

the
four
groomsmen
of the
wedpocalypse

COMBAT

book three

LILIAN
MONROE



COMBAT

A BODYGUARD
ROMANCE

THE FOUR GROOMSMEN OF THE
WEDPOCALYPSE

BOOK 3

LILIAN MONROE



CONTENTS

[Free Novellas](#)

[THE WEDPOCALYPSE HEATS UP](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lilian Monroe](#)

Copyright © 2024 Lilian Monroe All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the author except for short quotations used for the purpose of reviews.

Resemblance to actual persons, things living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Sybil at PopKitty Designs

Editing by Shavonne Clarke at Motif Edits

Proofreading by Paige Kraft (paigekredits.com)

Published by Method and Madness Publishing PTY LTD

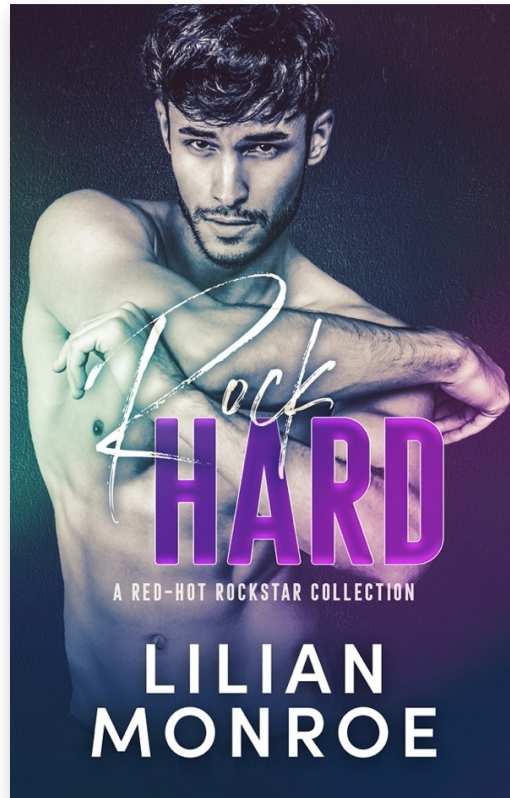
PO Box 168 Subiaco, WA, Australia 6008

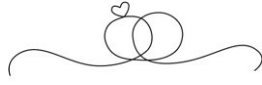
Ebook ISBN: 9781922986382

WANT **THREE** BOOKS DELIVERED STRAIGHT TO YOUR INBOX?
HOW ABOUT THREE ROCK STAR ROMANCES THAT WERE *WAY* TOO
HOT TO SELL?

GET THE COMPLETE *ROCK HARD* SERIES:

WWW.LILIANMONROE.COM/ROCKHARD





THE WEDPOCALYPSE HEATS UP

ONE

LUCY BARLOW WAS in deep trouble and trying to hide it. Just a few feet away from her, Cormac McKenna leaned his elbows on his thighs and surveyed her through the startling deep blue of his eyes. Discomfort squirmed through Lucy's stomach as she withstood the intensity of his stare, but there was no way around it. She needed help.

She huffed and decided to just come out with it: "The Stirling Stationery Man just declared war. I need backup."

Cormac blinked, unmoved. "Backup? What kind of backup?"

"Well... The kind of backup that looks like...you." Though her heart hammered, she squared her shoulders. "I need a bodyguard to accompany me to this year's Wedding Expo."

"I see," Cormac replied. His voice was deep and even, giving no hint at what was going through his mind. He probably thought she was insane. Maybe he was right.

Lucy soldiered on because she'd already humiliated herself this much, and she might as well finish the job. "Last year was a bit...rough."

“Rough,” he repeated.

“Uh-huh.” She aimed for brightness in her smile, forcing herself not to shift her weight from foot to foot. Standing in front of Cormac felt a lot like being the only actor on a stage, the spotlight shining in a bright circle around her feet. She hated it. The urge to fidget was an itch under her skin, the need to run a twitch in her legs.

But she had no choice. She needed him.

Another deep breath, and she was reasonably certain her voice would remain steady when she spoke. “I had a look at your website, and I saw that you provide personal security services. I’d ask Marlon, but he’s...you know.” She waved her hand at the other side of the ballroom, where the groom, Marlon, was busy kissing his bride, Camilla. The two of them would be leaving on their honeymoon a week from Monday, and they had earned his time off. Their courtship had been eventful; Marlon’s nose would forever have a slight lump from the time Camilla had kicked him in the face and broken it when he was trying to save her from a vindictive loan shark.

It had been about a year and a half since those events, but they had cast a long shadow. Lucy didn’t want to trouble her friends with her own problems when she was meant to be celebrating their union.

Lucy took a deep breath. “You didn’t have prices listed, so I was hoping I could get a quote...?” She trailed off.

Cormac watched her. She had the ridiculous urge to force out a fake laugh, tell him she was pulling his leg, and disappear in the throngs of weddinggoers so she didn’t have to feel the weight of his gaze. But that would be spineless, and Lucy was no coward.

He was a large man, wide across the shoulders, though his tuxedo did its best to conceal his size. Stubble lined his square jaw and framed his lips, which Cormac pursed slightly as he considered her. She knew from the interactions they’d had previously that he was built like a fighter: lean, corded, and freakishly strong. At their Friendsgiving celebration last year, she’d seen him heft a chunky timber table and rotate it into

position with one arm. When she'd tried to nudge it over a minute earlier, the table hadn't even budged.

Of the five friends (Cormac, Marlon, Leo, Archer, and Emory), Cormac was the most solitary. Even today, on his best friend's wedding day, he chose to sit at his table and watch other people enjoy themselves instead of joining in the festivities himself. Lucy was the same. Maybe that's why she'd worked up the courage to walk over here in the first place.

He brought his fingers up to rub his chin as he studied her. His hands were rough, weather-beaten and corded with tendons and veins, with blunt, clean fingernails and big knuckles. A man's hands.

The sight of this big man, with his big hands, and his shrewd, silent perusal made Lucy want to fall through the floor and disappear. She hated being watched—being *seen*.

She couldn't do this. The spindly fingers of anxiety raked across her ribs one time too many, and she discovered she was a gutless coward, after all.

"So, I'll email you." She clapped her hands together and nodded. "Good? Good. Enjoy the wedding."

She spun on her heels, the pale peach of her bridesmaid's gown swishing around her legs. Her face must have been bright red; it felt so hot it tingled. That always happened, and in recent years it had only gotten worse. She couldn't handle scrutiny, or attention, or any sort of pressure at all.

It hadn't always been this way. Once upon a time, Lucy was a high-performing salesperson with her name topping her company's charts on a regular basis. Now, she couldn't even handle a simple conversation.

A plan quickly bloomed in her mind. She'd cut across the ballroom, duck down the hallway to the bathrooms, lock herself in a stall, and do some deep breathing. Then she'd come back and hide behind the big potted plant in the corner until the wedding was over.

She wouldn't email Cormac's company, Elite Security. She'd deal with the Wedding Expo herself. It was ridiculous to want to hire a bodyguard. Really, a rivalry with another local stationery company was absurd. Why did she have to hire an actual security company to take her to a conference? She was—

“What happened last year?”

Lucy froze, having made it all of three feet into her escape-to-the-safety-of-the-toilet plan. She glanced over her shoulder to find Cormac leaning back in his chair. God, he was terrifying. He'd spread his legs and rested his arm on the edge of the table, taking up way more space than he ought to. “Sorry?”

“You said last year was rough. What happened?”

“Oh.” She turned back to face him, toying with the strap of her clutch that dangled from her wrist. “Well, see, there's this guy, Aaron Phillips.”

“The Stirling Stationery Man.”

She huffed. “Yeah. That's what he calls himself.”

“I remember.”

Nearly a year and a half ago, at the Stirling Winter Festival, Aaron had confronted Lucy about her plan to attend her first-ever Wedding Expo. He'd been irate and threatening, but Cormac and Marlon had swept in and kicked him out of the festival. Lucy's friends had crowded around her and made her feel better about the encounter, but she'd known, even then, that things would escalate.

And they had.

“Well, I ended up going to the Wedding Expo last year, as planned,” Lucy started. Her mouth was dry, and she tried to swallow. Teetering on her heels, she grabbed the chair next to Cormac's and plopped herself down. Fingers tracing the subtle floral embroidery on the tablecloth, she said, “Aaron was there, and he glared at me the whole time. It was uncomfortable, but it was fine. I just ignored him and worked

on giving out samples and trying to get some new clients. The Wedding Expo is a big deal.”

“Especially in Stirling.”

Lucy’s breath gusted out in agreement. “Especially in Stirling.”

Stirling, New Hampshire was a tiny town with a big reputation—for being the wedding capital of the country. The wedding season started in early June, and people flocked from all around to tie the knot in the small, picturesque town. Business ramped up in the fall, when the leaves turned a thousand shades of yellow, orange, and red, and then eased off in the winter, but it never stopped. Weddings were plentiful and varied.

Instead of fighting the reputation, the town had embraced it. There were wedding venues in hotels, old logging mills that had been refurbished to rustic-chic assembly halls, private barns, places of worship of every denomination, parks, museums—anywhere people could gather and celebrate the union of a happy couple, they did. In droves.

Along with the venues came small businesses. Dressmakers; florists like her friend Scarlett; bakers—of which Camilla was the best, in Lucy’s humble, not-at-all-biased opinion—photo booth rental companies; tent, chair, and decor rentals; caterers; planners; photographers; and, of course, stationery companies like Lucy’s.

Lucy had fallen into the business when her previous career ended in grisly, humiliating failure. She’d dusted off her graphic design skills, taken some classes at the local community college, and learned about weights of paper, quality of inks, and e-commerce websites. From the ground up, she’d built a business that now sustained her by creating custom stationery for weddings. From save-the-dates to invitations to seat maps and table name cards, Lucy designed, printed, and sold everything and anything paper-related that made a wedding come together.

She picked up one of the folded cards on the table, reading the name in gold script: Archer Jones. He and Cormac were

the last two in their friend group to remain single. Emory had been the first to marry Maggie, a kind, gentle woman who Lucy only knew through her fiery friend Amelia. Amelia had tied the knot with Leo, and now Marlon and Camilla were celebrating their nuptials.

Lucy lifted her gaze to Cormac and wondered if he saw his friends pairing off one by one, hoping he'd get a chance to do the same.

She resisted the urge to snort. There was no way.

Cormac scanned the room like he expected an armed gunman to burst through the doors. And Lucy knew, just by the set of his jaw, that he'd be willing and able to take any threat down. He wasn't thinking about wedding bells and babies, that was for sure.

As she watched him, Lucy's shoulders relaxed. Cormac emanated a competent calmness that eased a knot in her chest. Nothing could go wrong when Cormac was on guard.

“Anyway, I ended up hiring this college kid to help me out with the Wedding Expo. He was mostly on his phone the whole day, but I didn't mind. I doubt stationery is that interesting to a twenty-year-old guy. But then I went to the bathroom and told him to watch the booth, and I guess he ended up wandering off. When I came back, someone had spilled water over all my boxes of samples and products. Everything was ruined. I tried to stick it out to try to talk to potential clients, but I didn't even have business cards to hand out. It was a complete waste of time and money.”

Cormac hummed. “You think it was Phillips who ruined your products?”

Lucy ran her thumb over the thick cotton cardstock of the name card, smiling bitterly. She'd spared no expense for Camilla's wedding, and she wondered if anyone had even noticed how luxurious the name cards felt. Archer's gilded name gleamed in the twinkling ballroom lights. “I know it was him,” she admitted. “He told me so himself a couple of days ago.”

“That’s what you meant when you said the Stirling Stationery Man declared war.”

“His exact words were, ‘If you show your face at the Expo this year, I’ll make sure you never sell another thing again. You have no idea whose toes you’re treading on. This is war, Barlow.’” Her voice wobbled when she said her own last name, and she tried to hide it by clearing her throat. “So there. That’s the backstory. Can you give me a quote? A competent bodyguard would probably scare him off.”

“Make an appointment at the office and we’ll figure it out,” Cormac replied before tipping his bottle to his lips. The lump on his throat bobbed as he swallowed, and Lucy wondered why that made her heart thump a little bit harder.

She glanced away. “Okay. I’ll call on Monday and make an appointment.”

“You do that.”

Nodding like one of those bobblehead figurines, she stood and wiped her damp hands on her silk-covered thighs. “Okey dokey then. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he answered darkly.

“Right.” A nervous laugh fell from her lips, and she finally made her escape to the blessed solitude of the washroom.

CORMAC WATCHED Lucy scurry away with vague disinterest. The bodyguard job was fine. He’d seen Aaron Phillips in the flesh and didn’t think much of the man’s threats. How did a self-proclaimed Stationery Man plan to wage war, anyway? Paper cuts?

He’d give her a quote and assign someone to the Wedding Expo if she agreed to his price. Then he’d collect the paycheck and go on with his life.

End of story.

Protecting others was something he’d made into a successful career, but only because he’d failed once, when it counted most. That lesson had cost him more than he was

willing to admit, and he'd spent his life trying to make up for it.

He and Marlon had built a business based on their protective inclinations, and he attacked the job with ruthless efficiency. Work was work, and he was very, very good at it.

Outside of work, he protected no one but his mother, his sister, and himself.

With the index finger of his left hand, he touched the scar that marred his temple. Every time he looked in the mirror, it reminded him he'd failed.

These days, the only failure was not getting paid.

That's the way he liked it, and that's how it would remain. Lucy Barlow might be a pretty thing with shiny black hair and warm brown eyes, but as far as Cormac was concerned, she was just another client, interchangeable with any of the rest.

As he ran through the mental checklist that appeared in his head for onboarding a new client, Cormac realized he was bored.

Bored with the wedding. Bored with the job. Bored with the incessant edge that rode his nerves. He was always ready for a fight—ready to protect—and what had that gotten him, besides a business that didn't seem to hold his interest any longer?

What if he'd worked his whole life to build this thing, only to discover it was utterly meaningless?

Marlon's booming laughter echoed across the ballroom. He had his arms around Camilla, and he looked happier than Cormac had ever seen him. Come to think of it, Cormac hadn't ever heard Marlon laugh like that. Camilla leaned against him, and Marlon leaned down to kiss her. They were in love, and it was faintly nauseating.

"Cheer up," Archer said, clapping Cormac on the shoulder. "It's a wedding. You're supposed to be happy."

Cormac grunted as his friend deposited a fresh bottle next to his near-empty one. "I am happy."

Archer laughed. “And you said it so convincingly too.” He grinned, a slash of white teeth. Archer was a general contractor in town, talented and hard-working, with an innate ability to sell. Cormac imagined that particular smile made Archer a lot of money, in his time. The man inspired confidence even when he shouldn’t.

Cormac clicked his tongue, eyes darting to the hallway when Lucy reappeared.

His gaze tracked her as she ducked around a pack of people having an animated conversation. She nodded at someone and slipped by them, and she didn’t stop until she was in the corner of the room, beside a gigantic potted palm. She leaned against the wall and let out a breath, like she’d just escaped from the jaws of death with the barest margin of error.

Odd. And oddly endearing. No wonder she was afraid of a guy who sold paper.

“Hey now,” Archer warned. “That’s Lucy Barlow you’re staring at like a dog slobbering over a juicy steak. Camilla already warned me off.”

Cormac’s head cranked so hard he gave himself a sore neck. “What do you mean, warned you off?”

Archer shrugged. “She’s cute. Can you blame me?”

Cormac narrowed his eyes. “Stay away from her.”

For some infuriating reason, that made Archer laugh. “Camilla already gave me that speech, buddy. And she was scarier. What’s it got to do with you, anyway? Are you into her?”

“No,” Cormac clipped.

“Right,” Archer replied.

“I’m not interested in her.” And it was the truth. He wasn’t interested in anyone. Close relationships meant only one thing: more people to protect. The only reason he tolerated his friends was because they could take care of themselves.

But someone like Lucy? Some sweet, tender woman who jumped at the sight of her own shadow? That was a long road

to Cormac's personal hell.

"I believe you," Archer said, sounding like he meant the opposite. "What about her?"

Cormac followed the jerk of Archer's chin toward Scarlett Westbrook, the town's newest florist. She'd been in Stirling a couple of years, but she'd probably be seen as a new arrival for the next decade or two. Small towns were friendly, but it took a while to truly integrate. He shrugged. "What about her?"

"She's hot."

"Yeah," he agreed, but he meant it in a distant sort of way. Scarlett was tall, her head wreathed in brown curls, and had a loud laugh. She talked with her hands a lot, and he watched an elderly aunt dodge one of her gestures. His gaze traveled back to the gigantic potted plant and the woman hiding behind it. Amelia was there now, leaning her head against Lucy's. Lucy smiled, and it softened every feature on her face.

There was something compelling about that softness; it should be cherished. Protected.

Shaking his head, he picked up his fresh bottle and took a sip. "You watch the game last night?"

Archer tore his gaze away from Scarlett and nodded. They fell into easy conversation, and Cormac made a point to keep his gaze away from the potted plant—and the woman who shielded herself behind it.

When the wedding wound down, he said his goodbyes to the happy couple, clapping Marlon on the back a few times when they hugged goodbye.

"Congrats," Cormac told him. "You found a good one."

"Aww," Camilla said, curling her arm around Marlon's elbow. "He said I was a good one."

"It's pretty obvious, sweetheart," Marlon said, grinning at his bride.

Her face was flushed, and she looked like she was brimming with happiness. Overflowing with it, like the joy

couldn't help but leak from every pore. It sent a strange, squelching sensation through Cormac's gut. That much happiness couldn't be good for someone's health.

Saying his goodbyes, he ducked out of the hotel into the cool night air. It was crisp and fresh as it filled his lungs. Though his eyes scanned the twilight for any shadows that looked out of place and catalogued the cars and people in the lot, Cormac felt more at ease than he had at the wedding reception.

Even standing in the same room as those people, he'd felt like he was on the outside looking in.

Keys in hand, he headed for his car. His back, feet, and head were sore, and he was looking forward to locking himself inside his home so he could finally relax.

But when he was behind the wheel of his vehicle, his gaze caught on a dark-haired woman crossing the parking lot. She stopped at a beat-up white car—Ford Focus, probably somewhere between eight and ten years old, he noted out of habit—and picked something up off the windshield. Cormac leaned over his steering wheel, watching as Lucy flipped open a small card and frowned at its contents.

A ticket? It didn't look like a ticket. A flyer?

He glanced at his own wipers, which had nothing pinned beneath them. Casting his gaze back to Lucy, he watched her shake her head and enter her car. She put her purse in the passenger seat, started the car, and drove away.

A minute later, Cormac did the same. By the time he got home, there was an email waiting in his work inbox from Lucy, asking for that meeting they'd spoken about earlier. He checked his schedule and confirmed an appointment time for Monday. Best to get it over with quickly so he could move on.

TWO

IT WAS ridiculous to be nervous about a business meeting. Completely absurd. Still, Lucy couldn't help the way her pulse jumped, couldn't stop the sweat from gathering between her shoulder blades.

“Deep breaths, honey,” her mother crooned over her phone's speaker. The device was in the cradle clipped to her old car's dash. “I can feel your tension from all the way over here. When was the last time you went outside barefoot?”

“I don't need to reinforce my connection with the earth, Mother,” she said, staring at the offices of Elite Security through her windshield.

“Of course you do. You're chained to your computer all day, Lucy. You need to feel the grass beneath your feet. Listen to the whispering of the wind. Feel the wealth of the universe filling your lungs.”

Lucy rubbed her temples. “Okay. Thanks, Mom. Will do.”

“Love you to pieces! And remember, you can always come back and live with us. This whole business with the Wedding Expo gives me the heebie-jeebies. I've got a bad feeling about it.”

Dolly Barlow was convinced she was a prescient psychic, which had been inconvenient for Lucy growing up, especially when Dolly happened to be right about Lucy sneaking out to go to parties or meet friends. It was inconvenient now, when Lucy happened to agree with her mother's apprehension no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

The Wedding Expo was trouble. Lucy knew it, but she also realized that she couldn't expand her business without putting herself out there. She needed to attend.

"You need to meditate on what you want, honey," Dolly continued. "Search deep inside your heart."

Lucy loved her mother. She really did. But a bit of practical advice about business and bodyguards wouldn't have gone amiss in this particular moment instead of directives to feel the grass between her toes and advice on searching the depths of her heart. "Okay. Bye, Mom."

They hung up. Ten seconds later, the phone rang. She sighed and swiped to answer. "Hi, Dad."

"Pumpkin, you've got your mother twisted into knots. She's gone to meditate by the stream and said not to wait for her for dinner."

Lucy glanced at the time. It was barely ten o'clock in the morning. "She's going to meditate for eight hours?"

"You know your mother," Gus Barlow replied. Augustus Montgomery Barlow the Third had come from a long line of esteemed lawyers, prosecutors, and judges who were horrified that he'd turned his back on the family legacy to grow tomatoes in his backyard with the love of his life at his side. They shuddered every time Dolly mentioned the words "energy," but they'd accepted her. Along with both sets of grandparents, Dolly and Gus had given Lucy a loving, warm upbringing that had left her wholly unprepared for the real world.

Still, she was unable to resent them for it. They were too good.

"Make sure she eats," was all that Lucy said.

“Are you sure you need to do this Wedding Expo thing?” Gus asked, an edge of desperation in his voice. “If you need actual security, it can’t be worth the risk. Is this a money thing? Why don’t you come back home, pumpkin? We’d love to have you.”

Lucy’s heart sank. She knew she was lucky to have parents who were so ready to catch her when she tumbled, but as the years went by, she began to wonder if they expected it. Were they offering to help because they knew she was destined to fail? She’d done it once, after all. She couldn’t blame them for expecting it to happen again.

Feeling lost, all Lucy could answer was, “I have to do this. I can’t let Aaron Phillips shove me around.”

Her father’s sigh ruffled through the phone. “Be careful. Are you sure these security people know what they’re doing?”

“You’ve met Marlon,” she said. They’d had a birthday barbecue for Lucy last summer where she’d had the pleasure of watching big, burly, protective Marlon try to understand what her mother meant when she described his aura in great detail.

“Right, right,” Gus replied. “I have to go check on your mother. Love you, pumpkin.”

“Okay, Dad. Love you too.”

“You can always move back in with us, you know,” he reminded her.

“Yep,” Lucy said. “Bye-bye now!” She hung up before he could answer.

Her doubts ceded to a hot burst of anger.

She was in her mid-thirties and was absolutely *not* going to move back in with her parents, no matter how loving they were. It had taken her five years to build her business to the point where it sustained her. She’d fought for her independence after blowing up her previous career, and she wasn’t going to take a step back now.

That’s why she was here.

She wasn't going to let some scrawny, greasy-haired paper salesman push her around. This was her livelihood. Her business was her life. It was everything she was proud of—all the good parts of her character on display for everyone to see. She wasn't too hot at public speaking, and she got nervous whenever too much attention was on her, but Lucy was good at what she did. People's weddings were better because of her, and that was something to be proud of.

With that thought buoying her spirits, she exited her car and squared her shoulders. Stomping up to the door, she pushed her way inside with all the delicacy of a bull seeing red.

Crashing to a stop in front of a curved reception desk, she drew in a long breath as the woman behind the counter looked up.

The woman appeared to be in her fifties, with cat-eye glasses and expertly highlighted hair. Her lipstick was brick red, and her gaze was sharp. "Yes?"

"Lucy Barlow. I have an appointment at ten o'clock with Cormac McKenna."

The lady tapped on her screen, then gestured to a leather sofa on the opposite side of the room. "Have a seat. Won't be long."

Lucy looked around the room as she waited. The front of the office was lined with tall, tinted windows. The furniture was simple but expensive-looking, and the curved metal of the desk gave an impression of strength and solidity. The Elite Security logo was all simplicity and clean lines, and it fit with the rest of the decor.

