryan sighed. How long had it been? Had he bought enough time for Anna? He wasn’t sure what he could do to stall Howard much longer, not that he had really managed to slow down his apparent investigation at all.

“Where’s Anna?” Howard repeated.

“This way.” Ryan said as he started walking towards the hallway, “She’s in the nursery.”

“She spends a lot of time in there?” Howard asked as he pulled out his notepad and a pen.

“Lots of time.” Ryan lied, “Whenever I don’t need her!”

Ryan tried to channel Paul and let out a bark of a laugh that was meant to warn Anna that he was coming. Inwardly he felt sick at the way he was talking about his wife. He stopped at the door and took his time pretending to unlock it, anything to give Anna a few more seconds…