A coffee table sat in front of her, with a bouquet of fresh flowers the only element brightening the space up. To Lucy's left, a water cooler buzzed gently. She leaned over, took one of the cone-shaped cups, and had a drink. The cool water soothed her parched throat, so she filled the cone again and gulped another mouthful down in one go. Crisp, cold, and perfect. She felt a little better.

After she'd dropped the cup in the waiting trash can beside the cooler, she heard quiet footsteps moving toward her. Cormac appeared a moment later, wearing black pants, a black leather belt, and a fitted black polo shirt with the Elite Security logo on the breast.

Unlike the tuxedo, these clothes definitely did *not* downplay the power of his muscular body. He looked ready for action, all corded strength and calm confidence. Nothing could ruffle him. Nothing could stop him.

He was the opposite of the nervous energy that made up Lucy's entire being. He was terrifying.

But just as Lucy wasn't going to move back in with her parents, she also wasn't going to let some big, macho, muscular bodyguard intimidate her. She had a rival to intimidate and a Wedding Expo to attend. This year, she *would* find new clients and grow her business. That was a promise to herself, and a promise to the universe. Dolly would be proud.

Lucy sprang to her feet and stuck out her hand. "Hello."

Cormac considered the outstretched palm for a moment, then slowly lifted his own palm to meet hers. Warm fingers wrapped around her hand, and Lucy's body temperature cranked up a few degrees. "Good to see you, Lucy."

"You as well," she said, pulling her hand back. She resisted the urge to wipe her palm on her pants, because that would be rude. It's not that she thought his touch was disgusting, it's that the heat of his palm lingered. She needed more water.

"This way," he said, stepping aside to gesture down the hall. "Thanks, Karin."

Karin, the receptionist, watched Lucy with a raised brow. "Holler if you need anything. Marlon just called, said he got caught up. He'll be in later to talk about the Hampstead job. Said it's a doozy."

"Roger," Cormac replied, and he nodded for Lucy to lead the way down the hallway.

Lucy's legs had transformed into the unsteady stilts of a baby giraffe. She used the straight lines of the wood flooring to guide her down the hallway as she walked, feeling Cormac's presence at her back.

The walls began to close in on her. This was a corporate space. A business. She was about to enter a conference room, which was one of the more horrible spaces mankind had ever dreamed up. All sterile and cheap, with fluorescent lighting and no windows. It was going to be horrible.

Breathe, she reminded herself.

This wasn't like before. This time, *she* was the client. She wasn't going to mess it up—she couldn't. *She* was hiring *him*.

A few more steps, and the hallway opened up to reveal the office kitchen, with conference rooms visible just across the hall. It was militantly neat. The sink gleamed silver, free of dishes and even droplets of water. Mugs were lined up with handles facing at exactly the same angle. The coffee machine was open and prepped with dry grounds, ready to be filled with water and flicked on.

“You want a drink before we go into the meeting room? Coffee? Water?”

“Water, please,” Lucy croaked through her parched throat.

Cormac angled toward the sink. Passing the cabinets along the way, he paused for a moment to flip open the lid of the only item that marred the clean countertop: a box of donuts. She recognized the logo of Camilla's bakery and saw the rings of frosting and glaze left behind by the donuts that had once filled the space inside. Based on the barest twitch of Cormac's eyebrows and the disappointed huff he let out as he dropped the lid, the box was empty.

Lucy found herself endeared by that little huff, the tiny frown. This big, burly, muscular, slightly scary man had a sweet tooth. He liked donuts. She tucked the piece of information away, grateful that something had humanized Cormac before she had to enter the conference room with him.

He *couldn't* be terrifying; he liked Camilla's creations.

With two glasses of water in his hands, Cormac motioned to the nearest meeting room with his chin. Lucy took another deep breath.

The last time she'd been in a room like this—one with white walls, creaky office chairs, a long rectangular table with a conference phone in the middle, and a whiteboard on the wall—her career had fallen apart, and it had been entirely her own fault. Overhead, the fluorescent lights flickered to life as Cormac hit the switch with his elbow. Lucy jumped.

“I’m not going to bite you,” he drawled, noticing her reaction.

“Ah. Ha-ha,” she forced, taking a seat on the far side of the table.

Cormac placed her water down on the table and sat across from her. A laptop waited on the end of the table, and he pulled it in front of him. He had to stretch to reach it, and his shirt bunched a little at his shoulder when he straightened, exposing more of his bicep. He had a tan line on his upper arm, and even sitting at rest, there was a vein that ran down the thickest part of his muscle. These were things Lucy noticed, which were not very helpful for her stress levels.

“So,” he said, “I reviewed the information you sent in. I think one man would be enough to suit your needs, but due to the sheer number of Expo attendees, as well as the many entries and exits, two people would be best. I’ve put together a quote, which I emailed this morning.”

“I reviewed it,” Lucy confirmed, picking her water glass up to take a sip. She set it down again. “It seems reasonable.”

Cormac nodded. “Good. Here’s our standard contract. I’ll walk you through it and if you agree, we can go from there.”

There was no warmth in Cormac’s tone, but his steadiness settled Lucy. The trembling in her fingertips eased as she nodded, and they got to work. An hour later, she signed and initialed the contract, officially hiring Elite Security to provide two bodyguards for her to attend the Wedding Expo.

The conference room hadn't defeated her. She'd sat here and slain that particular dragon, pathetic as it may have been.

"Now," Cormac said, tapping the edges of the contract on the table before setting it aside, the paper lined up exactly with the table's edge. "Let's talk logistics. I've procured the plans of the Gladstone Hotel, where the Expo will be held. Do you know the location of your booth yet?"

Lucy's brows crept up when Cormac tapped on his computer, causing engineering drawings to appear on the projector screen. He'd marked exits already and also had photos of previous years' Wedding Expo booths. The man was thorough. He'd done this before she even hired him.

"Um, yes," Lucy said, "I'll email it through right now."

She tapped on her phone until his laptop chimed, and he pulled up the map the Expo organizers had sent through. A few taps, and the map was overlaid on the plans Cormac had already prepared. Wow. That was impressive.

"We'll have one man stationed here, with you." He pointed to the booth with the cursor. "The other will be stationed here." He pointed to a spot near the main entry. "If you need to leave your booth for any reason, the man at the door will move to the booth to watch over your products and gear, and the man at the booth will come with you. I've scheduled Sam and Luke, who are two of my more experienced employees. Between them, they have nearly twenty years of bodyguard experience, and I know for a fact that they will keep you safe. You can meet them today when we're done in here."

Two bodyguards for a wedding conference. Second thoughts rose as the reality of the contract she'd signed dawned on her. She'd just hired two men to follow her around at the Stirling Wedding Expo to protect her against a guy who sold wedding invitations. Lucy inhaled sharply.

"Is there a problem?" Cormac's dark-blue eyes had moved from the screen to meet her gaze.

"I, um, no," she stammered. "It just... I feel a little ridiculous, is all. It's a wedding conference. It seems a bit

over-the-top to do all this.”

“You’re the one who wanted to hire us. Are you saying you don’t want us to do our jobs?”

“No! Of course not. I just...” Lucy stopped talking. For a moment, the room spun. She was in one of these horrible corporate spaces, having to defend herself. Again.

Then Cormac leaned forward. “Lucy?” he asked quietly.

She focused on the roughness of his voice, the slight furrow of his brow. Even across this horrible fake wood melamine table, she caught a faint wisp of his clean, male scent. He loomed there, even though he was sitting down, but it didn’t scare her.

This man was prepared to send two men to the Wedding Expo with her. He had it all planned out, every position and exit.

Cormac would help her.

She’d spent so much time making her life smaller. After her failure in Corporate America, Lucy had focused on building a small, quaint business that could meet all her needs. She’d liked the slow pace of her growth and how little pressure the business exerted on her shoulders. No one expected anything of her. She could work at her own pace, doing something she enjoyed, with no expectations and no deadlines other than the ones she set for herself. When she took on a new client, she did it with plenty of buffer time added in.

For a long time, she was happy to scratch out a living by keeping her business small.

But now, things had changed.

The humiliation of her career failure had faded, and Lucy found herself wanting more. She wanted to be able to take vacations. She wanted to buy a house one day, have a family, retire. She wanted to be able to say yes to every dinner invitation with the girls, no matter what restaurant they were going to.

She wasn't happy to scratch out a living anymore. She wanted a *life*.

Not only that, but Lucy had been *threatened*. She'd had her booth sabotaged. She couldn't hide in her home office, sitting at her computer, without standing up for herself. She was a nervous wreck, but she wasn't weak.

Straightening, she shook her head and spoke to the table. "I don't want Aaron Phillips bullying me anymore. I don't want to lose months' worth of work because someone dumps water on my boxes of samples. I'm not going to let some pathetic bully push me around. I'm hiring Elite Security because I deserve to feel safe, and I deserve to be able to sell wedding invitations just as much as anyone else in this town."

She'd said it mostly for her own benefit, but when she lifted her head, Cormac nodded as if she'd been answering a question he'd asked. "Good. Should I continue?"

She huffed. "Yes. Please do."

An hour later, Lucy left the Elite Security offices with her head held high. The Wedding Expo would be a success. Lucy would make sure of it.

THREE

A GRUNT ESCAPED Cormac's lips as the couch he carried slipped in his grasp. Halfway up the stairs in Leo and Amelia's new home, he called out for Marlon to stop.

"I think we need to rotate it to get it over the corner of the banister," Marlon said when they'd set the sofa down and surveyed their progress. He glanced down at Cormac, who was wiping sweat from his temple. "You good?"

"Yeah." Cormac fixed his grip on the corner of the couch and hefted it up, and the two men made it to the upper-story living area without any further issues.

Amelia appeared in the bedroom doorway, a wide smile on her face. "Thank you! This is going to look so good!"

The whole gang had been enlisted to help Amelia and Leo move into their new home. It was Saturday, one week after the wedding. Marlon would be leaving for his honeymoon on Monday, and the past week had been a scramble to get organized for his absence. Cormac had wanted to spend today at the office finishing up a detailed plan for the next three weeks, but he'd been coerced into unpaid grunt work for one of his closest friends. At least Leo had promised pizza and beer at the end of it.

Leo and his wife Amelia had been living in Amelia's apartment for a couple of years, and they had finally closed on their forever home. Cormac didn't voice his opinions on the concept of "forever homes" out loud, but in the private space between his ears, he rolled his metaphorical eyes.

There was nothing magical about moving into a new place. Even looking around at the upstairs area, he could see half a dozen security risks. For example, the neighbor's fence gave access to the upstairs balcony, which had a laughably bad lock. It was worse than his mother's house, and his mother's house had been a nightmare to secure.

"There's a bit more room in this place than your old apartment, isn't there?" Marlon glanced around the second living room. He didn't seem worried about security risks. Cormac followed his friend's gaze to a small balcony overlooking their yard. Marlon grinned at Amelia. "Good place to let kids run around."

Cormac suppressed a shudder. Who was this man, and what had they done with Marlon? Apparently, falling in love and getting married melted a man's brain.

"We'll see," Amelia replied with a wry smile. "We're in no hurry. We have to renovate this place before any of that."

Setting aside the fact that it was a security nightmare, Leo and Amelia's new place was a beautiful home on the outskirts of Stirling, a two-story, four-bedroom house that had started as a two-bed bungalow from the 1950s and eventually had a second story and an addition cobbled onto it. It was a strange layout, but Amelia insisted that with a few simple tweaks, it would be a highly efficient floorplan. She had diagrams and budgets already detailed in an appropriately labeled folder on her laptop.

"The apartment served us well, but I'm happy to be out of there," Amelia continued with a smile. "After what happened with my neighbor, it never felt the same."

Her neighbor, Mrs. Gordon, whose real name was Ethel Brown, hadn't been the sweet old lady she'd pretended to be. She and her sister Meredith had been part of a complex

thievery operation that had gone undetected for decades. Even after Meredith had been arrested, a young man had tried to steal a precious cake topper from one of Elite Security's clients. Marlon had caught him, but the whole thing had been a cluster.

No one had ever found Ethel. Cormac hoped she'd taken her loot and run far away. They had enough crap to deal with in Stirling without geriatric larceny.

It was simply more evidence that you couldn't trust anyone, as far as Cormac was concerned. The best thing to do was have a strong security system and a healthy dose of caution where other people were involved.

"Here's good?" Marlon asked, nodding to the location where they'd dropped the couch.

"Can you move it to face this way?" Amelia gestured for them to rotate the couch 180 degrees.

They got it done, and Amelia beamed at them before turning toward the steps. "What do you think, ladies?"

Cormac followed her gaze to the four women trundling up the steps. Scarlett, Lucy, Camilla, and Amelia's sister Maggie all carried various boxes and bags as they made their way into the space.

"Your wedding photos would look amazing as a gallery wall behind the couch," Camilla said, wrapping an arm around Amelia's shoulders, beaming.

Behind her, Lucy climbed the last step while clutching a big plastic container of what looked like winter clothing. Her foot caught on the lip of the last step and she tipped forward, and Cormac was there in an instant. With one hand on her lower back and the other steadying the container, he frowned at the slight, dark-haired woman. "You okay?"

"Yes." Her cheeks flushed a soft shade of red. "Thank you." She turned to face Amelia. "Where do you want this?"

"In the closet is good!"

The house smelled musty, but Lucy had some sort of sweet, floral perfume on. When she disappeared into the bedroom, her scent lingered for a second or two. Cormac inhaled, a knot loosening in his gut. Then he huffed and headed back downstairs to keep unpacking the moving truck Amelia and Leo had rented.

Cormac noticed the number of times he passed Lucy on his way back and forth between the truck and the house. It was more than anyone else, which meant she was hauling boxes like a machine. He saw her scrubbing and sweeping, sweat dripping down the side of her face as the girls worked on getting the kitchen spruced up. He noticed her attention to detail as she took down the extractor fan in the range hood and cleaned the filter. She seemed like the type of person who wasn't afraid of hard work, and he'd seen the resolve in her gaze when she'd been sitting across from him in the conference room. She was determined and industrious, just like Cormac was when he set his mind to something.

He respected that about her. He was glad he'd be able to provide her some backup at the Expo. She was the type of client he enjoyed helping.

A few hours later, with all the boxes inside and the truck returned to the rental company, Cormac and the rest of the crew gathered around Leo's dining room table and shared a few pizzas to celebrate the end of the move.

"How are you handling all the changes in your life, Leo?" Camilla asked as she took a piece of pizza from a box on the table. "Big year, between the job and the move."

Leo had taken a new position at his company, which required way less travel. He now organized local events for Goodhew, the luxury event planning company where he worked. No more jet-setting around the world, but Leo didn't seem to mind.

"I love it," Leo said, one hand resting on Amelia's thigh beside him. "Today, I just confirmed the final details for a company retreat for a greeting card company. There's a lot going on in Stirling."

Beside Cormac, Lucy straightened. “What company is that?”

When everyone turned to look at her, she shrank slightly. Cormac frowned.

“Juniper and Sage. They’re pretty big, apparently.”

Judging by Lucy’s intake of breath, there was no “apparently” about it.

“Pass the vegetarian pizza over here,” Camilla called out from the other side of the table, and the conversation moved on. Lucy didn’t say anything else, and Cormac wondered why she’d been so impressed by the greeting card company name.

“Are you not hungry?” Cormac asked when Lucy nibbled on the single piece of pizza she’d grabbed. The rest of the group conversed around them, cheerful and loud. Something about Lucy’s calm, her quietness, called to Cormac. He liked that she was happy to observe; that’s how he felt in group gatherings too.

She blinked at him owlishly. “What?”

“You’re not eating.” He nodded to the half-finished slice.

“Oh,” she said, looking down at her plate. She huffed and picked up the piece of pizza, shaking her head. “I started thinking about the Wedding Expo,” she admitted, then took a bite. His gaze slid to her nearly full glass of water. She needed to hydrate too. She hadn’t stopped working all day.

“The Expo will be fine,” he told her. “I promise.” The words slipped out before he could stop them. He didn’t want to promise anything, because she was a client like any other. He didn’t make promises; he executed the tasks laid out in his contracts. That was the deal. That was how things worked in his life, how he liked them to remain.

But Lucy sat beside him quietly, worried, amidst the laughter and conversation of their friends, and Cormac found that he *did* want to promise her she’d be safe. He wanted her to believe him. He wanted to see that resolve filling her eyes again, wanted her shoulders to straighten and her chin to lift.

Which was...odd. Why should he care?

She swallowed her bite and smiled gratefully. "Thank you. I appreciate it. It's just a big deal, you know? And I get nervous about that kind of thing. Crowds and networking and sales." She picked a piece of pepperoni off her slice and popped it in her mouth before continuing. "It's silly, really. I've already printed most of the samples I'll bring, looked up the other vendors, and practiced my pitch a million times. I'm ready to go with a week left before the event. So I know, logically, that everything will be fine." She met Cormac's gaze, her lips curling slightly. "And it'll help to have Sam and Luke there to back me up. They were really nice when you introduced me on Monday, and they seem competent. You're right; everything will be okay."

"It'll be me," Cormac blurted before he realized what he was saying. But then it was out there and he couldn't take it back. Worse, he didn't want to take it back. So he cleared his throat and said, "Me and Sam."

"Oh. Was there a problem with Luke?"

"Scheduling conflict," he lied, reaching for another piece of pizza. "I'll be filling in."

The words landed between them, and Cormac nodded. This was correct. This was how things should go. Yes. He would do the Expo. Lucy wouldn't have to worry about everything, because he'd make sure she was okay. A knot unraveled in Cormac's chest. She was a client, but she was also a friend of his friends' wives. She was important. It was only right that he make sure the event went off without a hitch.

Feeling someone's gaze on his back, he turned to see Marlon watching him with an arched brow. He glanced back at Lucy and said, "Drink some water. It was warm today and you did a lot of work." Then he stood up and headed in his business partner's direction.

When he stood next to Marlon, the other man arched a brow. "You taking over the Wedding Expo job?" Marlon asked quietly.

Cormac grunted. “She’s important to Camilla, which means she’s important to you. Since you’ll be away on your honeymoon, it should be me working the job. I’ll shuffle things around.”

Marlon’s hand landed on Cormac’s shoulder, and he squeezed. “Camilla will be happy to hear it. She’s worried about the event. Apparently this Phillips guy has been threatening Lucy for years.”

Cormac’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“She’s had packages stolen out of her car and spam reviews on her business page. A couple of years ago, someone let the air out of her tires when she was meant to deliver invitations to a local client for a rush order. Slowed down some after the Winter Festival, but Phillips hasn’t gone away.”

Glancing at Lucy, who had moved to talk to Scarlett in the corner of the room, Cormac let one of his hands curl into a fist. “She didn’t tell me that.”

“I wouldn’t have known either, except Camilla told me. Something smells off about this, Cormac. This can’t just be about wedding invitations.”

“I’ll find out,” Cormac vowed, tearing his gaze away from Lucy to meet his business partner’s gaze. “I’ll make sure nothing happens to her.”

MONDAY WAS SPENT RESHUFFLING the schedule so Cormac could attend the Expo and completing the myriad of tasks needed to prepare for Marlon’s three-week absence. Marlon and Camilla were going to eat their way through Italy and France for their honeymoon. The last thing Cormac wanted was to bother his friend when he was taking some well-deserved time off.

When Cormac finally got home in the evening, he punched the code in to disarm his alarm, locked the door behind himself, and pressed the button that opened the shutters on his penthouse apartment windows. Calling it a penthouse was generous, since Stirling didn’t exactly have skyscrapers, but his residence did occupy the top level of one of the taller

buildings in town—all of twelve stories. He'd customized the apartment over the years, turning it into a veritable fortress. It was an instinct he couldn't resist, something written in his DNA in his childhood. Security was paramount, always.

As his home came to life around him, wrapping itself around him with all its safety precautions and fail-safes, Cormac found himself thinking about Lucy. Again. He hadn't been able to *stop* thinking of her since Saturday.

He thought of the delicate floral scent that lifted from her hair whenever he got close enough to get a hint of it, and the way she smiled at him. He thought of her laugh, and the cute little snort she made when Scarlett had said something he didn't catch the day of the move. She was pretty when she laughed. She was also pretty when she didn't laugh, and when she frowned, and when she set her jaw, and when she scrubbed extractor fans...

He thought of all that beauty and light being snuffed out by a worm of a man like Aaron Phillips, and he gritted his teeth.

Placing his shoes in the precise location where they belonged in the foyer closet, Cormac padded on sock-clad feet down the hardwood floors and turned into the kitchen. The shutters on his windows whirred as they lifted, finally rattling to a stop once they reached the top.

Lucy didn't have this kind of protection in her life. She didn't have theft-proof shutters on an apartment on the twelfth floor of a building. She probably didn't even have an alarm system on her home.

That...bothered him.

A meow tore his thoughts away from Lucy to another woman who now demanded his attention, the black cat complaining by her empty food bowl. She batted at the metal container, making it bang like a gong against the floor.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled affectionately, leaning down to scratch her ears. "I know. I'm ten minutes late. You'll die of starvation."

The cat meowed in agreement and batted at her bowl again. He filled it, gave her a can of wet food to appease her, and left the cat to eat, then turned to the refrigerator in search of his own sustenance. A pre-portioned meal he'd prepped earlier in the week waited for him in one of the many containers stacked in the fridge. He put it in the microwave to warm up, drumming his fingers on the counter.

Lucy was worried, but she was determined. That was admirable. She was soft and sweet and delicate, but she was strong.

She was a client. The contract had very defined limits that only included the day of the Wedding Expo.

So why did he keep wondering what kind of security precautions she'd taken on her own home? Why did he have the ridiculous urge to make sure she was safe?

Marlon would want him to look out for her. And Marlon was a good friend.

The microwave beeped. He ate, put the container in the dishwasher, and then turned in a circle in his home, feeling itchy and uncomfortable. His cat glanced at him haughtily, still miffed that he'd missed her usual feeding time by less than a quarter of an hour. The wet food hadn't appeased her at all. She slunk away and curled up under his couch, snubbing him.

All the women in his life were nothing but trouble, a fact which was punctuated by an alert on his phone. Sighing, he called his mother.

"Mom," he said when she answered. "You have to re-arm the alarm when you come home."

"Oh, relax, honey. You installed this complicated system that I didn't need and don't want; can you blame me for not using it?"

Cormac pinched the bridge of his nose. They'd had this conversation a million times. Did she really want a repeat of what had happened all those years ago? "Please, Mom?"

"You worry too much," she said with love in her tone. He heard the faint beeps of her alarm panel, and his phone buzzed

with another notification. She'd armed the alarm and set it to instant mode, which would trip if any of the doors or windows opened.

Cormac let out a breath. "Thank you. Next time, arm it as soon as you get home."

"But if I did that, you'd have no excuse to call me," his mother teased.

Huffing a laugh, Cormac dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling. "No guilt trips today, please. I'm begging you."

"I love you, honey," she replied fondly. "Are you coming to dinner next Saturday?"

He grimaced. Saturday was the day of the Wedding Expo. "I have to work, but I'll stop by if I have time."

"All right. Love you."

"Love you too."

He slipped his phone into his pocket and watched his cat stretch on the rug. She glanced at him over her shoulder, apparently still angry, and pranced away to jump on the cat tree in the corner.

"You've made your point," he grouched. The cat ignored him.

He still had that gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach, so he pulled out his phone and did the one thing he thought would make him feel better. He called his company's tech wizard. "Elton," he said when the other man answered. "What have we got on Aaron Phillips?"

"The paper guy?"

"Yeah."

"Not much. I've been working on the Hampstead contract."

The Hampstead contract was a gigantic, expensive job including the installation and commissioning of hundreds of top-of-the-line security cameras and assorted systems for all business and personal premises for the very large and very

wealthy Hampstead family, who were upgrading every building their family name had ever touched. It made sense to prioritize that contract, because it was one of the biggest that Elite Security had ever won.

But the protective instinct squeezing his guts in its icy fist wouldn't be eased by completing the Hampstead job on time. Cormac clenched his jaw. "Drop it. I want a full background check on Phillips in my inbox by tomorrow morning. I want to know everything there is to know about this guy, including why he's so obsessed with Lucy Barlow. Something weird's going on."

"Okay, boss," Elton replied. He slurped something, and Cormac could practically picture the pink mug with the glittery cat on its side. When he spoke again, his voice was angelic. "Is there a specific reason you'd like me to prioritize this particular job? Perhaps it has to do with a dark-haired lady with big doe eyes? Someone who might be special?"

The case on his phone creaked as he clenched it a little bit tighter. "Just do it, all right?"

A snigger sounded through the phone. "You got it."

When they hung up, Cormac felt slightly better, which was ridiculous. Scowling at himself, he grabbed a towel and stalked to the fourth bedroom of his penthouse, which he'd converted into a home gym. A workout would help him get rid of this weird, unsettled feeling.

Except it didn't.

Grimacing at himself in the bathroom mirror after he'd showered, Cormac knew that itchy feeling wouldn't go away until he finished one last task, something that had been on his mind for ten days, since the day of Marlon's wedding, and had only gotten worse since they'd helped Leo and Amelia move.

He dressed, grabbed his keys, and headed out into the night.

FOUR

LUCY TAPED a shipping label to the last box of a big order and let out a satisfied sigh. Her online business was growing, which had kept her afloat these last months. But things were tough online, with lots of intense competition. If she could only tap into the thriving local economy, she could expand her business in a meaningful new direction.

Moving the box to the corner of her living room where outgoing orders lived, Lucy crossed to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Unfortunately, it hadn't magically replenished itself in the two hours since she'd last looked. She closed the fridge and opened the pantry. Things were equally bleak in there, so she shut the door and went back to the fridge.

They say when you stare into the empty fridge, the empty fridge stares back. Nietzsche was on to something with that one.

Lucy shut the door and opened the drawer where her takeout menus were stored.

She'd just hung up with the local Thai joint, assured that her usual order would be at her door in twenty minutes, when the apartment buzzer went off. Strange. Maybe it was Scarlett stopping by after she closed up the flower shop? She did that

some evenings, since the shop was just around the corner from Lucy's place.

But it was later than usual, and Scarlett would have locked up over three hours ago.

"Hello?" she said into the intercom.

"Lucy, it's Cormac."

Frowning, she studied the outdated intercom system. It had no screen, only a yellowing box with two buttons on it which had probably been white at one point in the far-distant past. Lucy stared at it, wondering if she'd heard correctly. "Sorry?"

"Let me in."

She blinked, and the call cut off. The intercom buzzed again. She answered. "Hello?"

"Lucy, unlock the door."

His growly voice wasn't scary, and it definitely didn't send a tremor through Lucy's thighs. Nuh-uh. Her jaw unhinged and words came out. "You could say please."

There was a pause, then, "Lucy, unlock the door, *please*."

"What are you doing here?"

"*Lucy*."

Another quake trembled through her middle, and Lucy had to lean against the wall for support. "Fine, fine." She pressed the button to unlock the building's entrance, and a short minute or so later, a knock sounded on her apartment door.

The peephole told her that Cormac had indeed decided to visit her home this evening. She opened. He loomed in the doorway, fascinated by the jamb. What an odd, gigantic, beautiful man. He traced the frame with his fingers, frowning when he got to the latch mechanism on the door. He crouched down to inspect it, and Lucy inspected him. He hadn't said a word to her.

Reason returned to her mind, and Lucy frowned. "Uh—hello? What are you doing? And what are you doing *here*?"

“Someone could break through this door in two seconds flat,” he said, sounding unimpressed.

“Well, that’s comforting.”

He muscled his way inside and flicked her lock back and forth a couple of times, clicking his tongue in disgust. “This lock is a piece of crap. Why don’t you have a deadbolt?”

“This is a rental,” she explained. “I have no control over the deadbolt situation.”

Cormac closed the door and threw the lock before turning to face her. “You have an alarm system?” He scanned the room, presumably searching for this mythical security system somewhere between her secondhand couch and the end table her dad had made from reclaimed wood.

Her hands planted themselves on her hips. He had a lot of nerve barging in here like this. “What do you think? This building is a fifty-year-old walkup that smells of stale cigarettes and cat pee. Sometimes when there’s a really windy day, the fire alarms go off.”

His eyes were very blue as he stared at her. A muscle twitched in his jaw. “So that’s a no?”

“Of course it’s a no! What are you even doing here?” She folded her arms, trying a new pose to see if it succeeded in intimidating him (it didn’t). “How did you get my address?”

“It was on your contract forms.”

“That’s a total breach of privacy,” she said to his back as he crossed the room to inspect the window at the far end of the galley kitchen.

“This window doesn’t have a lock.” He shoved it open for emphasis, which was actually pretty impressive because the window had been painted shut and Lucy hadn’t been able to open it in the three years she’d lived here. The man was a freak of nature. It’s not like he was bulging with muscle, he was just lean and cut and *strong*. He glanced outside for a second, scanning up, down, and to either side of the window, then turned to meet her gaze over his shoulder.

That's when it sank in that Cormac McKenna was *in her apartment*. And she was wearing sweatpants, a fuzzy cardigan, and no bra. She crossed the cardigan over her chest and glared. "Listen, if you're trying to drum up some more work for your business, I have to say, this is not the way to do it."

He closed the window and turned to face her, leaning against the sill. When he crossed his arms, they bulged. Lucy amended her previous opinion about the size of his muscles. They were big, it's just that they were proportional to the rest of him, which was also big.

The apartment suddenly felt very small.

Cormac held her gaze. "If this Phillips guy is serious about coming after you, you've got to take your personal security more seriously."

"Okay. I'll...take that under advisement. But, really, it's not that bad. You'd need to get through the front door to get in in the first place, and that's not easy. It's always locked, and you need a fob to get in."

Cormac opened his mouth to retort, but someone knocked on the door before he had a chance. Lucy opened to see the usual delivery guy from the Thai place. He nodded toward the stairs. "The front door was open," he explained, extending the bag of food toward her. "I don't think the latch is working properly."

Lucy cringed. "Right. Thanks."

She paid, got her food, and studiously avoided Cormac's gaze, even though she could feel it like an itch between her shoulders. It made her want to squirm.

"Last week we covered the Wedding Expo plans and your rivalry with Phillips," he finally said in the tense silence. "How about you tell me about the business in general? Then we can move on to the packages that got stolen out of your car and the reviews spamming your online listing, and we can finish up with him letting the air out of your tires."

Lucy placed the bag containing her dinner on the counter. "You heard about that, huh?"

“It would have been good to know ahead of time.”

She shot him a sideways glance. “It didn’t seem relevant.”

“He’s escalating, Lucy.”

The sound of her name on his lips went straight to her clit, which was ridiculous. Yes, he had a beautifully deep voice and he was looming gorgeously at the end of her kitchen. So what? It’s not like he wanted to bend her over the counter and screw her senseless.

She gripped the edge of the cabinet. Unless...

Lucy glanced over. He was rubbing his jaw and scowling at the yellowed linoleum flooring. “I can’t figure out why this guy would be so upset about wedding invitations.”

Nope.

Feeling stupid, she turned back to the bag of takeout. Clearly, the furthest thing from Cormac’s mind was Lucy’s sex appeal, such as it was. She hiked up her sweatpants and noticed a stain on the left thigh. Really, how could he resist her?

“Tell me more about your business,” he repeated.

Containers of green curry, jasmine rice, and tom yum soup got unloaded and spread out on Lucy’s countertop while she pondered his question. “Okay,” she said, glancing over, “but first you have to tell me why you showed up here at eight o’clock at night.”

His jaw was cut granite. It looked like it took great effort to crank it open before he said, “I wanted to know how much of a liability your home would be in the event that shit hits the fan with Phillips.”

Lucy turned back to her food, peeling the lids off the containers. “And is this something you do with all clients?”

“Yes,” he answered, and Lucy couldn’t tell if he was being truthful or not. She shot him a skeptical look and he amended, “I don’t like that he’s escalating his threats. It...worries me.”

Well, wasn't that just great? She'd hired Elite Security mostly to settle fears. She was ninety-nine percent convinced that those fears were entirely ridiculous. Cormac's company was backup that would never in a million years be needed, hired because of a tiny niggle at the back of her mind. Hiring them for the Wedding Expo was overkill. It had to be.

Yet Cormac was here, after hours, because he was worried about the Stirling Stationery Man, which meant her fears weren't ridiculous at all.

"Elton's working on a full background check on the guy," he continued. "But I want to know why he's obsessed with you. That's why I'm here."

"Obsessed, wow," Lucy said, mind spinning. She didn't want to think about anyone being obsessed, so she covered her jolt of terror by slapping a grin on her face. "So what you're saying is, you're here because I'm special."

"Our contract covers the full day of the event, including getting you home. I have a duty of care to make sure we leave you somewhere safe."

Her grin melted off. She spooned some rice into a bowl and covered it with green curry. "Right. So what you're saying is, I'm not special at all."

"You're special, all right," Cormac replied, and it didn't sound like a compliment. Lucy glared.

When Cormac's eyes flashed with amusement, it made Lucy's heart thump. The man had that big, growly protector thing going on, but when his eyes lit up, it softened his harsh edges. It made him human. Almost...cuddly. The way grizzly bears were cuddly when they were pacing around a flimsy tent in a campground, sniffing at tasty, terrified humans ensconced in their sleeping bags within.

She turned back to her food. "You hungry?"

"No, thank you," he replied, then meandered into her living room. "I already ate."

She spooned delicious Thai green curry into her gob while Cormac loomed over her desk, paging through samples of

invitations and menus she'd printed in preparation for the Wedding Expo.

"What's this?" he asked, holding up a band of patterned paper.

"That's a band of paper," she said before taking another bite. She didn't know why she wanted to antagonize him. Maybe she wanted to see that light in his eyes again.

"That explains everything," he replied, turning the band over to unfold it.

Lucy sighed, setting her food down. "Here, let me show you." She took an invitation, an RSVP card, and a note on gifts and wrapped them in the band before sliding them into a thick envelope. Every item was thick and luxurious, the invitation embossed and the notes printed with quality inks. It looked fantastic. "See? Pretty."

Cormac watched, brows furrowed. "People pay for this stuff?"

Glaring, Lucy tossed the envelope back on her desk and returned to her food. Cormac let her eat in peace while he inspected the envelope she'd just tossed aside, only lifting his gaze to her when she'd finished washing her bowl and spoon.

"It's nice," he said unconvincingly, lifting the envelope, which was the most pathetic olive branch ever.

"You don't have to pretend to get it, Cormac. But this business means a lot to me, and people pay me good money to make those silly bands of paper."

He watched for a moment, then dipped his head. "Understood." The way he said that single word made Lucy straighten. It sounded like he did understand—like he could relate. Then he frowned, eyes returning to the stack of samples she'd bring to the Expo. "I still don't get why Phillips is so antagonistic."

Lucy joined him at the desk and straightened a stack of invitations. "Neither do I. Most of my business is online. I'm just trying to carve out a small revenue stream locally because there are so many weddings in Stirling every year. He owns an

actual brick-and-mortar store in town, and it's been there for decades. I'm not trying to compete with that. There's more than enough room for the both of us."

"Maybe he's threatened."

"Maybe," she agreed.

"Money, sex, and power," he said. "We're hitting all three."

"Excuse me," Lucy reared back. "I have *not* had sex with the Stirling Stationery Man."

"No, but you're an attractive woman. A man looks at you, some part of his brain is thinking about sex."

Lucy didn't quite know how to respond to that. She shut down the part of her own brain that was trying to point out that Cormac was including himself in his observation. He was, after all, a man, who presumably was looking at her and thinking about sex.

She shifted to cover the stain on her sweatpants with her palm, evidently oozing sex appeal like an open wound.

"Money is obvious. You're edging in on his turf." He waved a hand toward her desk, still frowning. "We covered sex. But power? How much power can the stationery business have in this town?"

"Two out of three ain't bad."

Cormac hummed and surveyed her living room, gaze snagging on the lampshade she'd reupholstered herself with blue-and-white floral fabric and the pictures of her parents clustered on the far wall. "You should get a dog," he mused.

"My lease says no animals. Which reminds me—you need to leave before I get in trouble."

Cormac slowly spun around to stare at her, incredulity lighting his features.

Lucy blinked at him, smiling sweetly. A perverse sense of satisfaction warmed her with every new expression that flickered across Cormac's stoic features. He was a mountain of

a man who presented himself as an immovable force, a protector, a guardian. But beneath that shell, she could tell there was more to Cormac's personality than he liked to reveal. She wanted to needle him until he cracked.

"I see now," he said in a low, silky voice, "exactly why Phillips decided to target you."

She couldn't have stopped the smile that bloomed across her face if she tried. The man had a sense of humor. That pleased her more than it should.

He stalked toward the door, his big body moving with the liquid grace of someone who wouldn't be easy to stop in a fight. Opening the door to stand on the threshold, he met her gaze. "Lock the door behind me."

She saluted. "Yes, sir."

His eyes flashed, but he didn't respond before closing the door. She followed his instructions, crossing the room to throw the lock. It wasn't until the bolt slid home that she heard quiet footsteps descending the stairs on the other side.

FIVE

“REALLY, Cormac, I can take my own car to the Expo—” Lucy had to cut herself off as she huffed, her short legs struggling to keep up with Cormac’s long strides.

He loaded yet another box of samples into the back of an Elite Security van. “When was the last time you got that thing serviced?”

She planted her hands on her hips. The man was insufferable. “Exactly when the sticker on my window told me to.”

He pursed his lips. “Letting us drive decreases the risks associated with arrival and departure.”

They faced off beside the van, two immovable objects blasting each other with the full force of their will. Only one would win.

Spring was stretching its arms all around them, with the fresh scents of earth and clean air dancing on the cool breeze. It was a beautiful day in early May, with the town in full bloom.

And Lucy wasn’t happy.

It was bad enough that Cormac had just informed her that he would be the one in the booth with her all day, instead of positioning himself at the exit. After he'd visited her at home, her brain had decided to keep repeating what he'd said about her being attractive. Was he choosing to be in the booth because he liked her? Did he want to keep her close?

He'd come over on Monday, and it was now Saturday, and her thoughts had drifted to Cormac with alarming frequency all week. When her computer had pinged with an email from him a couple of days before, her heart had sped up so much her smartwatch had thrown up an alert. The message was entirely business-related, with a detailed plan for the day of the Wedding Expo, which made Lucy feel pathetic and embarrassed.

She'd leaned on the hope that he'd station himself near the exit and Sam would be in the booth with her all day.

But it wasn't so.

She'd have to spend the next ten hours standing three feet away from big, bad Cormac. It was going to be a disaster. She was nervous enough without the thought of a gigantic, beautiful, overprotective man watching over her.

She would *not* be stranded at the Expo without her own vehicle. The man made her loopy, and she needed a way to escape.

Now she'd trotted after him as he transferred all her samples to his van, a pathetic little puppy, and was facing him with all the strength she could muster.

"Cormac, I am driving myself and that's final." She karate-chopped the air for emphasis.

Cormac merely grunted, breaking their stare-off, then crossed the lot to rip open her back door to look for more boxes. Finding none, he moved to the passenger door. Lucy scowled at his broad back and didn't immediately notice when he froze.

Cormac stood, stepping aside to point at the seat. "What's that?"

Lucy glanced at the item on the passenger seat, feeling stupid. She'd made a stop at Camilla's bakery, The Sweetest Thing, that morning. She'd had to go early before the hordes of slobbering regulars picked Camilla's display cases clean. "That's a box of donuts, Cormac."

He blinked. "Oh. Right."

She scowled at him and reached down to pick up the box. "I got them for you and Sam, to say thank you for helping me out today." She opened the lid to reveal the dozen gleaming, sugary treats.

A new expression crossed Cormac's face, one that Lucy had never seen before. Surprise? Gratitude? Desire? Whatever it was, it looked good on him, and Lucy was reminded of why she'd picked the donuts up in the first place. She loved peering beneath the shell he wrapped so tightly around himself. She loved getting glimpses of the real him. The man behind the overbearing obnoxiousness.

She extended the box toward him, feeling charitable.

Then he went and ruined it by opening his big mouth. "Paying the invoice is usually thanks enough."

"I see," Lucy said through clenched teeth.

He jerked his hand back when she snapped the lid closed on his fingers like he was Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, except without the uproarious laughter and the fabulous red dress.

"No donuts for you!" Lucy sniffed, cradling the box near her body. She spun around and used her sweetest voice to say, "Sam, would you like a donut?"

Sam flicked his gaze between Lucy and Cormac, hesitated for a brief moment, then shrugged and took one of the rings of deliciousness.

Cormac's eyes narrowed. He watched as she placed the box back on the passenger seat and closed the car door. That itch between her shoulder blades was back.

"You're a strange woman," he told her, which was true.

“Nice people get donuts,” she proclaimed, then pointed at him. “Bossy men who commandeer my business samples and then insult my good deeds get nothing.” She karate-chopped again. “Nothing!”

He lifted a brow in response. The sun shone on Cormac’s tawny skin, lightening the usually deep blue of his eyes.

He was intolerably handsome. She should never have hired him.

“All I need is for you to watch my back while I schmooze my way to new clients today. It’ll be very boring, I promise. Now,” she said, drawing on every scrap of confidence to withstand the power of his stare, “I’m going to drive myself to this conference, and you will follow in your van. Got it?”

They locked gazes for a long moment. Lucy practically trembled with the effort of it.

She hated the nearly superhuman effort it took for her to stand up for herself. She absolutely despised the part of her that wanted to wilt beneath his gaze. She wanted to feel strong, for once. Her car might have some rust around the edges, but it was hers, paid for with the stationery she’d sold to countless happy couples. She would drive herself to the Wedding Expo and drive herself back, and she would make sure this event grew her business the way she’d intended last year.

She would be *successful*, despite her previous failures. She wouldn’t move back in with her parents, even if they were loving and supportive.

Lucy couldn’t live her life like a trembling, terrified little mouse anymore. She couldn’t bear it. It was ridiculous, but caving to Cormac’s demands and letting him drive her to the event in his van felt like a loss. It felt like she was already giving up and letting other people deal with her problems. She needed to prove to herself—to the world—that no one could scare her. Not even a tall, broad, stupidly hunky bodyguard.

She didn’t even *like* muscular men! What was *wrong* with her!

As the seconds ticked by, Lucy began to sweat. A familiar anxiety crept through her bones, trying to grind them to dust. She would crack under the strain, just like she always did. This was just one event among many where she let the pressure get to her.

Then, all of a sudden, Cormac tore his gaze away from hers. He jerked his chin at Sam, who nodded at the unsaid command and got behind the wheel of the van.

Lucy watched the exchange as the van's engine turned over, and elation filled her like a helium balloon.

She'd won. She'd won! Buoyed, Lucy lifted her chin. "Good." Then, because she couldn't leave well enough alone, she added, "*You* work for *me*, buddy."

Cormac's dark, dangerous eyes tracked her as she circled her own car and got behind the wheel. As she clipped her seatbelt, she did a little wiggle of victory to settle into the driver's seat. She'd stood her ground! She did it!

All she'd won was the ability to drive herself to her own work conference, but still. Her victory tasted sweet, like a donut glazed to a mirror sheen, and as she slid the key into the ignition, she couldn't help the smirk that graced her lips.

Then the passenger door opened, and the smile died.

Cormac picked the box of donuts up, sat down, and placed the box on his lap. Then he closed the door, clipped himself in, and glanced at her expectantly.

"What are you doing?"

Instead of answering, Cormac shifted his gaze to the box of donuts. He lifted the lid and perused the selection.

"Don't you dare," she gritted out.

He plucked a glazed donut from the box and held it up for inspection.

"If you eat that thing, so help me—"

Cormac bit into the donut, raining little bits of glaze onto his lap. Lucy gasped in abject horror. He let out a deep grunt

as he chewed, and Lucy, shamefully, felt a tendril of heat flare to life below her belly button. He turned to glance at her, leaning an elbow on the center console. His black polo was tight around his arms and shoulders, and he looked far too big to fit in her small car.

Holding her gaze, he took another bite of the donut, challenging. His eyes were dark and steady as they watched her. His tongue darted out to pick up a bit of sugar on his lip. He closed his eyes for a beat as he swallowed, then glanced at the donut in his hand as if to strategize where he'd take his next bite.

“Un-be-frickin’-*lievable!*” Lucy’s jaw wouldn’t close as she watched him eat that donut like he was making love to it. Heat swept through her, but it wasn’t desire. Or rather, it wasn’t *only* desire. It was the bitter heat of outrage mixed with a healthy dose of lust.

Donut consumed, Cormack licked his fingers with a smack, then glanced at the box again.

“If you eat another donut, I’ll never speak to you ag—” Another gasp tore through her. “You man-bastard!”

That made him stop. “Man-bastard?” He arched a dark brow at her, the filling of his Boston cream donut oozing dangerously out of its pastry prison.

“I said what I said. Man. *Bastard.*”

He licked the cream. Lucy used her indignation to excuse the flush in her cheeks, then reached over to snatch the box from his lap. Twisting uncomfortably, she deposited the box of donuts on the back seat which Cormac had so helpfully cleared only a moment ago.

And the man began to *laugh*. He held the decimated remains of the chocolate-covered, custard-filled donut in his hand and leaned his head against the headrest, deep, rolling laughter making his shoulders shake.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” Lucy muttered darkly.

“You are, Lucy.”

“I regret every good deed I’ve ever done.”

He ate the rest of the donut and said, “That was delicious. Thank you.”

“Yeah, well, Camilla’s a genius,” she grumbled.

“How did you know to get donuts?”

Lucy turned the key in the ignition and took a deep breath to calm herself down. It was ridiculous to be simultaneously outraged and attracted to a donut-stealing man-bastard. The car rumbled to life, and she checked to make sure her mirrors were adjusted correctly. Finally, she felt calm enough to respond. “I saw you look at the box in your office kitchen when we met to discuss the job the first time. You looked disappointed when you saw it was empty.”

There was a long pause, and it wasn’t until Lucy was stopped at a red light that she glanced over to see Cormac frowning as he stared through the windshield.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

He looked over. “Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

The light turned green, so Lucy drove on.

EVERYTHING WASN’T FINE. Cormac’s thoughts whirled around him, and he found himself unable to untangle them. She’d noticed his facial expression when they’d first met at the office. It couldn’t have been obvious. People always told him he was hard to read—it was one of the things that made him a good bodyguard. Nothing could faze him.

But Lucy had seen right through him.

That was a problem. She was too close. It could get in the way of him doing his job.

What was an even bigger problem was that he *liked* how easily she saw him—the real him. That she’d gone out of her way to bring him a treat this morning made his chest feel warmer than usual.

He could feel it rising within him—an unstoppable tide of protectiveness. Suddenly, his nerves stretched tight. This

wasn't just another bodyguard job; it was *Lucy's* body he'd be guarding. Nothing would happen to her on his watch. No sabotage, no injury, not even a single paper cut.

Cormac would make sure of it.

Decision made, he settled back in his seat—but his eye caught on a bit of gold-embossed paper stuffed into Lucy's cupholder. Pulling it out, he found one of the name cards from Marlon and Camilla's wedding. It had Lucy's name on it, but the gold writing had been crossed out with red pen so violently that the indentations from the pen marks went through both sides of the folded card.

He flipped the card open. They'd all been blank to begin with, but this one had the words "I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING" scrawled in the same red pen inside.

Cormac's body went solid. Through clenched teeth, he asked, "What's this?"

Lucy glanced over and her eyes went wide. "Oh. I found that on my windshield after Camilla's wedding."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Don't talk to me like that."

He took a deep breath. "This is a threat, Lucy. I need to know about these things."

They were approaching the Gladstone Hotel, where the Wedding Expo would be held. Vendors' vehicles lined one side of the parking lot, with more vans and cars stopped at the lights leading to the parking lot. The event would be packed.

Lucy kneaded the steering wheel. "I forgot, okay? It freaked me out a bit that night, but then I thought 'I know what you're doing' was kind of a lame thing to write. Juvenile, like a kid trying to come up with a threat. And then it just slipped my mind."

"Did Phillips do this?"

They stopped behind a van branded with a wedding dress shop's logo, waiting to turn into the hotel lot. Lucy glanced at the card, then at Cormac. "I don't know. Probably."

“What does it mean? What are you up to?”

“No idea.”

“Lucy.” Cormac inhaled sharply. His voice had been too harsh.

Lucy lifted her hands so only the edges rested on the wheel. “I don’t know what it means! What *am* I doing? I sell wedding stationery and hang out at my apartment for, like, twenty-three hours a day. How could anyone be threatened by that?”

Cormac wanted to crumple the card in his fist. He’d seen her find this threat two weeks ago, and he’d had no idea. Fire burned down the back of his throat. What if something had happened?

Someone had been at Marlon’s wedding. They’d taken Lucy’s name card specifically, scratched out her name with red pen, and written a clear threat.

“If you get any more threatening messages, you tell me right away, Lucy.”

“Fine.”

“That means immediately. Not the next day,” he said and held up the card, “and not two weeks later. You tell me the minute it happens.”

She frowned at him. “Sure. Okay.”

Jaw clenched, Cormac slid the card into his breast pocket and then forced himself to relax. They drove into the lot in silence. He directed her to a spot near the exit. If they needed to make a quick getaway, he wanted to be able to get her out of here.

When the engine was off, Lucy met his gaze. “You seem stressed,” she noted. “Would you like a donut to make you feel better?”

This woman was going to drive him insane. He unhooked his jaw and growled, “No, Lucy, I don’t want a donut to make me feel better.”

Her eyes sparkled. She enjoyed needling him, and she was damn good at it. Impossible woman.

SIX

THEY'D ARRIVED at the Gladstone Hotel with plenty of time to spare. Lucy grabbed the foldable hand trolley from her car trunk (and the donuts from the back seat, not that she'd give Cormac any more of them, the glutton) and pointed herself in the direction of the van, which was backed into a spot on the opposite side of the parking lot exit. Cormac reached over and grabbed the trolley from her, and she decided to pick her battles and let him push it. If he wanted to be a pack mule as well as a bodyguard, she wouldn't stop him.

Sam scanned the lot while she and Cormac stacked her boxes of samples on the dolly. She also had a tablecloth and two big banners as well as some pretty decor for her booth, along with a large tote bag with food, water, and everything she'd need to make it through the day. By the time they loaded all her supplies, the dolly was stacked higher than its handle.

One of the dolly's wheels squeaked as Cormac pushed it. Behind them, Sam took the rear. Any sign of laughter was gone from their expressions. Grim, Cormac scanned the lot and the building, then nodded to the door.

This was complete overkill. Lucy was going to a wedding conference, for crying out loud. Why did she think she needed two trained security guards?

Still, she didn't mind the looming presence of the man beside her and the other at her back. Let Aaron Phillips try anything with these two around! Donuts clutched in her arms, with her tote bag slung over her shoulder, Lucy squared her shoulders and entered the hotel.

Lucy beamed at the lady behind the registration table. She had red hair—dyed a vibrant shade of ruby—and chunky green earrings dangling from her ears. She looked fabulous. Lucy beamed. “Hi! I’m Lucy Barlow from Invitations Etcetera.”

The lady flicked her gaze from Lucy to the two men in black beside her and pasted a wide—if slightly bewildered—smile on her face. “Of course! Let me sign you in.” She pushed her glasses up her nose as she scanned the names on the list in front of her, pausing to glance at Cormac. “You don’t have the look of our usual vendors,” she noted, eyes scanning his broad body before flicking to Sam. “Are you here with Miss?”—she checked the sheet of paper in front of her—“Barlow?”

“I needed some help hauling the boxes,” Lucy explained.

The woman’s brow arched, her gaze lingering on Sam’s corded forearms. “I see,” she said, sounding like she didn’t believe Lucy for a moment, and Lucy rolled her lips inward to hide her smile.

It took a few minutes to get organized at the welcome booth. Once Lucy had her name tag, her paperwork, and her booth number, she strode into the main conference room with more confidence than she felt. Her gaze jumped from booth to booth, looking for the Stirling Stationery logo.

Shoulders relaxing when she didn’t spot it, she found her booth and nodded to Cormac. “Thank you. You can leave the trolley right there.”

“Sam, recon.”

“Copy.” Sam stalked away, drawing gazes from more than one Expo attendee.

“You could try less looming and scowling,” Lucy suggested. “Then you might blend in.”

That earned her a full-frontal scowl. “I’m not here to blend in,” Cormac replied.

That was good, Lucy thought, because Cormac wouldn’t blend in anywhere. He was the type of man to draw the eye wherever he went. For a woman who was petrified of the spotlight, his presence was great. Gazes skipped over her to linger on him.

Last year, Lucy hadn’t known what to expect at the Wedding Expo, but this time she was prepared. A thick white tablecloth got draped over the foldable table at the front of her booth before Lucy started displaying her samples. Invitations, menus, save-the-dates, envelopes of different weights displaying different fonts, the works. She unfurled one of the banners she had made for last year’s Wedding Expo, positioning it at an angle behind her so it was clearly visible from the wide walkway, and then she added another for people walking in the opposite direction.

The donuts got tucked under the table, so she’d be in prime position to kick Cormac if he went near them again. When she told him as much, an amused glimmer lit his eyes.

“I thought I was allowed one to make me feel better,” he said.

“That was then; this is now.” She stuck her nose in the air, enjoying the way Cormac studied her.

Unlike the time she approached him at Marlon and Camilla’s wedding, now his gaze made warmth spread through her stomach. He watched her as if she fascinated him, like he wanted to figure her out. Lucy discovered she liked this man’s attention very, very much.

“Lucy!”

Turning, Lucy smiled at the sight of Scarlett sweeping down the wide walkway, pulling a big cart full of flowers behind her. “Hi, Scarlett! Those are gorgeous.”

“Here.” Scarlett stopped in front of Lucy’s booth and plucked a lush arrangement of roses and peonies in various shades of white and soft pink. The flowers were in a delicate but beautiful crystal vase, with a ribbon tied around its narrow neck. “Beautiful,” the other woman proclaimed.

Lucy walked around her table to admire the flowers. They livened up the whole display, almost like a centerpiece on a wedding table. A warm smile bloomed across her face. “Thank you. Want to put a business card next to the flowers so people know where they came from?”

“Cross-promotion,” Scarlett said. “Love it! Give me a stack of your business cards and I’ll talk you up all day.”

They positioned Scarlett’s business card against the vase, then stepped back. Scarlett slung an arm around Lucy’s shoulders and squeezed, then shifted her gaze to Cormac, who stood beside the stacked boxes of samples, scanning the people walking by behind the women.

“You sure he won’t scare potential buyers away?” Scarlett asked quietly.

A puff of breath escaped Lucy’s lips. She shrugged. “I hope not. I just don’t want to lose hundreds of dollars’ worth of samples because I have to leave the booth to go pee.”

“If that twerp comes anywhere near you, I’ll punch him in the neck.”

“Maybe I should have hired you for security instead,” Lucy answered.

A feral light entered Scarlett’s eyes as she grinned, then gave Lucy’s shoulders another squeeze. “Let me know if you need anything. I have to go set up! See you in a few hours.”

“Good luck!”

Scarlett winked, then pulled her cart down the walkway, disappearing around the corner. The big room was set up with booths all around the outer perimeter, with two more aisles of booths in between. Cormac grumbled about Lucy being in one of the internal aisles, since it was apparently more difficult to

secure than ones where her back would have been to a solid wall.

Now that she was here, her fear had started to abate. She wasn't too worried about the Stirling Stationery Man.

"I trust you to do a good job," she told Cormac, fanning out some business cards on the edge of her table. She glanced over when Cormac didn't reply.

His jaw was tense, but he gave her a nod. If she'd expected him to loosen up once they got inside the event room, she was wrong. He looked like he was ready for war.

Lucy checked her watch and took a deep breath. Within minutes, the first attendees would be walking through the aisles, and she'd have to put her sales face on. Tightness banded around her chest, and she did her best to breathe through it.

She could do this. It wasn't a presentation or a sales pitch. It was just being friendly and talking to people. The wedding planners and general population who were attending the Expo *wanted* to buy her wares. All she had to do was be herself.

Still, sharp pains pierced her stomach. This felt a little too familiar, too close to her old career. She'd been good at it, until she crashed and burned. The memory of her humiliation was like a hulking shadow in the corner of her eye, a patch of darkness hiding hissing monsters.

What if this was a mistake? With Aaron Phillips threatening her, wouldn't it be better to expand her online business instead? Why was she putting herself through this kind of torture?

"Everything okay?" Cormac's voice was nearer than she'd expected, just behind her back. "You see Phillips?"

"No, I'm fine," she answered, blowing out a breath. "I just get nervous, is all. Choking under pressure is kind of my specialty." Her laugh was thin and reedy, and she cut it off when Cormac didn't smile back.

Deep blue eyes met hers. "You'll do great, Lucy."

Straightening at the sincerity in his voice, Lucy felt the pains in her stomach ease. “You really think so?”

“I know it. And I think you’ve got your first customer.”

Turning, Lucy beamed at the woman scanning her wares. She had an engagement ring on and carried a gigantic binder bursting with magazine clippings. A bride. Lucy greeted the woman, then asked her if she was planning her own wedding. The woman excitedly gushed about their plans—a winter wedding in Stirling, with rich colors of burgundy, emerald, and gold—and Lucy brightened. She dug through her box of samples to show the woman an invitation she’d designed for a holiday wedding two years prior.

The bride gasped, eyes shining. “This is *perfect*,” she exclaimed.

When the woman walked away clutching the sample and one of Lucy’s business cards—after having followed Lucy’s business page on social media—Lucy couldn’t help the smile that curled her lips.

First one down. Now she just had to do it a few hundred times over, and the day would be a success.

UNEASE TRICKLED down Cormac’s spine. The Expo thrummed with people, vendors and clients and lookie-loos milling through the aisles of the huge room. No one had bothered Lucy so far, but Cormac’s instincts twigged. He didn’t like that he hadn’t spotted Phillips yet, though the other man was supposed to be at the event all day.

His earpiece crackled, and Sam spoke. “Confirmed with Rhonda, Stirling Stationery canceled at the last minute.”

“Rhonda?”

“The woman at the check-in desk. Nice lady.”

“Ah. Thanks, Sam.”

“I’m doing one more sweep around the room and then I’ll return to my position. Something feels off.”

“Agreed.”

Lucy let out a gasp and exclaimed, “Gorgeous!” at something a woman was showing her on her phone. She clicked her fingers. “I’ve got *just* the thing to match your theme.”

The other woman cooed when Lucy presented her with an invitation and menu, but it was Lucy’s beaming smile that caught Cormac’s gaze. Redness flushed over the apples of Lucy’s cheeks, and her eyes shone with excitement.

“You designed this?” The other woman shook her head in awe. “This is beautiful.”

“Thank you. Let me show you the matching envelope and save-the-dates.” She flicked her dark ponytail over her shoulder and headed for her box of samples once more. In a dark tee and black pants that hugged her curves, Lucy looked professional—and delectable. He watched her bend over the box for a few moments too long.

Cormac tore his gaze away from her. Yes, she was luminous. Yes, she was clearly talented. But no—he wouldn’t indulge his interest.

He was here to work. This was a job like any other. He was doing this for Marlon, because he cared about Camilla, who cared about Lucy. The shape of Lucy’s ass in those pants was irrelevant.

Turning around, he scanned the space between the booths on their aisle. The vendor directly behind Lucy was a photographer who had spent the whole day so far sitting behind his table flicking through his phone. Thick power cables snaked between the two booths all the way down the aisle, which was a trip hazard. If they had to make a quick exit, Cormac would haul Lucy over his shoulder, jump the cables, and head for the fire exit directly across from him.

“Pumpkin!”

Cormac turned in time to see an older man spread his arms toward Lucy. Beside him, a woman beamed. The man had a pleasant face, bald head, and thick white beard. The woman’s brown hair was specked with silver and wrapped into a bun on

top of her head. Both of them had brown eyes and were a few inches shorter than Cormac.

He knew who they were without having to ask. He could see Lucy's face in theirs from a mile away.

"Hi, Dad, Mom," Lucy said, skirting around the table to give them both a hug.

Her father's gaze landed on Cormac. "This is the bodyguard, is it?"

"One of them. Cormac, these are my parents, Gus and Dolly."

"Charmed," Dolly said with a smile that looked just like Lucy's—warm, with a hint of impish delight. "Everything under control?"

"All good on my end," Cormac replied. "And as far as I can tell, Lucy is killing it."

A flush darkened Lucy's cheeks, and her father wrapped her in a hug so tight it made her squeak. "Of course she is! My little pumpkin can do anything."

"Father," she grumbled, "I'm a grown woman."

"You're our little girl," Dolly said, stroking Lucy's cheeks. She turned to the table and sniffed one of Scarlett's roses, then leaned over to inspect Lucy's work. The two ladies fell into conversation while Gus came around to Cormac's side of the table.

"Have you seen Phillips here?" he asked quietly.

Cormac shook his head. "He canceled at the last minute. Isn't attending."

That seemed to ease something in Gus, because his shoulders visibly dropped. "Good. I don't like that man. Don't like thinking about our Lucy anywhere near him."

"I'll take care of her," Cormac replied, sounding more solemn than he'd intended.

Gus must have heard the vow in his words too, because he turned to meet Cormac's gaze. His eyes narrowed slightly as

he studied Cormac, and then he glanced thoughtfully at Lucy. “I see,” he said.

Uncomfortable with the other man’s scrutiny, Cormac shifted his stance and nodded. “I need to do a sweep of the area,” he lied. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Will do.”

Cormac walked down the space between the booths and scanned for anything odd, keeping Lucy in his sights. By the time he returned a couple of minutes later, Lucy was saying goodbye to her parents. She joined him behind the table again and gave him a wry smile.

“My dad didn’t do anything embarrassing, did he?”

“Embarrassing how?”

Lucy shrugged, laughing. “I don’t know. They get worried about me and they hover. I think they still think I’m a little girl, and with how my last career ended—”

When she didn’t finish her sentence, Cormac frowned. “What happened?” Was that why Phillips was after her? Was there something she hadn’t told him?

Tucking a stray tendril of hair back into her ponytail, Lucy shrugged. “It’s nothing. Thanks for being nice to them.”

A potential customer angled for Lucy’s booth, so Cormac couldn’t ask her about her previous career path. He stepped back far enough that he couldn’t catch the scent of her every time she moved. He needed to focus on the job, but all he could think about was Lucy, her past, and what he could do to ease the tension that had made her shoulders clench near her ears.

An older woman, probably in her early fifties, stopped at Lucy’s table and began inspecting her designs. “Beautiful work,” she said. Dyed blond hair—well done, probably expensive—brown eyes, about five foot seven. Cormac catalogued the woman just as he’d scanned every other person approaching the booth, filing their faces away in his mental rolodex in case he needed to remember them in the future.

“Thank you very much,” Lucy answered, politely attentive.

“What’s your design process?”

Cormac half-listened as he took stock of the woman. She wore a gray pantsuit with a black button-down shirt. Her throat was adorned with smooth pearls, and her hair was tied back in a twist. Dark eyes that missed nothing settled on Lucy as she spoke.

“So you draw these yourself?” The woman thumbed one of the invitations on the table.

“The watercolor style and the abstract floral designs, yes,” Lucy answered. “But the rest are put together from various stock images. I do the composition and typography myself, of course.”

“May I?” The woman pointed to one of the watercolor-style thank-you cards, which were splotches of color vaguely reminiscent of flowers. The others were mostly squiggly lines made to look aesthetic on various pieces of paper. They were nice. Even a man without an ounce of artistic talent in his body could see that.

Cormac scanned the Expo attendees again. The tense feeling hadn’t left him, and he wondered if he was losing his touch. Everyone here was hawking their wares and planning weddings. There was a happy buzz in the air—so why did Cormac think it would end badly?

He shook his head and scanned the back of the booth again. Nothing was amiss.

“Nothing to note,” Sam said in his ear. “All appears normal.”

“Same here,” Cormac answered quietly, one eye on the woman in front of Lucy, the other on the throngs of people milling behind her.

“Have you ever considered selling your designs?” the woman asked Lucy.

Lucy straightened. “What do you mean?”

“I’m a buyer for Juniper and Sage.” The woman pulled a business card from her purse. “I’d be interested in having you pitch a few ideas to our corporate team. We’re always looking for new designers.”

Cormac’s ears pricked. That was the company Leo had mentioned when they’d helped him move, the one that had made Lucy gasp. He glanced at Lucy, whose eyes had gone wide. Her fingers trembled slightly as she took the card, jerking her chin down once.

“If you’re interested, I’ll take a few of these samples to the team, and we’ll be in touch to set up a meeting date.”

“Yes—yes!” Lucy nodded vigorously. “Yes, that sounds amazing!”

“We’ll have to move quickly,” the woman continued. “We’re in town for a company retreat, so we’ll have to hear your pitch next week unless you want to travel to Manhattan.”

“I can do next week,” Lucy confirmed.

“Good.”

“Wonderful.” The woman smiled, grabbing a few samples. “I’ll be in touch.”

Cormac watched her walk away. She ambled down the rows of booths, glancing curiously at a few offerings before turning the corner. As soon as she was out of sight, Lucy let out a long, wheezing noise. Then she sucked in a breath, wavering on her feet.

“Are you okay?” Cormac took a step toward her.

He grunted as Lucy launched herself at him. She jumped, landing against his chest like a desperate koala who’d just spotted the only eucalyptus tree for miles. Her arms winched around his neck in a surprisingly strong headlock while her legs clamped around his hips. He wavered, arms circling her on instinct to help catch his balance. She squeezed him as an excited squeal slipped through her lips.

“Juniper and Sage, Cormac! *Juniper and Sage!*” She squeaked again, constricting him with her limbs a little bit

harder.

He should have been telling her to get down so he could keep scanning the surroundings. He should have put some distance between them.

But he didn't.

His hand stroked down her spine, the warmth of Lucy's body soaking through to his frozen core. Slowly, he tightened his hold on her, closing his eyes as her breath tickled the side of his neck. His fingers found their way to the nape of her neck as his other arm clamped around her waist.

She felt perfect in his arms, warm and soft. She smelled even better up close, some indefinable scent that seemed to rise from her skin. Holding her was heaven. He'd never felt anything better. In the very hidden recesses of his soul, a missing piece clicked into place.

Then, as if she realized what she was doing, Lucy's arms and legs loosened. He let her slide down to the ground, keeping his hands on her waist as she caught her balance. Her palms rested on his chest, warm and delicate.

Her eyes were melted chocolate. Her body wilted toward him, like she couldn't help but lean into his bulk. Cormac didn't want to admit to himself that he enjoyed the feeling of her so close. He didn't want to acknowledge that her tremulous smile and shining eyes were burrowing deep under his armor, making his heart thump a little bit harder.

She was precious, like a rare jewel. She needed to be protected. Cherished.

His thumbs swept over her ribs of their own accord, like even his hands couldn't get enough of her.

"What's Juniper and Sage?" he finally asked when the silence between them stretched.

He regretted his question when Lucy dropped her hands from his chest and stepped away. The loss of her touch was an acute ache that nearly made him wince. He recovered quickly, annoyed at himself for being thrown off by the touch of a woman who was meant to be his client and nothing more.

Lucy grabbed the older woman's business card from the edge of the table where she'd left it and turned it so he could read it. "Oh, only the second-biggest greeting card company in the country, after Hallmark."

Her smile was pure sunlight—until it dimmed.

That fading smile was a spike to Cormac's chest. "What?"

She shook her head and tried to curl her lips again, but it didn't look the same. "Just the thought of pitching my designs to a room full of suits..."

"You'll do great," he told her, meaning every word. He wanted that light back in her eyes. Wanted to be the one to put it there. "You'll blow them away."

She took a deep breath and slipped the card into her pocket. "Yeah. I'll just make sure I'm really, *really* prepared. And if I choke, then I'll have no one to blame but myself."

Before he could stop himself, he caught Lucy's hand. She glanced at him, surprised.

"You'll do great," he repeated, running his thumb over her knuckles. Every part of her he'd touched was soft as silk. "She loved your work. You're amazing at what you do. I've watched you all day, Lucy. I know what it looks like when someone has both skill and work ethic."

The softening of her shoulders told Cormac he'd gotten through to her, at least a little. He didn't understand why that made him relax in turn. He didn't know why he cared so much.

"Thank you," she said quietly, squeezing his fingers. Then another potential client stepped up to her booth, and she got back to work, painting that same sunny smile on her face—the one that made Cormac feel like the earth was wobbling beneath his feet.

He closed his eyes for a beat, trying to wrestle his emotions back into submission.

He didn't want to get close to a woman. Not now, when things were going well. He didn't want to invite trouble into

his peaceful life, and he especially didn't want to have another vulnerable person under his protection.

But as the day wore on and he watched Lucy light up with every interaction, he had to admit that he did want her.

SEVEN

A PERSISTENT ACHE pulsed through the soles of Lucy's feet, up her calves, and through her thighs. Soreness spread through her lower back as she rolled up the banners and tucked them onto her dolly behind the now lighter boxes of samples. Standing for ten hours straight wasn't something she was accustomed to doing.

Despite the discomfort in her lower body, Lucy was happy.

Most of her samples had been given away, and she'd already gotten inquiries from two couples for save-the-dates and invitations. She had a list of a dozen new contacts with local wedding planners, and she'd taken countless photos for her social media.

And of course, the biggest news of all, a potential deal with Juniper and Sage. Her heart thumped at the possibility—but anxiety screeched in the wake of excitement.

What if she messed up? Last time she was in a boardroom with a bunch of stuffy suits, she'd crumpled. What if it happened again? What if she lost this golden opportunity and never got another?

Huffing, she focused on the feel of the tablecloth beneath her fingertips as she folded it into a neat square. Her head was

too full to process all the things that had happened today.

Including the hug. If that could qualify as a hug. The way Cormac had stroked her spine...the way his breath had shuddered as he'd held her...

Blinking, she shook her head. It didn't mean anything. She'd mauled him, and he'd just been trying to recover his balance, that's all. His touch had only felt tender because that's what Lucy wanted to believe.

From the corner of her eyes, she glanced at Cormac, who scanned up and down the aisle and periodically checked on her progress packing up. His presence had helped her today, a steady wall of warmth at her back at all times. She'd been able to actually *enjoy* meeting new people and promoting her wares, which had been a surprise.

With Cormac here to support her—even if he was only doing it in a professional capacity—Lucy had been able to let go of a small part of the fear that usually held her back.

He'd eaten two more donuts over the course of the day, which had filled Lucy with a silly, glowing kind of warmth. She liked being the one to give him pleasure, even if it was just deep-fried dough dipped in sugar.

“Ready?” the big man asked as she plopped the folded tablecloth on top of the stack of boxes on her hand trolley.

She smiled tiredly. “Let's get out of here.”

Cormac grabbed the dolly before she had the chance to, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop from smiling. It was *nice* to have someone carry the heavy things for her, and she didn't care if it made her a weak-willed woman to admit it.

They headed for the exit. About half the vendors were packing up, with the other half still busy chatting with potential clients. Scarlett had sold out three hours ago, and she'd stopped by Lucy's booth to say goodbye, and Lucy had finally called it a day when the crowds had thinned considerably.

Caterers, photographers, venue representatives, planners, bakers, florists, photo booth rentals—the list of businesses that

were supported by Stirling's bustling wedding industry was immense. Gratitude flooded Lucy as she walked by. She was part of this too. She'd risen from the ashes of her destroyed career and carved a living for herself.

She *did it*. She didn't have to wait to grow into the local economy to feel successful. She already was!

But...did she really want to mess that up by contacting Belinda from Juniper and Sage? The edge of the older woman's business card felt rough against her thumb as she traced its outline in her pocket. Maybe staying small was a better option. She could have a good life without asking for any kind of spotlight.

Spotlights were terrifying.

Cormac shifted the trolley to his other hand and touched her elbow with the hand that was now freed. The warmth of his fingertips sent little sparks shooting over her skin, and her thoughts settled.

She'd enjoy today, bask in her success at the Stirling Wedding Expo, and think about big business deals tomorrow.

They turned a corner toward the main aisle that ended at the exit. Sam stood by the doorway, watching their advance.

But that's not what caught Lucy's eye.

To her left, a confection of white was displayed in front of an angled mirror. The dress had thin straps and a sweetheart neckline that plunged ever so slightly. The figure-hugging fabric was studded with glimmering beading sewn in long, smoothly curved lines, its effect almost Art Deco in style despite the modern silhouette. At the bottom of the dress, from the knees down, glitter-studded tulle fanned out.

In the angled mirrors, she could see that the back dipped low, with a line of buttons studding the dress all the way down to the tulle.

It was romantic and sexy and not at all understated. It was the opposite of what Lucy would ever want for herself, because she despised the thought of being the center of attention.

But it was *beautiful*.

“What is it?” Cormac asked, and Lucy realized she’d gasped and slowed.

Blinking, she shook her head. “Nothing. Just the dress.”

Cormac frowned, his hand tightening on her elbow. He took a step closer to her. “What about the dress?” His eyes scanned the garment, flicking to the woman behind the booth who was busy talking to another woman. “What did you see?”

Lucy waved in the gown’s direction. “It’s...pretty.”

Cormac’s gaze cut to hers. “What?”

The man must’ve thought the dress hid some threat. Lucy hid her smile. “It’s a pretty dress, Cormac. That’s all. It caught my attention.”

He looked at the dress again, tilting his head, considering. “It would look good on you.”

She jerked and shook her head. “Oh, no. No. I could never.”

They started walking again. “Why not?” he asked, staring at her like she’d just grown another head.

“I couldn’t wear that thing! It’s too... It’s just too much! Besides, I don’t want to get married.”

The furrow between his brows deepened. “You don’t? But you work in weddings.”

“Right. But the thought of everyone staring at me as I walk down the aisle...” She huffed and shivered in disgust. “No way.”

“But you like the dress.”

“Well, yeah,” she answered, arching her brows at him. What was so hard to understand? “It’s gorgeous.”

“You like the dress but you don’t want it,” he clarified, “because you don’t want to get married and you don’t think it’d look good on you?”

They were halfway to the door. “Okay,” she clarified. “I’d like to get married one day, maybe, if I meet the right person. But I don’t want a *wedding*. And I think the dress would look good on me—I hope, anyway—but there’d be no reason to buy it because I’d have nowhere to wear it.”

He nodded slowly, but his eyes had gone back to tracking the movement of all the people milling around the room.

“A dress like that requires an occasion,” she continued, feeling more confident. “You wear a dress like that, you need a wedding in an old hotel with gorgeous decor and stone lions guarding the front gates. You need a band, and a black-tie dress code. I don’t want any of that.”

Cormac’s thumb had started making small strokes on her elbow, and the touch was beginning to go to her head. She had to clamp her teeth shut to stop herself from babbling any more, but he kept stroking. Had he even realized he was doing it?

“Report?” Cormac asked Sam when they reached the other man. His thumb stilled, but he didn’t take his hand away from Lucy’s elbow.

“All clear. No sign of Phillips and no trouble with any of the vendors and attendees. Ready to move out.”

Cormac nodded, but his jaw tightened. Even Sam looked troubled.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy asked.

Cormac’s dark-blue eyes met hers. Sighing, he shook his head. “Bad feeling.”

“Had it all day,” Sam agreed.

Lucy bunched her lips and flicked her gaze between the two men. “Maybe all the wedding stuff makes you uncomfortable. You wouldn’t be the first man to hate attending the Stirling Wedding Expo. That’s why the whole dress thing is so weird to you. You don’t get the romance of it all.”

Cormac’s hand moved from her elbow to her lower back. “Maybe,” he conceded, then nodded to Sam. “Let’s move out.”

Sam took the rear again, while Cormac guided her through the doors and down the hallway to the hotel's exit.

They emerged into the fading light of the late afternoon sunshine, the scent of spring heavy in the air. Lucy gulped down a deep breath, happy to be done with the Expo. Her car was across the lot, with the Elite Security van parked in the opposite direction.

Wind ruffled the end of her ponytail as she turned to face the two men. "Thank you so much for everything," she said, smiling. "Today was a huge success, and a lot of it had to do with you two backing me up. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"Job's not over until we get you home safe," Cormac said as Sam peeled away and headed for the Elite Security vehicle.

"I can take it from here," Lucy insisted. "Really. I feel a bit silly for having hired you in the first place. Nothing happened today."

The van pulled up in front of them, and Sam hopped out and opened the sliding door. Cormac began handing him boxes and banners and supplies.

"Boys. This isn't necessary."

"We'll get you home safe," Cormac said in a tone that dared her to argue. "Get in the van. We'll drive your car home for you."

Normally, Lucy would wilt under that kind of pressure—but there was something about Cormac that lit a fire inside her. He made her want to fight back.

"I will get myself home safe, thank you," she said primly, grabbing her car keys from her purse. "But thank you for hauling my supplies."

Cormac growled at her like some sort of wild animal as she ducked around the van to cut across the parking lot to her own car. Ha! It felt *amazing* to assert herself. She'd hidden herself away, alone in her apartment, for far too long.

"Lucy."

“I’ll meet you at the apartment,” she called, waving a hand over her head. Strutting across the asphalt, she let her lips curl into a smile. What a great day!

Someone cut across the lot in front of her at the end of the aisle. It looked like a man, but his shoulders were hunched and he wore a ball cap, so it was hard to tell. He paused for a second in front of Lucy’s vehicle, bending over to look at something on the ground. Lucy frowned, following his gaze to the undercarriage of her car, then let out a breath when he got up and kept walking. She picked up the pace, curious about what the man had seen.

“Lucy!” The note of panic in Cormac’s voice made her stumble over a flat piece of pavement.

Then a strong arm banded around her stomach, and she was whirled around to face the opposite direction a mere second before her car exploded.

EIGHT

SULFUR AND ASH and gasoline stung Lucy's nostrils. She coughed, the hard press of Cormac's arm jarring her stomach as he ran. Each step made his grip tighten against her ribs, constricting her lungs. She struggled to breathe, struggled to make sense of what had just happened.

The squeal of tires made her look up in time to see Sam pull the van up a few feet away. He leaned across the seats to throw the passenger door open.

"Get her out of here," Cormac clipped, then unceremoniously tossed Lucy into the waiting Elite Security van. She tumbled over the seat, gasping for breath.

"Copy," Sam answered, and the door slammed behind Lucy. "Put your seatbelt on, darling," he added, then hit the gas.

Thrown against her seat, she struggled to sit up. Once her belt was clipped, she whirled around to try to catch a glimpse of Cormac.

She spotted him halfway to the lot adjoining the hotel's, which was attached to a gas station and convenience store. Arms pumping, Cormac covered incredible distance as he

sprinted. His body was a work of art, clothing pressed against his front to reveal the sheer power of his movements.

The man he chased circled around a car near the gas station. He looked at Cormac across the roof of the car, and Lucy saw it clear as day: it wasn't Aaron Phillips. Someone else had blown up her car. Cormac hopped a chain link fence with the kind of grace that shouldn't be possible in a man his size. The man opened the passenger door of his getaway car as Cormac picked up speed.

Lucy's heart was in her throat. She pressed her nose to the glass as she watched the getaway car burn a black mark into the pavement, tires squealing, Cormac only a few feet behind. She'd never seen anyone move like that. Her breaths were jagged as the van rumbled beneath her, and then Sam was turning a corner and driving away.

The sound of the Bluetooth system in the van drew her attention forward.

"Sam Walters from Elite Security," he said when the call connected. "We have an incident at the Gladstone Hotel. A car exploded."

"Exploded?" the gruff voice on the line replied.

"White Ford Focus belonging to Lucy Barlow. She's here with me, and I'm taking her to our offices. Suspect got into a gold Crown Vic with McKenna in pursuit."

"Stand down," the man replied. "We're sending units. Did you hear me? Tell your man to stand down."

Sam's jaw tensed. "I'll try," he said, and he hung up the call. He pressed another button on his steering wheel and a moment later, Cormac answered. "Cops are sending units," Sam explained. "They want you to stand down."

"They turned down Maple," Cormac answered, naming one of the main streets that cut the length of the town. "I'm two minutes behind them. Lucy?"

"She's here." Sam scanned her. It was quick, but Lucy could tell the two-second glance took in a lot of information. "Rattled, but fine."

“Well, get off the phone and get her to the safe room like I ordered.”

The call cut off, and Sam huffed. “Gave it a shot,” he told Lucy, who was just beginning to catch her breath. Sam drove with expert precision, never over the speed limit, always checking surrounding cars. They pulled into an underground parking lot under the Elite Security offices.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, Sam cut the engine. He didn’t park in a spot, but rather stopped the car just a couple of feet from the nearby elevator. Then he slipped from the car and scanned the lot while circling around to her side.

Ushered into the elevator, she leaned against the mirrored wall and let out a breath. Sam stood in front of the elevator door as they traveled upward, tension radiating from his body. It wasn’t until they were in the Elite Security offices that Sam relaxed. They passed an empty reception desk, the building dark. Sam led her down the hallway, then closed and locked a solid steel door that shut off the kitchen area from the front of the building.

His face still grim, Sam led her to a room set up with a couch, a TV, and a small dining set. “I’ll call the boss,” he told her, then waved at the room. “Make yourself at home.”

“What’s going on? What happened?” Lucy finally croaked. Her fingers and toes were ice cold. Her brain seemed to be moving at a glacial pace.

“Not sure yet, but it looks like someone planted a device on your car. Must have detonated early.”

Lucy gaped. She’d been there when the explosion happened, of course, but their escape had been so efficient that she’d almost believed she’d imagined it. Hearing Sam say it so plainly sent cold shivers trickling down her spine.

“They wanted to...kill me?” The words came out as a whisper.

Sam sighed. “Help yourself to coffee or tea,” he said gently, pointing to the kitchenette in the corner. “There are

snacks in the fridge. I'll call Cormac. Once we have more information, we can figure out the next steps."

Putting on a brave face, she nodded at the other man. He was as tall as Cormac and built like a linebacker. His blond hair was cut short, his face clean-shaven. She wanted a hug, but she doubted getting one from Sam would make her feel better.

When he disappeared behind the door, Lucy let out a trembling breath. She drifted to the kitchenette and stared at the cups, plates, and coffee-making implements like she was an alien who'd just landed on Earth and had no idea what she was supposed to do with them. Deciding that coffee would be too much effort for her sluggish brain, she picked up a glass with trembling hands and filled it with cool water.

She should call her parents and tell them she was okay, but she could hardly manage to work the taps. Speaking about her car exploding was beyond her.

Her phone buzzed. Scarlett, asking if she was okay. Lucy's fingertips felt numb as she typed back a quick response. *I'm fine*, she wrote. *At Cormac's office.*

Scarlett replied, *What happened????? Your car exploded?????*

Lucy closed her eyes and tried to take a deep breath. *Yeah*, she wrote back. *I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?*

Let me know if you need anything. You can stay at my place tonight, she said, and Lucy felt a rush of gratitude. Her friends were the best.

The door opened. Lucy turned, but it wasn't Cormac who filled the opening.

A slim man with a laptop and messy hair entered, giving her a crooked smile. "So you're the one who's got the boss's panties in a twist!" He dropped onto the long couch and set his laptop on his thighs. "When Marlon got married, I told Cormac he'd be next, but did he listen to me? Nooo."

A bit of tension eked out of her. Lucy sipped her water. "Um. Cormac and I aren't...together."

“Ha!” The man’s fingers danced over his laptop, and then he reached for the side table without looking. Frowning when his hand met empty air, he set the laptop on the coffee table and disappeared through the door again. A moment later, he came back with a coffee mug decorated with a sparkly kitten. Sam loomed behind him, scowling.

“Let’s go over the security camera footage,” the scrawny man said brightly before slurping from his cup and grabbing his laptop.

“Elton, give her a minute.” He arched his brows at the other man, clearly communicating something along the lines of, *Can’t you tell she’s about to have a nervous breakdown, you idiot?*

“No, it’s fine,” Lucy cut in. “I want to see.”

“See?” Elton replied. “She’s fine! The boss wouldn’t date a woman who couldn’t handle a little exploding car.”

“We’re not dating,” Lucy repeated, then added, “Does this kind of thing happen a lot in your business?”

Elton spun the laptop around, ignoring her question. “There. Press the spacebar to play it.”

Crossing the tile floor, Lucy took a seat next to Elton. She pressed play and watched herself approach her car on the grainy footage. She waved a hand on the screen, saying goodbye to Cormac and Sam, then slowed as another man entered the frame. With his hood up and a ball cap on his head, she couldn’t see his face.

“You think that’s Aaron Phillips?” Sam asked, looking over her shoulder.

“No,” Lucy replied. “I saw his face; it wasn’t Aaron. Plus, this guy is tall and thin. Aaron is only a couple of inches taller than I am.”

The man kneeled, got up, walked away, and a moment later the screen went white with the explosion. Lucy’s stomach knotted. It didn’t make her feel better to see the events on the screen. Her heart thumped as bile rose in her throat.

She could have been inside that car. She could have *died*.

The panic that had evaded her before rose up like a wave. Eyes squeezed shut, she tried to suck in a long breath to calm her racing heart. It was too much. All she wanted to do was sell wedding stationery. Was it really worth her life?

She should never have gone to the Expo. She should have stayed at home, where it was safe. This was just a consequence of trying to get over her very reasonable fears. She'd crashed and burned her career once, and that should have been a lesson. Now she was under attack. An unstable, unpredictable psycho was trying to *kill her*. What if he attacked her again? What if he went after her parents? Her friends?

Breathing felt like inhaling shards of glass. She couldn't get enough oxygen. All she could see was the white of the explosion on the screen. The scent of soot and sulfur still burned her nostrils.

Distantly, she heard a door open, but her mind whirled with the screech of panic. She gripped her hair, trying to use the points of pain to bring her back down to earth. Someone *made her car explode*, and Lucy was in way over her head.

A familiar voice said, "Leave us," and a moment later, the scent of comfort and strength washed over her. Warmth encased Lucy's body as she was lifted from the seat and tucked against a strong body. Finally, she could fill her lungs.

"That's it," Cormac rumbled. "In and out. Deep breaths. You're okay. I'm here, Lucy. Just breathe."

Face mashed against the side of his neck, she breathed in the scent of his skin. As rational thought returned to her mind, she realized she was clinging to him with a white-knuckled grip. Her fingernails were clenched into Cormac's shoulders so hard she wouldn't be surprised if she'd drawn blood. Loosening her hold on him, she sucked in another breath.

His arms were around her, one hand drawing long, smooth lines up and down her arm, his other arm banded across her thighs. His touch was a drug. She'd never felt so calm, so peaceful.

Stroking the shoulder that she'd been gripping so hard with her fingernails, Lucy asked, "Did I hurt you?"

Cormac's laughter was a huff of breath coasting across her temple. "Only as much as a kitten would."

Clicking her tongue, she glared at the scruff on his jaw but didn't move. His arm kept stroking, and it felt like someone had turned all her limbs to lead. She couldn't move—or maybe she just didn't want to.

"I could have died," Lucy said in a small voice.

Cormac's arms tightened ever so slightly and then relaxed, as if he'd forced himself to ease his grip. "You're safe now."

"I make wedding invitations, Cormac. I don't understand." Lifting herself up, she looked into his eyes. Right now, they were the color of late twilight—nearly black with a hint of blue. There was darkness in his gaze, an ancient anger that had been drawn out by the day's events. But there was something else there too—worry, for her, maybe. Lucy sucked in a breath. "Why would someone do this?"

Cormac's jaw was hard as he held her gaze. His hand slid up to stroke her cheek, thumb tracing the shape of her cheekbone. It was intimate and unexpected. When Cormac spoke, his voice was soft. "I'll find out, Lucy, and I'll stop them."

Deep certainty coated his words, and Lucy felt a pulse in her chest, as if a hidden part of her was responding to his vow. For once, she wasn't alone.

A knock on the door interrupted them. Sam poked his head through. "Cops are here," he said, blinking when he saw Lucy perched on Cormac's lap.

She tried to squirm off him, but his grip tightened, and she was trapped. She didn't really mind.

Cormac said, "Put them in the large conference room. We'll be right there."

It wasn't until the door closed again that he loosened his grip, almost reluctantly. They stood, and Lucy straightened her

clothes and hair. She took a deep breath to calm herself, then turned to the man who had drawn her out of the jaws of panic.

“What happens now?” Lucy asked.

“We tell the cops everything we know, and then I take you home.”

“You think I’ll be safe at my apartment? You said the doors and windows weren’t—”

“Not your home, Lucy,” Cormac interrupted, his gaze daring her to argue. “You’re coming to mine.”

NINE

CORMAC RODE the knife's edge of his nerves for the hours that it took to talk to the police and bundle Lucy home. Rick Holden, Stirling's only detective, was cagey with his responses to Cormac's questions. When Cormac suggested that Aaron Phillips was behind the explosion, Rick only said, "We're investigating all possibilities." When he questioned what the detective's plan was to bring Phillips in, the other man only dismissed him by saying, "We'll call you as soon as we know more."

It was a little too close to Cormac's memories for comfort. Whenever the detective neglected to give him a straight answer, Cormac's jaw locked and his muscles went hard. Suddenly, he was eleven years old again, powerless, angry, and terrified.

Except now he had Lucy to protect. It wasn't until he was inside his apartment with all the locks and alarms engaged that he breathed a little bit easier.

Dark smudges marred the skin under Lucy's eyes, and her movements were clumsy and sluggish. She'd seemed calm while speaking to the police, but Cormac could tell the interview had worn her down. The woman made wedding invitations; an exploding car was a shock to her system.

“Are you cold?” he asked when he noticed her rubbing her arms as she took a step into his apartment.

“A little,” she admitted. She gave him a sad smile. “My favorite sweatshirt was in my car.”

“I should have given you one of our company hoodies.” Cormac pinched his lips, annoyed at his oversight. “Hold on,” he told her, then ducked into his bedroom and grabbed the first sweatshirt he saw. When he handed it to Lucy, she pulled it on over her head and let out a happy sigh.

“Cozy,” she said, her body swallowed in the soft jersey material. She rolled the sleeves up until her hands poked through. Cormac’s tension eased slightly as she smiled at him. It was a tiny smile, but it was there. “Thank you.”

All Cormac could manage in response was a curt nod. A vise had tightened around his throat while he took in the sight of Lucy wearing his clothing. He liked the sight. A lot.

It made no sense to feel this strongly about the woman. He shouldn’t have brought her here. But how could he not? Was he supposed to leave her in her unsecured apartment, an open invitation for every criminal in the area?

Catching her frown at the sight of his lifting shutters, he arched his brows. “Is there a problem?”

“You have four locks on your door,” she informed him, glancing back at the front door. “And an alarm. Are those hurricane shutters?”

He glanced at the window shutters that were slowly rolling up to reveal the town of Stirling spreading at their feet. The clock tower was lit up in the middle of his view, with the dark line of the river snaking below it. “They’re not hurricane shutters, no,” he hedged, “but they’d probably survive one.”

“You used your fingerprint to do that alarm thingy,” she said, pointing to the control panel beside the door. “I’m surprised you didn’t have a retina scanner.”

“I considered it, but the added security benefit was minimal for a residential space.”

Lucy laughed, but she clamped her lips when Cormac didn't join her. Then she narrowed her gaze. "Was that...a joke?"

"No. Come," he said, leading her deeper into the home. As he entered the kitchen, he kept one eye on Lucy. She scanned the kitchen/living space with idle curiosity, touching the dark marble of his island and tracing one of the ivory veins that shot through it. Then she stroked the leather back of one of his barstools and wandered toward the huge windows.

For some reason, Lucy's opinion of his space mattered to him, which was annoying. He tore his gaze away and opened his fridge. His pre-portioned dinner waited in its glass container, but he didn't want to feed Lucy reheated leftovers. Instead, he set some water to boil for pasta and checked the fridge. No guanciale or pancetta, but he had bacon. He'd make carbonara. She needed energy after a day like today. She hadn't touched the snacks he'd given her earlier and had only had half a glass of water. She needed sustenance. Decision made, he grabbed a hunk of parmesan and a few eggs.

"Hello there," Lucy said. "Aren't you a pretty thing?"

Cormac turned to see her kneel on the polished concrete floor of his living room, a dark, furry creature creeping toward her. His cat was fickle as anything, but apparently she was just fine making nice with Lucy. Figured.

"Don't be offended if she runs away," Cormac warned. "She doesn't usually like strangers—"

He clamped his mouth shut when his cat rubbed up against Lucy's thighs, purring so loud it sounded like a rumbling engine. Knife poised above his cutting board, he stared in shock as his grouchy, solitary cat allowed herself to be picked up and snuggled against Lucy's chest.

"You're a darling, aren't you?" Lucy cooed. "What's your name, pretty kitty?"

Cormac pinched his lips as he watched Lucy reach for the cat's collar. She read the name written on the dangling charm, then cranked her head to stare at him.

“You named your cat Princess Snowball?” She blinked, fingers stroking behind Snowball’s ears, making the cat purr even louder. “*You named your black cat... Princess Snowball?*”

“The shelter named her,” Cormac explained, then turned to the stove and started cooking. His face was oddly warm, so he turned the heat down on the pan. It didn’t seem to help much.

He heard Lucy approach but didn’t turn. She washed her hands and then leaned against the counter beside him. “Can I help?”

“No. There’s wine if you want some. Or water. Glasses are just above your head.”

She took out a glass and filled it with cold water from the cooler built into the fridge. Watching her move around his kitchen, Cormac was surprised to find he wasn’t uncomfortable having her in his space. He liked it, actually. She fit here.

“I still can’t get over the fact that you have a cat, and she’s called Princess Snowball. Make it make sense.”

The water was boiling, so he dropped the noodles and started on the sauce. The chopped bacon went into a pan so he could render the fat. “What’s so hard to believe?”

“You should have a big, growly dog or something. With spikes on its collar.”

Cormac grated the parmesan into a bowl and used a fork to mix in the eggs and an extra yolk. He frowned at Lucy’s words. “Dogs require constant attention. A cat takes care of itself for the most part.”

Lucy hummed, and Cormac stole a glance in her direction. She was watching him over her glass, and some of the old light had returned to her eyes. The sight of her witchy little smile made his shoulders relax while his ribcage tightened over his lungs. She looked like herself again. Good.

The noodles were done, so he saved some water and drained them. Then it took only a few minutes to bring the sauce together, mixing the noodles with the bacon and quickly

emulsifying the egg-and-cheese mixture into a sauce. He splashed in some pasta water and got the plates out of the warm oven he'd prepped earlier.

When Cormac plated the noodles and slid a plate across the island, Lucy inhaled deeply and let out a soft grunt, almost a moan. Cormac watched the way she stared at his food, and he knew she wasn't just any client, and this wasn't a favor to Marlon and Camilla.

He wanted her here, with him. He wanted to be the one who fed her, cared for her, and kept her safe.

When he gestured to one of the barstools for her to sit, she slid onto the seat and gave him a strange look.

"Eat. Is everything okay?"

"You can cook," she answered, tone slightly befuddled.

"Is that a problem?"

"No, it's just...a surprise."

Cormac didn't know what to make of that. "Eat, Lucy."

She tucked in, letting out a little mewl of contentment, and Cormac got that same feeling of easing tension in the center of his chest. He sat beside her and ate.

"Thanks again for letting me stay here," she said after a while. "I really appreciate it. I'll call one of the girls in the morning so I can be out of your hair tomorrow."

He gripped his fork a little too hard then said, "You'll stay here until we've figured out who's behind the explosion."

"Cormac—"

"Do you really want to put one of your friends at risk?"

Her eyes widened. She hadn't thought of that. "Oh," she said quietly, and Cormac regretted his harsh tone.

He sighed. "I have plenty of room, and you'll be safe here."

"Look, I appreciate it, but I can't really afford to—"

“I’m not charging you a fee, Lucy.” The growl was back in his voice, and he forced himself to calm down. “If you leave here and get hurt, I won’t be able to live with myself.”

She nodded, eyes wide. He’d put that fear back in her eyes with his harsh tone, and he hated himself for it—but she had to be safe. Nothing else mattered. The best place for her to be was right here, where he could watch over her. No one could get to her if she was with him.

They ate and cleared the dishes, and then Cormac showed her the guest room. He rustled up some pajama pants of his along with a T-shirt, placing them on her bed, and felt that same bone-deep satisfaction at the thought of her sleeping in his clothes.

He was losing his mind. It was exhaustion. It had been a long day. He needed sleep, and these feelings would go away.

After showing her the bathroom across from her room and finding one of the spare toothbrushes he kept in the cupboard, he gave her a curt nod. “I’ll be just on the other side of the living room. First door on the left.”

Cormac needed to get away from her. It was bad enough that he’d brought her here, in his space, under his protection. He should have left her in the safe room at the office and kept a boundary between them, preferably a boundary that included a moat, a drawbridge, and hundreds of snapping crocodiles. But the thought of Lucy anywhere but an arm’s length away from him made the back of his neck itch. He needed to know she was safe. Needed to make sure of it.

It was the same old instinct, time-worn and unwelcome. But this time, he didn’t have the energy to fight it.

He turned for the door. “Goodnight,” he said, then paused when he felt her hand on his shoulder. Turning, he was surprised when Lucy wrapped her arms around his middle.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Hesitating a moment, Cormac finally gave in and wrapped her in his arms. It felt too good. He had to put some distance

between them. He let go and took a step back. “Let me know if you need anything.”

She nodded, looking small and scared, wrapping his oversized hoodie tighter to her body. His chest ached—but he turned around and walked away before he did something he regretted.

LUCY TOSSED and turned in the big, unfamiliar bed. She’d showered and changed into the clothes Cormac provided and put the amazingly cozy sweater back on, but she couldn’t rid herself of the remnants of her anxiety. Huffing impatiently, she threw the covers off and padded to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

She was surprised to find she wasn’t the only one who was still awake. Cormac glanced up from the couch, a laptop propped on his knees. Lucy recognized the security footage from the Expo parking lot before he closed the lid.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she explained. “Just getting a glass of water.”

He nodded, watching her as she filled her glass and moved closer to him. A small plate sat on the coffee table, holding a fork and what looked like smears of chocolate. She grinned at the evidence of his sweet tooth.

“You were holding out on me,” she chided. “I didn’t get any chocolate tonight, and my car exploded.”

Huffing, Cormac shifted to the side to make more room for her on the couch. “With the way you hoarded your donuts, I didn’t think it was safe to show you my stash.”

A small smile tugging at her lips, Lucy took a seat beside him. She put her glass down on a coaster and nodded to the laptop. “Did you find anything?”

He shook his head. “No. But the police are going to take Phillips in for questioning as soon as they find him, so we should know more soon.”

“Find him?”

Cormac ground his jaw. “He wasn’t at home or his office. They don’t know where he’s gone.”

Worry squirmed through Lucy’s middle. All she managed was a nod.

He rested his arm on the back of the sofa behind her, and Lucy had the urge to curl into the crook of his shoulder. She resisted, choosing instead to wrap her arms around her knees for comfort. When Cormac’s hand slid onto her back, she couldn’t help the sigh that slipped through her lips. He made comforting circles on her upper back, and that simple touch soothed her more than she wanted to admit.

“I looked up Juniper and Sage,” he said in the stillness of the night.

Resting her chin on her knee to look in his direction, Lucy arched her brows. “And?”

“Pretty big opportunity for you.”

She grimaced. “Yeah.”

“Why the face?” His thumb made slow sweeps along the edge of her shoulder blade, the warmth of his palm soaking through the fabric of her—his—hoodie.

Maybe that’s why Lucy felt comfortable enough to share. She was wrapped up in clothes that smelled like him, ensconced in his fortress, with the warmth of his hand between her shoulder blades. In this cocoon of safety, it didn’t seem so bad to share the embarrassment of her past.

“I have a habit of choking under pressure,” she admitted.

A notch formed between his brows. “In what way?”

A deep sigh made her chest rise and fall. She gulped and said, “I used to work in sales. I was part of the sales team for this company that sold really specialized software that managed safety and compliance for heavy industry applications. Quality assurance, government compliance, that kind of thing. We tailored the programs to various industries and sold them. It was a male-dominated field, and I was really

good at it. I was making a ton of money. It was fast-paced. I enjoyed it.”

“But?”

“But then I got promoted, and I had to pitch our biggest potential client yet. Multi-million-dollar contract that would last at least five years. The commission I’d make on the sale would be enough to triple what I’d earned in the previous year. I worked so hard to prepare for the meeting. Hours upon hours upon hours. I knew the software back to front. Nothing was going to stop me from making the sale.”

Cormac’s hand slid up to her nape, fingers tangling into her hair. He massaged gently. “What happened?”

Lucy’s eyes drifted shut. His touch felt so good. How was it possible for a man to have this effect on her? She leaned into the comfort, dredging up the worst of her memories. “I froze. The client was this brash, loud, combative man in his sixties, and I stood in front of him and turned into a stuttering mess. He asked me questions I knew the answer to, questions I’d *prepared* for, and I couldn’t get the words out. It’s like my brain just went blank. By the end of the pitch, he looked at me like I was pathetic, rolled his eyes, and we lost the contract.”

“You got fired for losing one contract?”

“I didn’t get fired,” Lucy admitted, “but I stopped getting big clients. And then even smaller contracts became harder to close. Within six months, I wasn’t selling anything, so I wasn’t getting any commissions. The base salary was so low I had to quit just to find a job that paid my bills. It was this slow, horrible death spiral. I just...lost it. Lost whatever confidence I had. Now every time I feel that kind of pressure, it takes me back to that boardroom, and I freeze.”

“You didn’t freeze today when people came up to your booth.”

His fingers dug into a knot at the base of her neck, and Lucy groaned. “That’s different,” she said.

“How is it any different?”

“I went back to school to study graphic design because it was something I could do on my own. It’s just me and my computer. And yeah, sometimes clients are difficult, but they’re not staring at me while I do my work. So when I’m standing at the booth, I don’t have to convince them to buy right away. I know, at the back of my mind, that I have all the time in the world to make things right for them. There’s less pressure to perform on the spot.”

A gentle tug, and Lucy was crashing into Cormac’s chest. He wrapped his arm around her back and let his hand rest on her hip, using his free hand to tilt her head up.

They stared at each other, and Lucy’s heart thrummed. He smelled clean and fresh and delicious. He was warm and strong, and he was looking at her like she mattered. She didn’t feel frozen and anxious; she felt *hot*. She wanted to close the distance between them and feel his lips pressed against hers. She wanted that stoic exterior to shatter because of what she did to him.

In those suspended seconds, when time ceased to exist and all she saw was the deep blue of his eyes, Lucy was sure that was where they were headed. She’d let him do whatever he wanted to her. She’d love every minute of it.

But then he went and ruined it by saying in a low rumble of a voice, “I think you’re lying to yourself.”

She stiffened. “Excuse me?”

“I said, I think you’re lying to yourself.”

Trying to push against his chest to get away had precisely zero effect as he tightened his hold on her, so she glared at him. “How do you figure?”

“If you crumpled under pressure all the time, you never would have hired me to stand up to Aaron Phillips. You wouldn’t have shown your face at the Wedding Expo at all.”

“That’s different,” she repeated.

“You charmed every person that walked up to your booth and convinced one of the biggest companies in the country to

give you a shot. It's not different, Lucy. You've still got it, that thing you think you lost."

A hissing snake was writhing in her belly, protesting his words, but Cormac was warm and sure, and he was looking at her with such conviction that the feeling settled. Her fingers curled into the soft fabric of his top, and she could feel the warmth of his chest beneath it.

He believed in her.

Not the way her family and friends did; they encouraged her and made sure she knew they were there for her, but they did it in a way that reminded her of her failure. They'd catch her if—when—she fell. That's not what Cormac was offering. He was meeting her gaze and telling her that *he believed in her*. He thought she could accomplish anything she set her mind to. No safety net required.

It rocked her. Held tight against his chest, her own shell cracked open for him. She wanted to live up to whatever belief he had. She wanted to prove him right.

Warmth twisted through her veins, settling between her legs. Somehow, she'd ended up wrapped up in Cormac's arms, safe in his home, with the world far, far away.

This wasn't real. It was some sort of fantasy world, where big, gruff, security-obsessed men told her she was stronger than she thought.

She was just about to pinch herself when he angled her chin up, his thumb stroking the edge of her jaw. Eyes steady on hers, he gave her plenty of time to pull away as he lowered his lips to hers.

But she didn't pull away. She curled her fingers around his neck and met him halfway, trembling, desperate, on fire.

TEN

LUCY KNEW that kissing Cormac was a bad idea. There was too much going on in her life, too many unknowns. The day's events had rocked her to her core. What she should have done was curl up in bed, sleep for an age, and then try to pick up the pieces and figure out her next steps. She had to contend with a dangerous rival stationery man, an exploded car, and an unsafe home.

The worst thing in the world to do would be to fall into Cormac's arms, because if things went sour, what would she do? Where could she turn? She had friends and parents, but as her protector had pointed out, she'd be bringing trouble to their doorstep if she asked them for help.

Adding sex to the mix was a terrible idea. Lucy knew it. Cormac, no doubt, did too.

But as his lips touched hers, logic and responsibility fled from her mind. His touch was confident and sure, though it was gentle. He kissed her softly to begin, pulling away an inch to gauge her reaction. When she tugged him back to her lips, he let out a moan that lit a fuse in Lucy's core.

His grip on her jaw tightened, his arm squeezing her closer. Suddenly, she was being kissed like nothing else

existed. Cormac's tongue brushed against hers, and the last of Lucy's wits disintegrated. All that was left was sensation: his palm against her neck, thumb angling her jaw with gentle pressure. His arm around her back, curled around her body so he could grab the soft flesh of her hip. The rumble of his groan as he tasted her again and again.

Lucy melted. She submitted. She gave in. She kissed him back with a sort of desperate lust, using the strength of Cormac's presence to ease the fears that had plagued her all day.

It had been weeks of tension and stress, weeks of worrying about the Expo, months and years of wondering if Aaron Phillips was serious in his threats. And it all compounded into an explosion that nearly took her life.

Cormac was a balm to soothe all those worries away. His kiss was an antidote. His touch was the cure.

As if he could sense her surrender, he let out a low grunt and lifted her onto his lap. Straddling him, Lucy cupped his face in her hands and renewed the kiss. He tasted like strength and lust and man. He touched her like he'd been starved for her.

She lost her mind.

Grip tightening on the nape of her neck, Cormac slipped his free hand under the oversized clothes she wore. Gasping at the heat of his hand on her waist, Lucy leaned her forehead against his and tried to catch her breath. He kissed her jaw, her neck, holding her exactly where he wanted.

"Love seeing you wear my clothes," he admitted in a low rasp. His hand slipped from her waist to her ribs, pausing for a moment just shy of her breast.

Lucy trembled. Her legs were spread as she straddled him, and she felt the spaces between their bodies like they were on fire. She wanted her clothes to disappear. She wanted to feel him thrust inside her until she lost the last remnants of her rational mind.

“Touch me,” she begged in a desperate whisper, her hands tunneling into Cormac’s hair.

His breath trembled as he exhaled, the warmth of it washing over Lucy’s neck. Then he slid his hand up to her breast, the contact jolting through Lucy’s body so hard she jerked.

He brought his lips to hers again, his hand squeezing and fondling and teasing. Their movements turned frantic, harried, as if time were running out and they had one last chance to feel pleasure.

“I’m going to make you scream my name,” he told her, pinching her hardened nipple for emphasis.

“Cormac,” she gasped.

A low, rumbling chuckle. “Yes,” he said, doing it again. “Just like that, but louder.”

He was teasing her, and it was driving her wild. Lucy used the only weapon she had: she widened her knees and rubbed herself against him exactly where she needed it. He was hard and throbbing, all the layers of clothing doing nothing to hide the evidence of his need.

She’d done that to him. In baggy clothes, looking like a tired, overstressed mess, Lucy had made him mad for her.

That thought was a drug. She ground herself against him as both of his hands moved to her hips, guiding her movements. He was strong, and rough, and perfect. They moved against each other in an imitation of an intimate dance, bodies writhing in hopeless need.

Cormac’s hands tightened on her hips as his breaths began to stutter. Every muscle of his body was taut, hard as marble wherever Lucy touched. She kissed his jaw, fisted her hands in his hair. She was needy for him, desperate—

“Wait,” he gasped. “Lucy.”

She sucked in a hard breath, body pressed against his.

“Wait,” he repeated. He turned his head so she could only see that his eyes were squeezed shut, his hand gripping her

hips so tight she wasn't sure if he was trying to pull her closer or push her away. Seconds ticked by. Her body ached. Every pulse of her heart drew her attention to the emptiness between her legs.

"We can't do this," he finally rasped.

Lucy's heart thundered so hard she wasn't sure she'd heard properly until he shifted to put a little more distance between them. The movement was like a bucket of ice water drenching her from head to toe. Suddenly, she was mortified.

"I'm so sorry," she said, averting her gaze. Her cheeks were on fire. Clambering off his lap, she scrubbed her palms over her face and tried to catch her breath.

"No—don't be sorry. It's my fault." Cormac had his own hands combed through his hair, his gaze steady on the closed lid of his laptop. "I shouldn't have let things get that far. You're—you've had a rough day. You didn't want that."

Lucy held her tongue. She most definitely *did* want that with every fiber of her being, but with every new breath that filled her lungs, her mind won a little more ground over her body.

"I should try to get some sleep," she said, forcing herself to look in Cormac's direction and only managing to stare at a spot just over his shoulder.

"Yes," he replied.

With a jerky nod, Lucy turned and walked to her bedroom. Her steps were awkward, and her arms felt wooden. She didn't know what to do with her hands. By the time she made it safely behind the closed door of her bedroom, she was a stiff, sweaty mess. The wetness that had drenched her underwear earlier now felt cold and uncomfortable against her skin.

She stripped them off, put Cormac's pants back on, dove under the covers, and forced herself to close her eyes. It took a long time to fall asleep.

ON THE OTHER side of the apartment, Cormac leaned over his bathroom sink and cursed himself. The last thing he needed

was to get involved with Lucy. The last thing he wanted was to sleep with her and complicate his life.

But...that wasn't quite true, was it?

He *did* want her in his bed—desperately. A part of Cormac that he hadn't known existed burned for her. He was desperate to feel her in his arms again, to have the softness of her skin beneath his palm. Kissing her had felt like watching the sun rise after a cold, rainy night, its warmth breathing new life into the husk of his body.

But she was a client, first of all. And second, Cormac had no interest in getting involved with anyone—Lucy included. His life worked because he was on his own. Any entanglement he'd had with a woman had been casual and short, just the way he liked it. But he knew that wouldn't work with Lucy.

When he'd seen the man toss something under Lucy's car that afternoon, the fear that had iced his veins had been so intense he'd staggered. In that moment, when he sprinted toward an unconcerned Lucy, there'd been nothing in his mind but blank, white terror.

He could have lost her, and she wasn't even his to begin with. How would he be able to function if he let her in? How could he live with himself if he took her to bed, let himself care for her, and then found out that he couldn't protect her, after all?

It would kill him more surely than any explosion. He knew it, because that part of his personality had been written into his DNA. Letting someone into his heart meant being responsible for their safety. Cormac couldn't handle the risk of inviting Lucy in.

So, after a cold shower, Cormac climbed into bed—alone. Exactly the way he should.

ELEVEN

“ABSOLUTELY NOT.” Cormac crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Lucy.

She stood with her hands planted on her hips—a pose she seemed to favor, Cormac had noticed—and returned his glare with equal intensity.

“Cormac, I need clothing.”

“We’ll order some.”

“I need my laptop.”

“You can use mine.”

“I can’t,” she insisted, “because you don’t have the software I use to do my work, and you don’t have all my in-progress projects saved on your hard drive.”

Gritting his teeth, Cormac turned to the stove. He poured beaten eggs into a sizzling pan and used the few minutes of cooking time to gather his thoughts. By the time he pushed a plate of steaming scrambled eggs toward Lucy, he felt calmer. More rational.

Sort of.

“I’ll go with you to your apartment, but you have to follow my lead.”

She speared a curd of scrambled egg and narrowed her eyes. Cormac’s stomach fisted. She was gorgeous in the morning, sleepy-eyed and red-cheeked. When she’d first walked out of the bedroom, his heart had stuttered. What would it be like to have her in his bed as the sun came up? How would it feel to see her open her eyes and smile at him?

Mercilessly tearing those thoughts to pieces, he straightened and met her gaze. “Agreed?”

“What does following your lead actually mean?”

“It means if I tell you to get back in the car, you get back in the car. If I say it’s not safe to go inside, you don’t go inside.”

Her lips bunched to the side, and she dropped her eyes to her plate, mulling over his words. She picked up a triangle of golden toast and inspected it. Evidently finding the butter coverage adequate, Lucy took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. Then she met his gaze. “Fine,” she finally replied.

“Good.”

When Lucy had finished her food, Cormac felt a bit better.

Lucy met his gaze and asked, “Have you heard from the police?”

He shook his head. “Elton was able to get the plates from their getaway vehicle, but they haven’t found it yet. Phillips wasn’t at home or at his shop, so they’re looking for his family and friends. We haven’t been able to confirm it was him that threw the device under your car, which makes things more complicated. He needs to be brought in and questioned.”

“So...what’s the plan?”

“Get your things. Keep you safe.”

“What about your other clients?”

“It’s under control,” Cormac replied. He’d gone through his emails and shuffled the schedule for the week so he could

work from home while the rest of his team managed call-outs and in-person jobs. Marlon would be away for another two weeks, which was unfortunate, but Cormac would manage.

They'd tidied the kitchen when Lucy took a deep breath, as if she was preparing to say something.

Cormac turned to face her, waiting.

"About last night," she said, lifting her gaze to meet his with what looked like a superhuman effort. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

He shook his head, heart galloping. Lying in bed the previous night, he'd had a lot of time to think about his own actions. He was ashamed of himself. He'd acted like a brute, pouncing on a vulnerable woman. That wasn't the kind of man he wanted to be. "You didn't. I'm the one that's sorry. I took advantage of you after you'd had a rough day. I should never have touched you."

She jerked her head back, frowning slightly. "It's not like I didn't know what I was doing, Cormac. I participated just as much as you did."

Oh, he was well aware. He could still feel her grinding herself against him, still remembered how hot she'd felt even through their layers of clothes. "You're here because you're in danger and I can protect you," he gritted out, as much to remind himself as anything else. She was a client, first and foremost.

But that wasn't quite true, was it? How many clients had he brought to his home because they'd been in danger?

It wasn't hard to dredge up the answer: none. Lucy was the only person he'd felt compelled to bundle into his vehicle and take here, where he knew she'd be safe. She was the only one he'd wanted to take behind the walls of his impenetrable fortress, because the thought of her being on the outside, alone, vulnerable, made him want to scream.

But that didn't mean he could hook up with her. He wasn't the type of man who took advantage of a defenseless woman in a vulnerable situation.

Lucy's fingers rose up to brush her bottom lip, and Cormac wondered if she was remembering how it had felt to kiss him. He sure as hell was remembering it—in vivid detail. Hadn't been able to stop remembering it since the moment it happened. His fingers tingled with the need to hold her, so he curled them into fists.

“So, we'll just put it behind us and forget it ever happened,” Lucy said, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Yes,” he answered with a dip of his chin. “Grab what you need. We'll head to your place as soon as you're ready.”

THE STREET outside Lucy's apartment was quiet. It was midmorning on a Sunday, so most people were likely either out enjoying the sunshine at one of the nearby parks or lying in bed for a lazy morning. The sun shone down on the worn pavement, intrepid weeds struggling to poke through every crack in the sidewalk. Lucy stared out the passenger window of Cormac's SUV, seeing her apartment with new eyes.

It was a run-down dump. The front door hung crooked, its latch not fully engaged. Anyone could be in there, waiting for her. The brick was dull brown, cracks spidering through the mortar throughout the front of the building. In one of the windows on the top floor, a cat stared out over its domain, watching the street with eerie stillness.

Lucy gulped and tried to push her fear down to a manageable level. She'd go in, get her clothes, her computer, and the orders she needed to ship, and then they'd get out. She could set up camp at Cormac's place to prepare her pitch for Juniper and Sage, and the police would find whoever blew up her car, and everything would be just fine.

A warm hand slid over her knee. “You okay?” Cormac asked quietly. “We don't have to go up there if you don't want to. Or I can take you home and come back to grab whatever you need on my own.”

Lucy shook her head. “No, it's all right. It's just... After everything that happened with my sales career, I had to downsize to this apartment. And I know it's nothing fancy—

nothing like your place—but it became like a sanctuary to me. It's where I built myself back up. And now..."

"Now it doesn't feel so safe anymore."

"Exactly." She turned to look at Cormac, who had a grim look of understanding on his face. For a moment, his gaze turned inward, then he shook it off and squeezed her knee. "I'll be right beside you. I won't let anything happen to you, Lucy."

Her heart thumped. He was a bastard for saying things like that to her, in that warm tone, while also telling her he regretted kissing her. The mixed messages were giving her whiplash.

Taking a deep breath, she opened her door. Cormac was at her side in an instant, and they entered the building together. It still smelled like decades of cigarette smoke and too many roaming cats. In front of them, on the left side, was a hallway leading to the building's back exit, lined with ground-floor apartments. Beside the hallway, the stairway leading up to the upper stories beckoned. The old linoleum on the stairs creaked and squeaked as they made their way up to Lucy's apartment, the only other noise the sound of their breaths.

Outside Lucy's door, Cormac scanned the landing and both sets of stairs going up and down, motioning for her to stand still. Satisfied, he held out his hand.

Confused, Lucy stared at the palm. Not sure what he wanted, she slowly slid her hand against his and shook it, pumping twice. "Thanks," she said. "Good work."

Cormac's fingers curled around her palm, and amusement lit the dark depths of his eyes. "No problem," he replied, "but I was asking for your keys."

"Oh," she said. Cheeks burning, she pulled her hand back and plucked her keys out of her purse. Handing them over without being able to meet his gaze, she caught the edge of a smile curling his lips. Then he unlocked the door, told her to stand just inside, and did a quick sweep of the apartment.

“Clear,” he said, reappearing in her bedroom doorway. He crossed the small space and turned the lock on her front door. “Grab what you need and we’ll head out.”

“Yes, sir.” She headed first to the bedroom, finding it just as she’d left it. Grabbing enough clothing for a week, she shoved it all inside her suitcase and paused. Would she need more than a week’s worth of clothes? How long would this nightmare last?

Shaking her head, she moved to the bathroom. A week would have to be enough. Any longer, and she’d go crazy. Toiletries and makeup were next, and then she moved to the living room to start packing up her work gear.

“I’ve already shipped most of my recent orders because I wanted to clear my schedule before the Expo,” she explained, “but I still have these two boxes to send out.”

Cormac nodded, grabbing the boxes and tucking them under his arm. Once Lucy had her laptop and the rest of her work necessities in her bag, she zipped her suitcase up and rolled it to the front door.

“Got everything?” Cormac asked, reaching for her case.

“I think so.”

They went downstairs and made it to the lobby when Lucy’s phone rang. She grimaced, giving Cormac an apologetic glance. “It’s my mother. Do you mind? I texted her last night but never returned her calls. She’s probably worried sick.”

He nodded. “I’ll be just outside.”

She watched him through the grimy front door as he hauled her suitcase into the trunk of his car, his head on a swivel as he scanned the street.

“Hi, Mom,” she said into the phone.

“Lucy!” the other woman screeched. “What’s this about your car? It exploded? Why? What’s going on? Are you okay? I *told you* not to go to that event. I knew something like this would happen!”

Rubbing her forehead, Lucy forced her voice to remain calm. "I'm fine, Mom. I'm with Cormac, the guy I hired for security." She glanced outside the window to see Cormac looming near the building entrance, his back to her as he stood guard. He was a lot more than just the guy she hired, wasn't he? He was thoughtful, and protective, and he had a monster sweet tooth. He was a great kisser, and he—

"Have you called the police? Come home, Lucy. Your father wants to speak to you." A shuffle, and then her dad's voice came on the line. "Pumpkin?"

"Hi, Dad. I'm fine. I'm staying at Cormac's and he's helping me talk to the police. Everything is under control." It was a blatant lie, but she needed to calm them down.

There was a brief silence, and then her father said, "Stay close to him, Lucy."

It surprised her to hear her father's endorsement of Cormac. He'd never particularly liked any of her boyfriends; none of them were good enough in his eyes. After a few more short exchanges, Lucy hung up the phone and let out a breath.

Paradoxically, her parents' worried voices had calmed her. They'd seemed supportive of her staying with Cormac, which eased some of the worry in Lucy's mind. She glanced at his broad back through the window, resolving to respect whatever boundaries he wanted to maintain.

Maybe he was right. Her emotions were all over the place, and the last thing she needed to do was add sex to the mix.

"Knew you'd come back here," a quiet voice said from behind her.

Whirling around, Lucy inhaled sharply at the sight of Aaron Phillips creeping toward her from the hallway leading to the back door. His clothes were rumpled, and his face was splotched with red. His eyes were dark and feverish, as if he were fighting some deadly infection. He stumbled on a crack in the linoleum and caught himself against the old, textured wallpaper.

"You've ruined everything with your antics."

Lucy backed toward the door. “My antics? What are you talking about?”

“You just had to elbow your way onto my turf, didn’t you?”

“Your turf? What are you talking about?”

“Everything was going great until you showed up. Thought you could outsmart us, did you?” He advanced, steps wavering, fists clenched. “Taunting me. Asking me questions you already knew the answer to.”

“Who’s us? What are you talking about?” Lucy nearly yelled the words, her heart pounding. She wanted to scream for Cormac to come save her, but Aaron wasn’t far away. If he lunged at her, he would do some damage. Lucy would fight him off for all she was worth, but she’d never hit anyone. The thought of fighting for her life made her muscles turn to stone.

A bark of a laugh. “I know what you really sell, up here in your little apart—” His eyes widened as he looked over her shoulder.

A waft of cool air told her the door had opened, and Cormac rushed inside like a malevolent spirit. Aaron whirled and ran down the hallway. The back door clanged, and Cormac skidded to a stop and turned toward Lucy. His eyes were wild and dark and bottomless. He swept toward her and scooped an arm around her back, guiding her to the exit. He opened the front door for her as he scanned the street.

“You’re not going after him?”

“I’m not leaving you alone,” he said in a low, gravelly voice. He bundled her into his car and jogged to the driver’s side, and a moment later they were off. Knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel, Cormac scanned the street like he expected a tank to rumble down and start blasting at them. A vein stood out on his temple, and his jaw muscles clenched and unclenched.

The air seemed to grow thinner. Lucy couldn’t get enough oxygen. She gripped the car door and stared out the windshield as Cormac drove, her heart rattling an irregular beat against

her ribcage. Her body was acting strange; legs twitching, fingers curling and uncurling. She sucked in another reedy breath.

When the Bluetooth speaker on the car trilled with an incoming phone call, Lucy jumped so hard she banged her elbow against the window. Cormac glared at the console screen like he could send the caller running with nothing more than his glare.

Then his shoulders relaxed.

He clicked a button on the steering wheel. “Hey Mom, now isn’t a great time.”

A siren sounded over the phone. “Honey, the system has lost its mind! I can’t turn this stupid alarm off!” There was a grunt, and the siren changed from a long *beep, beep, beep* to a rapid and ear-splitting *whoopwhoopwhoopwhoop*.

“Stop pressing buttons,” Cormac growled.

“Stupid thing! I’m ripping it off the wall! I never wanted this thing in the first place!”

“Mom!”

The call ended abruptly, and Cormac swore. He changed lanes and cut down a side street. The phone rang again, this time with Elton’s name on the screen.

“Getting alerts from your mom’s house,” he said when Cormac answered.

“I’m on my way.”

“Need backup?”

“Don’t think so. I think she accidentally armed it for nighttime then opened the door.”

“Copy.”

“Just ran into Phillips,” Cormac added, his jaw clenching on the man’s name, “at Lucy’s apartment. Looked bad, like he’s been roughing it. Dark windbreaker, no hat, jeans.”

Lucy blinked. She hadn't even noticed what Aaron Phillips had been wearing. She'd been too alarmed by the fact that he was there and talking nonsense to take anything else in.

"He could have changed after the bomb went off," Elton said over the speakers, and Lucy realized Cormac had mentioned Phillips's clothes because they didn't match the bomber's.

"Yeah. He ran out the back. Can you track him?"

"I'll try, but I haven't got access to many cameras in that end of town. Did you see which direction he ran?"

"No. I needed to get Lucy out of there."

"Got it. I'll see what I can do. Still don't need backup?"

"Phillips ran when he saw me. He'll come at us again, but I think we're okay for a little while. He wasn't ready for a confrontation."

"I'll let you know when I find something."

When the line clicked, Cormac glanced over. "You mind making a pit stop?"

"Not at all," Lucy answered, her body having relaxed slightly, her heart rate returning to normal. Listening to the phone calls had jarred her out of her panic and allowed her breathing to slow. Plus, Cormac had said he thought they had a little while before Phillips would show up again. That was a good thing. "Is your mom okay?"

"She's fine. This used to happen all the time until she learned how to use the control panel."

They drove to one of the neighborhoods of Stirling that used to be quite rough. In the past decade or so, the area had been cleaned up, and property prices had skyrocketed. Now, instead of overgrown lawns and suspected drug dens, the streets were lined with new builds and manicured gardens.

Lucy was surprised when they pulled up in front of a house that was clearly older than its neighbors. It was a single-story brick build with a roof that looked like it had recently been

replaced. Pavers led from the sidewalk to the front door, which was framed by two square columns and a small porch.

On the single step leading to the porch sat a woman who looked to be in her early sixties. She had her fingers plugging her ears and a scowl on her face. She stood, glaring at the SUV until Cormac came out. Lucy slipped out in time to hear the woman say, “Get that alarm out of my house, Cormac. I don’t want it. Never did.”

Cormac stalked up the stairs and turned to the wall just inside the front door. From her vantage point, Lucy could see his arm and shoulder move as he pressed a button on the wall. The alarm stopped mid-whoop.

The woman sighed. “Finally.”

“You set it for nighttime and then opened the door, Mom,” Cormac explained.

She lifted a finger and pointed it at him. “I don’t want to hear it! I don’t want to hear a word about this, Cormac. I want you to take all your electronics and throw them in the trash where they belong. And if you don’t, I will.”

For the first time since she’d met the big, stoic, serious man, she saw something like long-suffering annoyance on his face. “Mom,” he started.

“No. I’ve had enough. This is my house, Cormac. I’ve lived here for forty years. I have a right to decide what kind of security system I want, and this”—she waved her arms at the house in a dramatic windmill motion—“is not it.”

He gritted his teeth. “You didn’t want to move, so we compromised.”

“No, you bullied me into this.” Another windmill in the house’s direction, and then a horizontal slice through the air. “I’m *done*.”

“We can simplify the system,” Cormac conceded, “have it controlled remotely—”

“And another thing!” The woman was clearly in no mood to listen to her son. “You didn’t even call to tell me you

wouldn't make it to dinner yesterday, Cormac. Just one text! That's all I ask."

Cormac opened his mouth, but Lucy spoke before he could. "That was my fault," she said. "I, uh, caused an incident, and Cormac had to, um, essentially...save me."

The woman whirled, then froze. She straightened, her head tilting. "He did?"

"My car exploded," Lucy explained, "so Cormac had to take me to his place because my apartment wasn't safe. So if he missed dinner, it was because of me." She pinched her lips and smiled. "But the alarm is definitely his fault."

The woman snorted, then turned and glanced at her son. Frowning, she faced Lucy again. "The Wedding Expo explosion?"

Lucy nodded. "That was my car."

The woman frowned. "And Cormac took you back to his apartment? Not his office?"

Cormac stood in the doorway, grimacing. Lucy's gaze flicked from him to his mother. "Uh—yes. Yes, he did. I mean, he took me to the office first, but then we went to his apartment, and..."

The smile that lit the other woman's face rivaled the brightness of the sun. She spread her arms. "Cormac, why didn't you tell me you had a guest?" she asked while studying Lucy from head to toe. She definitely noticed that Lucy was still wearing Cormac's sweater, because her smile, impossibly, got wider. She beckoned impatiently. "Well, don't just stand there. Come on in! What did you say your name was?"

TWELVE

THE SITUATION WAS QUICKLY SPIRALING out of Cormac's control. He watched Lucy introduce herself, her hesitant smile lighting the warmth in her brown eyes.

"I'm Victoria, but all my friends call me Vicky," his mother said, sweeping down the flagstones to curl an arm around Lucy's elbow. "Now, tell me, how did you and my son meet?"

Lucy's smile turned a bit panicked. "I think you might have gotten the wrong impression, actually," she started, but Cormac's mother would not be deterred.

"I got the exact right impression," Vicky insisted, spearing her son with an incisive glance. "The exact right impression. Now. Do you prefer coffee or tea? My neighbor just brought over the most delicious coffee cake, and I think we should all have a slice and get to know each other, don't you?"

"Mom, we need to go. I need to get back to work..."

"It's Sunday, sweetheart," Vicky said, tugging Lucy through her front door. "You missed dinner last night, so you'll have coffee and cake with your poor old mother, won't you?"

“My poor old mother, huh,” Cormac grumbled, glancing out the door to scan the street. All looked normal. He wanted to get Lucy back to his apartment, but there was no changing his mother’s mind when she made a decision. He locked the door and set the alarm, then followed the women to the kitchen.

His mother shot him a victorious glance as he walked in, eyes twinkling, and then turned to Lucy. “So, you were telling me how you met my son?”

“We know each other through friends,” she explained. “His business partner is married to one of my best friends.”

“You’re friends with Camilla?” Vicky beamed. “She makes the most *wonderful* danishes. There’s some kind of custard layer that’s just to die for. I don’t know how she does it.”

“Cormac’s partial to the donuts, I think,” Lucy answered with a grin, missing the delight that sparked in the other woman’s gaze.

“He *is*. How fantastic of you to notice! Did you say yes to coffee? I was just about to put on another pot. Cormac, while I’m getting to know your gorgeous friend, can you have a look at the upstairs bathroom? The toilet is making that leaking noise again and I can’t get the tank to fill up after a flush. Thank you, honey.”

Cormac stood in the kitchen of his childhood home, knowing there was no salvaging this situation. He’d never brought a woman anywhere near his family, because no woman had ever been important enough to introduce to his mother and sister. He could understand his mother’s enthusiasm, even if it was misplaced. He and Lucy had shared a passionate kiss, but they weren’t anywhere near being a couple. His mother would get the wrong idea, and he’d never hear the end of it.

Still, as Lucy laughed at something his mother whispered, Cormac discovered he didn’t dislike the thought of them getting along.

Ducking into the upstairs bathroom, he lifted the lid off the toilet tank and got to work. Like the rest of the house, this toilet was decades old. It needed a new flush valve and chain; both of them had been repaired one too many times to be salvageable.

Cleaning his hands and replacing the lid on the tank, he gave himself a pinched-lip look in the mirror. Nothing like visiting his mother to remind him that he wasn't so all-important, after all. He'd been relegated to repairman duties within moments of stepping foot on the property.

Back downstairs, he found Lucy and his mother sitting at the small round table in the breakfast nook. Sunlight gilded the dark strands of Lucy's hair as she let out a long breath, shaking her head. "And then the car exploded. I was lucky Cormac was there to shield me from the blast; otherwise, I would have been injured. The heat was insane, and the smell..." She shuddered.

Hands clasped at her breast, Vicky let out a gust of breath. "Well. I heard about the explosion at the Wedding Expo, but I hadn't realized..." She spun around in her chair to give Cormac a wide-eyed stare. "Why didn't you tell me you were in that parking lot when it happened? Everyone's been talking about it!"

"I was kind of busy at the time, Mother."

"He took off at a sprint to try to catch the guy who did it," Lucy interjected.

"Cormac!" Vicky chided. "How many times have I told you to be careful?"

"It's my job," Cormac protested, horrified to realize he sounded like a petulant teenager.

"You should be more careful. Let someone else take the risks!"

"I'm not going to let someone else get in the way of danger when I can do something about it," Cormac answered, his voice lowering to a growl.

His mother sighed, relenting. "I know, honey. I know." She turned back to Lucy and brightened. "So. Tell me more about

your business. How did you get into it?”

“Well, I’ve always liked graphic design,” Lucy answered, picking up her cup of coffee.

Cormac’s mother had taken out the nice china for the occasion—the floral mugs and saucers with gold edges—which was a bad sign. A very bad sign. Cormac poured himself a cup of coffee and joined them at the breakfast nook while Lucy explained everything she did for work. When she pulled out her phone to show Vicky some examples of her design, Cormac watched the two of them lean their heads together to look at the screen.

Lucy looked proud, and a little bashful. His heart gave a violent thump. He couldn’t let Aaron Phillips get away with terrorizing this woman. He wouldn’t stand for it. It was wrong.

She was sweet and hard-working and funny, when she let herself open up. Imperious, too, with her hands on her hips whenever she wanted to make a point. He liked needling her, liked seeing the different facets of her personality come through. It was like finding new secret compartments that only he could unlock.

“Hello!” a voice called out from the front door.

“In here, Rubes!” Vicky yelled.

“I smell coffee,” Ruby, Cormac’s sister, said cheerfully a moment before appearing in the kitchen. Her eyes landed on Cormac, then on Lucy, and her brows went on a long and arduous journey north.

“Ruby, meet Lucy. She’s Cormac’s ‘friend.’” Vicky didn’t put actual finger quotes around the word “friend,” but they were heavily implied.

Cormac huffed.

Ruby’s brows remained raised. “His ‘friend?’”

“Isn’t she gorgeous?” Vicky beamed. “Lucy, this is my daughter, Ruby.”

Lucy stuck out her hand, smiling. “Nice to meet you.”

Ruby shook the proffered hand, then cut her gaze toward Cormac. “Since when do you have friends?”

“Har-har,” Cormac grumbled. “Hilarious as always, Rubes.”

“Have you picked a date yet?” Ruby continued, and Cormac resisted the urge to throttle her. Barely.

“A date?” Lucy frowned, flicking her gaze between Ruby and Cormac. Vicky was chuckling to herself as she fixed a cup of coffee for Ruby, her back to the exchange.

“For the wedding,” Ruby explained, cutting herself a gigantic piece of cake and accepting the mug Vicky passed across the counter to her.

Lucy’s face went bright red. “We’re not—no. I think you’ve got the wrong idea. Cormac and I aren’t dating.”

“Right,” Ruby said, stretching out the word, not believing Lucy for a minute.

“Leave her alone,” Cormac growled.

“Ooh,” Ruby said, slurping her coffee like the annoying little sister she was. “Someone’s touchy.”

“You know your brother,” Vicky cut in, sitting down beside Lucy again, a beatific smile on her face. “He’s very protective of people he cares about.”

“Cormac doesn’t care about me,” Lucy said. “I’m just his client. Things just got a bit out of control this weekend, is all.” She glanced at him, slightly panicked, and he knew she was remembering his reaction to their kiss. He’d pushed her away because it was the right thing to do, but now Lucy thought he didn’t want her.

Half of him wanted to grab her and tell her that he wanted her desperately. He’d never wanted anyone more. The other half was glad she’d gotten the message.

Ignoring Lucy’s protests, Vicky turned to her daughter and explained, “Cormac moved Lucy into his apartment yesterday because her car exploded.”

“That was your car?” Ruby exclaimed, interest sparking in her gaze. “It was all over the news.”

“The Stirling Stationery Man tried to kill me.”

“He’s not going to kill you, Lucy,” Cormac interjected, vehement. “I promise.”

Vicky and Ruby exchanged a loaded look, and the urge to throttle returned.

“Lucy works in weddings,” Vicky supplied out of nowhere, “which is convenient.”

“How is that convenient?” Cormac interjected, but no one listened to him.

Ruby said, “Huh. Doing what?”

“Stationery,” Lucy answered.

“Very cool,” Ruby said. “I can introduce you to my friend who’s a wedding planner. She’s always looking for new vendors.”

“I would love that,” Lucy exclaimed.

“Beautiful smile,” Vicky said. “Very nice teeth,” she added, like Lucy was a damn horse. “You’ve done well, honey.”

“I haven’t done anything,” Cormac protested. “And stop making Lucy uncomfortable.”

“You’ve never brought a girl home, honey,” his mother said, shrugging. “How am I supposed to react when you do? I’m excited!”

“Never?” It was Lucy’s turn to arch her brows at him. “Really?”

“I didn’t bring Lucy home, Mother,” Cormac explained as he fought for patience, “we just happened to be together when you called me to help you with the alarm.”

“‘Happened to be together,’ huh,” Ruby repeated. She slurped her coffee again, clearly enjoying herself immensely. She started on her cake as she asked, “Is that because you

moved Lucy into your fortress of solitude because you're feeling oh-so-protective of her?"

"What are you doing here anyway?" Cormac lobbed at his sister, frowning. "Shouldn't you be, I don't know, somewhere else?"

"I'm visiting my dear mother on a Sunday," Ruby shot back, pretending to be offended. "Something you should try doing once in a while."

"Don't you start guilt-tripping me too."

Lucy's phone rang, interrupting everyone. She grimaced as she looked at the screen. "It's my mom again," she explained. "Do you guys mind if I take this?"

Vicky glanced at the screen and brightened. "Your mother is Dolly Barlow? I love her booth at the farmers' market!"

Lucy smiled. "I'll let her know." She swiped her phone screen and got up so she could step away from the table. "Hi, Mom. I'm at Cormac's mom's house right now, so I can't talk for long."

"Wait!" Vicky followed Lucy and motioned for her to hand the phone over.

Cormac rubbed his temples, where a headache sprouted.

"Dolly? It's Vicky McKenna. Your daughter is a dear. We were just talking about heading over to yours for a visit to reassure you that she's all right."

"*Mom,*" Cormac hissed.

Lucy stared at her.

Vicky waved her hand at Cormac and nodded while the woman on the other end of the line spoke. "Yes, yes. Great! We'll head over shortly. Ta-ta!"

She hung up and handed the phone back to Lucy, who stared at it like she'd never seen it before. She glanced at Ruby, who was cleaning the dishes off the table.

"Everyone, shoes! We're going over to the Barlows' place. Rubes, honey, if you need to pee before we go, use the

downstairs toilet. The one upstairs isn't working."

"Mom, I'm a grown woman, you don't need to remind me to pee before we go places." Ruby helped clear the dishes then headed for the front door, as if she was actually agreeing to head off to Lucy's parents' place.

"Just making sure, honey," Vicky replied.

"I peed my pants *one time* when I was eight years old, Mother," Ruby protested as she put her shoes on.

Cormac caught Lucy's hand. "You okay? We don't have to go over there if you don't want to. I can take you home and we'll talk about what happened at your apartment, figure out the next steps."

"Don't be silly, Cormac," Vicky interjected, bustling them out the front door. "Dolly was in a state. She needs to see her daughter to make sure Lucy's all right. Plus, last time I went to the farmers' market, Dolly promised to show me the workshop where she makes those gorgeous pendants!"

"It's fine," Lucy said, squeezing Cormac's hand. "I should probably go see my parents and reassure them."

"Exactly right," Vicky cut in, hooking her arm around Lucy's elbow. "Now, come. We'll take Cormac's car. That gas guzzler is big enough for all of us."

The three women climbed into his SUV as Cormac watched on, powerless. He sighed. There was no point fighting it. They'd stop at Lucy's parents' place, and then he'd get everyone home and bring Lucy back to his apartment so they could debrief. An hour or so wouldn't hurt, and at least the three of them would be with him, so he could make sure they were safe.

So, with a sigh, he got behind the wheel and asked Lucy for directions, and he drove.

THIRTEEN

LUCY'S PARENTS lived in a big Victorian on the edge of town. The exterior of the house was painted a deep plum color, punctuated by the vibrant yellow door. It had been a wonderful place to grow up, with creaky floorboards, small nooks, and weirdly proportioned rooms that had been perfect for a small child to explore. She let her gaze roam over the home while Cormac parked the car, with its ornate trim, dramatic shutters, and the fanciful turret that had been her childhood bedroom. Her father had put his inheritance into the dilapidated home when Lucy was a child, and she'd grown up helping them restore it to—well, not quite its former glory, but the Dolly and Gus equivalent. It was a quirky, colorful home, and it suited Lucy's parents perfectly.

Her lips curled into a smile despite the stress of the recent happenings. She didn't want to move back in with her parents, but this place would always be home. Until she stepped out of Cormac's SUV and heard the gravel crunch underfoot, she hadn't realized just how much she needed a bit of comfort and stability.

Dolly came flying out the front door a moment after everyone had exited the car. She crashed into Lucy and wrapped her in a bone-crushing hug, pulling back to let her

gaze roam over Lucy's face. "Oh, baby," she said, squeezing Lucy's cheeks. "I was so worried."

"I know, Mom," Lucy replied, "but I'm fine." She pulled away and introduced Ruby, Vicky, and Cormac as her father came ambling across the front yard.

"We met at the Expo," Gus said when she introduced Cormac. He shook the other man's hand. "You taking care of our daughter?"

"As best I can," Cormac replied, more solemnly than Lucy had expected.

"Come in! Come in!" Dolly ushered everyone in the front door and through to the back of the home, where the sunroom lived in all its warm and sun-drenched glory. It ran the whole length of the back of the house. In early afternoon, the enclosed verandah wasn't yet sweltering, with only a few early rays of western sunlight angling through the windows. Plants lined three walls, while eclectic, mismatched furniture gave off a sense of comfort and coziness.

Dolly and Vicky disappeared into the kitchen while Gus sat down in his favorite rocking chair.

Ruby sat on a cushioned footstool next to him and nodded to the backyard. "Are those beehives?" she asked.

"They are," Gus answered. "We've been trying to plant wildflowers and encourage pollination for the past decade or so, but I just got new hives this year."

"How cool!" Ruby sprang up to look out the window. "I've always loved bees. Do you harvest your own honey?"

"We do," Gus answered, pride pulling his lips into a smile. "Dolly makes the most delicious honey cakes with it."

Lucy chose a seat on the old rattan three-seater covered in ancient floral cushions. The couch creaked as Cormac sat next to her, his arm stretching out behind her head. She glanced at the big man, arching her brows. "You okay?" she asked quietly.

Cormac tore his gaze away from the view of the backyard and glanced at her. His hand slid onto her shoulder, thumb stroking softly. "I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about."

"After what happened earlier?"

Cormac nodded.

"I'm okay," Lucy said, and she was surprised to find it was the truth. After the adrenaline rush of her encounter with Aaron, the coffee and cake with Vicky and Ruby had settled her nerves. Meeting those two women had given her a glimpse into another aspect of Cormac's personality. He wasn't just the serious bodyguard who scanned for threats all day, every day, and occasionally demolished donuts that didn't belong to him. He was a son and a brother who got teased and bossed around, and though he grumbled, she'd seen his shoulders relax the moment they'd stepped through his mother's front door.

He was just like her: an important part of a small yet tight-knit family. He loved them even though they sometimes drove him crazy. It humanized him a little more in Lucy's eyes, made it easier to understand him. He was protective because he cared very deeply about people.

She wasn't delusional enough to think he cared about her that way. They weren't dating, and he certainly wasn't going to propose. His mother and sister were overexcited, that was all. If he'd never brought a girl home, it was natural for them to get the wrong idea. He didn't care about her in the way he did them, but Lucy still liked knowing he had the capacity. It meant he was a good man, able to love deeply. It made it easier to trust that he had her best interests at heart.

"...and her tires were slashed last year as well! I told her, Lucy, you be careful, but did she listen to me?" Dolly came into the sunroom carrying a tray bearing an ornate tea pot and six mugs. She'd taken out the nice tea set, Lucy noted.

"Slashed tires!" Vicky followed close behind, carrying a plate of homemade cookies. "My, my. Cormac, did you know about that?"

Cormac frowned. "No," he said, turning to Lucy.

“Mom, I told you: they weren’t slashed. The air had been let out of them.”

“The police were utterly useless,” Dolly continued, ignoring her daughter. “Wouldn’t even arrest Aaron Phillips after he did that in broad daylight!”

Cormac made a noise beside her, but Lucy had to set the record straight. “There were no witnesses,” Lucy continued, because apparently she enjoyed talking to a wall. “We don’t know it was Aaron who did it.”

That finally got Dolly to acknowledge her. She huffed and chided, “Oh, don’t be naive, Lucy,” setting the tray down and rattling the china in the process. She poured steaming tea into the six waiting cups. “Who else could it be? That horrible man. And before that, when he stole those packages out of the back seat of your car? Do you remember that?”

Vicky’s brow furrowed. “When was this, exactly?”

“It was around the time Amelia and Leo were doing their thing,” Lucy answered, waving a hand.

Cormac let out a sigh, then said the same thing he’d told Lucy when he came out of her apartment: “He’s escalating.”

“Exactly!” Dolly harrumphed. “Isn’t that what I said, Gus?”

“Darling, we can’t keep our daughter wrapped in bubble wrap her whole life. If she wanted to do the Expo, she was going to do the Expo. At least she had backup.” He nodded at Cormac who nodded back, cross-generational bro code.

“Her car *exploded!*” Dolly planted her hands on her hips and glared at her husband. “Or have you forgotten?”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten!”

This sounded like an argument that had been going on before Lucy and the rest of the crew arrived, and Lucy knew from experience it could continue for a long time regardless of who was in the sunroom listening along. Her mother was a peacemaking, meditation-loving, farmers’-market-attending nut, but the woman knew how to stand her ground.

“Mom, Dad, I’m okay. Okay? Cormac made sure of it.”

All eyes turned to look at Cormac, who sat there and didn’t even twitch. The man was unflappable. Lucy was a little jealous. If everyone had turned at once to stare at her, her head would’ve exploded.

Vicky leaned over and patted her son’s arm. “You did, my boy. You did. His home is a castle. No one will hurt Lucy while she’s in there.”

Dolly huffed. “Well. That’s something.”

“He keeps trying to get me to install all kinds of locks and alarms on my old house, but I’m too old for all that,” Vicky continued. “Today the thing went haywire on me. The neighbors threatened to call the police if I didn’t get the thing turned off!”

“Which neighbors?” Cormac asked, coming to life next to Lucy. The rattan creaked beneath him as he leaned forward to meet his mother’s gaze.

“Oh, just batty old Mrs. Montgomery. You know how she is.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Cormac said, accepting a mug of tea from Dolly with a nod.

“You most certainly will not,” Vicky shot back, prim. “Last time you tried to talk to her, she scooped her dog’s poop in my garbage can for three months. The smell never came out! I had to get a new one from the city, and they charged me two hundred dollars for the replacement.”

“We had neighbors just over here”—Dolly pointed to the left—“not next door, but the ones over, who were convinced we were growing pot. They called the cops on us half a dozen times.”

“Not our fault they can’t tell a tomato plant from marijuana,” Gus cut in, chuckling.

“That was so embarrassing,” Lucy said. “Everyone at school was talking about it. They called me Doobie Barlow for weeks, which wasn’t even a good nickname.”

“Totally lame,” Ruby commiserated. Lucy nodded in thanks, but then Ruby added, “Lucy Bonglow would have been way better.”

Vicky, sounding horrified, said, “Ruby!” but Gus started laughing.

Lucy rolled her eyes, cracking a smile, then turned back to her mother. “Whatever happened to them?” She nodded to the side of the house where the neighbors had lived.

“Moved to Vermont,” Gus replied.

“And good riddance,” Dolly answered.

“Wait. Didn’t you call the city on them for building an illegal shed?” Lucy asked, frowning. “And something about informing the IRS that they’d bought a bunch of fancy cars and it seemed suspicious?” She couldn’t quite remember.

Gus’s face went blank. “Us? No.”

Dolly wouldn’t meet Lucy’s gaze. “We didn’t call anyone about anything. They just up and left.”

“I definitely remember a few conversations about giving them a taste of their own medicine. Right?”

“That would be vindictive and cruel,” Dolly answered, neatly avoiding the question.

Gus cut in before Lucy could dig further and said, “Stop stalling. Tell us about yesterday, pumpkin.”

Everyone had tea by now, and Lucy found herself the center of attention as her mother asked her to recount the previous day’s events. She was surprised to find that talking about the explosion no longer made her stomach clench. She’d recounted the story several times now, and the terror had dulled. Now she just felt angry.

Similarly, all those eyes on her didn’t fill her with the usual anxiety. She was slightly uncomfortable being the center of attention, but it wasn’t the crushing, panic-inducing weight that typically accompanied this much attention. Cormac’s warmth at her side helped, as did the kindness and worry reflected in everyone’s eyes.

“And the worst part is, I should be celebrating,” Lucy finished with a huff, “because guess who stopped at my booth at the Wedding Expo. A buyer for Juniper and Sage!”

Gus blinked, clueless. Dolly gasped along with Vicky, and Ruby arched her brows and nodded, clearly impressed. Cormac’s hand slid back onto her shoulder to squeeze gently.

“The card company?” Dolly asked, wide-eyed.

Lucy nodded. “They want me to pitch a few ideas. She said they were interested in carrying my designs in their stores.”

The squeal that left Lucy’s mother’s lips was so high-pitched, it must have pricked the ears of every dog in Stirling. She set her tea down on the coffee table, sloshing the hot liquid over the edges, then dove at her daughter. Her arms wrapped around Lucy like a steel vise, and Lucy fought for breath as her mother hugged the life out of her.

“I’m so proud of you,” Dolly said, voice muffled in Lucy’s hair.

Lucy gasped and patted her mother’s back. “Thanks,” she croaked.

“That’s *wonderful*,” Dolly said. Her eyes shone as she pulled back and studied Lucy.

Over her mother’s shoulder, Lucy saw Vicky’s gaze shift to Cormac, and the older woman gave her son a look that, to Lucy, seemed to convey approval.

Lucy didn’t know why that made her chest warm. She didn’t know why she should care if Cormac’s mother liked her. It’s not like they were dating. They’d kissed once, and he’d made it clear he didn’t want to do it again.

Okay, it was a bit more than a kiss. But still! He clearly wasn’t interested in pursuing anything with her. It shouldn’t matter if his mother approved of Lucy or not.

“What I want to know,” Ruby cut in, “is what this Aaron Phillips creep is hiding.”

Vicky nodded. “There’s more to this than just wedding stationery.”

“Is his shop still open?” Ruby asked, lifting her cup to her lips to take a sip.

“Closed last time I walked by,” Dolly answered.

Lucy narrowed her eyes. “Why were you walking by?”

Dolly’s eyes opened wide, angel that she was. “I was in the neighborhood, that’s all.”

Lucy frowned. Stirling Stationery was on the opposite side of town, far from anything Dolly would normally visit. She wouldn’t be in the neighborhood unless she’d gone there specifically.

“I think we should go check it out,” Ruby proclaimed. “I think we should go right now.”

“Hold on a minute,” Cormac said, lifting his hand. “We should definitely not do that.”

Vicky ignored him. “Yeah! And if he’s at his shop, we can all tell him exactly what we think of his bullying tactics. Run him off like you did the neighbors.”

“We did no such thing,” Dolly answered, but she was cleaning up the tea tray as if preparing to leave.

Gus stood. “I’ll lock up. Should we take the boy’s car? We can all squeeze in, right?”

Apparently Cormac was “the boy” now. Lucy glanced at him and saw the grim set of his jaw.

“I’m not driving you to the Stirling Stationery store,” he said. His voice was utterly calm, but a vein pulsed near his temple.

“We’ll take two cars, then,” Dolly proclaimed, picking up the tray to bring it back into the kitchen. “Augustus, get your keys!”

“Shotgun!” Vicky called out, picking up her purse.

“You can’t call shotgun until you can see the car, Mom,” Ruby complained.

“I am your elder, therefore I can claim the front seat anytime I choose.”

Lucy watched everyone stand up, feeling suddenly like she’d lost complete control of a situation. Or maybe she’d only just realized that she never had any control at all.

The last thing she wanted to do was go see Aaron Phillips—but she also didn’t want to sic all these people on Aaron Phillips. He’d blown up her car; who knew what he’d do to her and Cormac’s families?

Cormac, vibrating beside her, resisted for another few seconds, then let out another gusting sigh and pushed himself to his feet. “Fine. I’ll drive. But you all listen to what I say, understood? No running off and getting yourselves in trouble.”

“Of course, honey,” Vicky said, patting his arm. “You’ll keep us safe.”

A muscle in Cormac’s jaw bulged, but he just let out a breath and turned to help Lucy off the sunken-in couch. His hand slid to her lower back as he led her outside behind the troupe of lunatics they were related to. His touch was warm and soothing, and Lucy didn’t fight the urge to lean into him ever so slightly.

They all piled into his SUV, but before Cormac started the engine, he turned to look at everyone in the vehicle. “This is a terrible idea,” he said, “but I know that I can’t change your mind. So we need some ground rules.”

Everyone nodded.

“No wandering off,” Cormac said, counting off on his fingers. “No getting out of the car. We’ll park across the street and have a look, and then I’ll take you home.”

More nods. Everyone agreed, obedient as angelic children. Lucy, sitting in the front seat, narrowed her eyes.

“Good,” Cormac said, and he started the engine.

FOURTEEN

“WELL, it’s dumpier than I expected.”

Lucy hummed in agreement at Ruby’s proclamation as they all studied the Stirling Stationery Store from across the road. Cormac had backed the car into an angled parking spot, so the front of the vehicle faced the stationery store. The squat brick building was shoved between a nail salon and an old apartment building. The Stirling Stationery sign was faded and flickering, and the windows were slightly grimy.

This was Lucy’s competition? In the past three years, she’d avoided coming down here because Aaron Phillips had succeeded in intimidating her, but now that she was able to take a good look at it again, she wasn’t impressed. Lucy had put hours upon hours into her brand. She’d designed a slick, functional website. She worked hard to find suppliers and printers who could execute her visions to the standard she required.

And this was her competition. No wonder Aaron was mad.

For the first time in a long, long time, Lucy sat straighter and felt like she deserved her success. She’d earned the meeting with Juniper and Sage. Aaron was right to be intimidated.

Before this stupid feud had started, she'd come to his store and asked him a few friendly questions. She'd thought the shop was cute. It was a little cluttered, and it smelled like paper and ink and everything wonderful. But now... Well. Things had gone downhill for Aaron Phillips, that was for sure. Lucy didn't think it had anything to do with her little online store, but she could see how Phillips might want someone to blame.

Cormac hadn't said much on the drive over, but he opened his mouth now. "There. You've seen it, and it's closed. I'll take you all home—"

The back doors flew open simultaneously, and all the passengers exited the vehicle in a tumble. From the front passenger seat, Lucy watched the exodus before glancing at Cormac. "Sorry," she said, cringing.

"For what?"

"I feel like this is my fault." She waved her hand at the crowd of family members crossing the street to get a closer look at her rival's store.

"I think it might be my mother's fault," Cormac replied, unclipping his seatbelt. He opened his door and gave Lucy a wry smile. "Or maybe my sister's. Or your mother's."

"Getting them all in one room was probably a bad idea."

"I don't think we had much choice in the matter," he answered.

Lucy huffed and watched her father study the building's roofline with a critical eye. He leaned over and said something to her mother, who nodded, nose wrinkled.

Cormac sighed, watching his own mother try the door to the shop that was clearly closed. "I'll just let them have a look and then get everyone home, and you and I can talk. I want to go over what Phillips said to you this morning. I keep getting the sense that we're missing something."

Lucy nodded and opened her door. Cormac jogged around the front of the car in time to close the passenger door for her, then put his hand on her lower back again. His touch was a

comfort that Lucy knew she shouldn't get used to, but she couldn't help herself. She liked how steady he was, how confidently he did everything, even something as simple as crossing the street. It was addictive to feel that surety radiating from him. As long as he was around, everything would be okay.

"Oh, he changed the display on the left side of the store," Dolly said, her hands cupped around the sides of her face as she looked through the tinted glass.

"How do you know that, Mom?" Lucy frowned as her mother turned.

Dolly shrugged. "Well, you know, when I'm in the neighborhood, and the store happens to be open, sometimes I stop in."

Lucy narrowed her eyes. "You stop in."

"Sure."

"Why?"

"Call it curiosity."

Vicky snorted. "You pester him, don't you?"

Dolly put a hand to her chest in mock outrage. "I do not pester *anyone*. I am a pacifist."

Lucy arched a brow.

"You mess up the displays and never buy anything." Vicky's eyes twinkled. "That's what I would do."

Dolly's lips twitched. She shrugged. "Maybe. Sometimes his carefully color-coded greeting cards get mixed up, but I wouldn't have a clue who does it."

Lucy gaped. Her mother preached acceptance and non-reactivity. She always told Lucy to let things go for her own peace of mind. Between the tomato misidentification neighbors and this, Lucy was beginning to think her mother had many hidden facets. How long had Dolly spent secretly antagonizing the villain in Lucy's life? A strange mix of warmth and shock spread through Lucy's chest.

Her mother had a spine of steel. Lucy might be able to learn something from her. She could be sweet and sunny on the outside, just like her mother, and then go and do whatever she pleased. A smile curled her lips.

Vicky guffawed, hooking her arm around her new best friend's elbow. The two of them were cut from the same cloth. "I would do the same for my daughter."

The daughter in question was peeking around the side of the building. Ruby glanced over her shoulder and said, "I'm going to take a look out back."

"No," Cormac stated, voice flat, but Ruby had already trundled off into the dark alley. The space between the buildings was barely wide enough for a single person, so the whole gang followed after Ruby into the darkness as Cormac looked on, a storm brewing on his brow.

Lucy arched her brows at him. "You want me to stay out here while you go wrangle them back around front?"

"No," he answered, resigned. "It's best for us to stay together."

So, Lucy stepped into the narrow space between the buildings and joined the posse of busybodies heading for the back of the building. The narrow walkway spat them out onto a lane with buildings backing onto either side. It smelled overwhelmingly of ripe garbage. The only greenery visible were the stubborn weeds that had pushed themselves through cracks in the pavement.

The group had assembled in a semicircle, staring at the building where Aaron Phillips had made his living. It was as uninteresting from the back as it was from the front. Water damage stained the brick from a broken gutter in the top right corner of the building, a lone window interrupting the expanse of the back wall. The window was blocked with a sheet of plywood fixed to the inside of the frame, blocking it off completely. Otherwise, the building was utterly unremarkable.

"I can't believe this guy blew up your car," Ruby said. "What a turd."

Lucy hummed in agreement. “All because of wedding invitations.”

“If he was losing business to you, he could’ve stepped up his game,” Ruby said, frowning. “Competition is healthy.”

“That’s the thing,” Lucy replied. “I don’t even make that many local sales. It’s mostly online. I’ve just been trying to break into the local business to diversify. I’ve barely stepped on his toes, but he just decided to puff his chest out and bully me.”

“A complete turd,” Ruby repeated.

Despite herself, a smile curled Lucy’s lips. “Totally.”

“There’s got to be something more,” Cormac said, scowling at the building.

“Maybe you can run him out of town the way you did the neighbors,” Vicky suggested to Dolly.

Dolly seemed to consider it, but before she could answer, Cormac stepped forward. “No. No running anyone out of town, especially not someone who has access to explosives and a vendetta against Lucy. You’ve seen the building. Now let’s get back to the car and I’ll take you all home.” Cormac gestured toward the walkway again. His neck was taut with tension, but Lucy didn’t think it was because he sensed danger. She thought he’d reached his limit of exasperation for the day and needed some time to cool down.

She couldn’t blame him. Their mothers together were a menace.

Even now, they were both ignoring him and inspecting the back of the building like they could coax Aaron Phillips out with the power of their stares alone.

“Let’s go,” Cormac growled.

“Ooh, he’s using his scary voice,” Ruby said, lifting the lid on a dumpster to peek inside. She let it fall back down a moment later, and a waft of stink washed over them all. Gus wrinkled his nose.

“Ruby,” Cormac warned. “Mom. Mr. and Mrs. Barlow. Please.” He swept his arm toward the walkway.

“Guys, let’s go,” Lucy said, wanting to back him up. They weren’t accomplishing anything by staying in this stinking alleyway, anyway.

“That window is strange,” Dolly finally said, frowning. “I’ve been in that store a thousand times, and there’s no entrance to a storeroom on the back wall. And look, there’s no door back here.”

Gus frowned, following his wife’s gesture. Vicky tilted her head.

Cormac pinched the bridge of his nose. “Folks, please. Can we talk about the window when we’re in my car and driving away?”

Dolly nodded and marched back between the buildings, and the rest of them followed like little ducklings. But instead of heading for Cormac’s car, Lucy’s mom turned toward the windows and peered through them again. She clicked her tongue and pointed at the dirty glass. “Look! Metal shelving full of stacks of paper. There must be a hidden door.”

Despite herself, Lucy was intrigued. She looked through the glass and saw the long, uninterrupted shelves that ran almost the entire width of the shop. Pointing to the small room in the back right corner, she asked, “What’s that?”

“That’s a tiny powder room. It has no window, and it doesn’t go back any farther than the wall of shelves,” Dolly explained. At Lucy’s stare, Dolly widened her eyes and scrunched her shoulders, the picture of innocence. “I was curious!”

“Mom,” Lucy started, then stopped. Apparently, her mother had been playing detective for a couple of years, being a nuisance for Aaron Phillips for months on end. Lucy didn’t have the mental energy to chastise her for it. Instead, she peered around the other side of the building—the one they hadn’t walked down—and saw nothing but brick.

Frowning, she turned to Cormac, whose eyes were narrowed. He met her gaze.

“The window is strange,” Lucy admitted. “There’s no door.”

“They could have covered it over to install the shelves,” Gus noted.

“Wouldn’t we see the plywood? Why wouldn’t they use drywall? It’s just a smooth, blank wall behind the shelves.” Dolly had her hands cupped around her face again.

Cormac hummed, then pulled out his phone. “Elton,” he said a moment later. “Did you manage to get the plans for the Stirling Stationery Store? Yeah, send them through.”

“Yeah, a little more, a little more, stop!”

Lucy and Cormac turned in unison to see Vicky standing at the corner of the building, flicking her gaze between the walkway beside the building and the window. They shuffled over and saw Ruby standing a few feet from the end of the building, frowning at the wall.

“What’s going on?”

“The back wall doesn’t go all the way to the back of the building,” Gus cut in, seemingly catching the ladies’ excitement. “There’s a secret room!”

Lucy’s heart thumped. She watched as Ruby spread her arms to the back of the building, measuring the space that was unaccounted for.

“About four, maybe five feet,” she called back.

“Secret room!” Dolly repeated, hanging onto Gus’s arm. “What do you think it’s for?”

“That’s where Phillips builds explosives,” Vicky answered.

“The bastard!” Dolly exclaimed, shaking her husband’s arm. “Honey, call the police.”

“It’s probably storage,” Cormac cut in, but there was a frown marring his features.

Lucy touched his forearm. “What are you thinking?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw, and he let out a long breath. “I’m thinking I want to get all of you out of here before someone comes asking us questions. Or before Phillips shows up and gets angry.”

Lucy nodded. “Mom, Dad, we need to go.”

Dolly turned and nodded. “Fine.”

Ruby reappeared in the sunlight in front of the building, wiping her hands like she’d just done a hard day’s work. “What are we thinking? Secret room?”

“Where he builds his explosives,” Vicky confirmed.

“We’re thinking it’s storage for his stationery store until we find out otherwise,” Cormac cut in, voice firm. “Now everybody, get back in the car. I’ll take it from here.”

Ruby opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the sound of a loud engine drew their attention to the street.

“Get to the car, *now!*” Cormac barked as the incoming car screeched to a stop in front of the stationery store. The car looked to be at least thirty years old. The boxy lines of the Crown Victoria were distinctive, square headlines shining as both front doors swung open. The car was a dirty tan color, with wood paneling running down both sides.

This was the getaway car the bomber had used.

Lucy’s blood ran cold.

Two men tumbled out, leaving both of the car’s front doors open. The vehicle was still running as the men lunged for the group. Vicky screamed.

Cormac shoved Lucy behind him and cut the men off, neatly dodging a wild punch before landing one in the first man’s gut.

“Look out!” Lucy screamed uselessly as the second man came barreling in like a linebacker. The rest of the group had run for the other side of the street, but no one wanted to leave

Cormac on his own. It was two against one. Someone had to help.

But how? Lucy had never thrown a punch in her life.

The linebacker reached his target, but Cormac rolled, letting the man's momentum take him past Cormac's body. The man stumbled over the curb and almost lost his footing. Meanwhile, Cormac turned back to the first attacker, grunting as the man landed a hit that glanced off his cheek.

"Get in the car," he shouted. "Lucy, get everyone in the car and get out of here."

She wasn't leaving him here on his own, but she did see the sense of moving the more vulnerable people—that is, everyone except Cormac—out of harm's way. She waved at her parents, who hurried for Cormac's SUV.

As she herded everyone inside the vehicle, the two men faced off against Cormac.

"You shouldn't have come here," the driver said. He was the wider of the two, his body slabbed with muscle. His hands curled into fists as he circled Cormac, trying to get Cormac into a more vulnerable position.

"Shouldn't have shown your face," the second man said. Taller and skinnier than his partner, he tried for another tackle.

Cormac bent his knees, caught the man's attack on his shoulder, and lifted him up and over to body slam him on the ground. The man's body made an awful noise as it hit the concrete, his head rolling to the side.

That's when Lucy got a look at his face. Her chest tightened so quickly she let out a wheezing breath, because she recognized this man; he'd been the one to plant the explosives under her car.

Without a glance at his partner, the meaty man hit Cormac with a flurry of punches. Lucy stood in front of his SUV and watched Cormac dodge, block, and take every hit the other man delivered. The man on the ground rolled, trying to get to his feet. Cormac stumbled and let out an awful, pained grunt as Meaty landed a punch to his ribs.

Cormac was losing.

Blood streamed down the side of his face as the other man threw a wild punch, which Cormac just barely leaned back to avoid. But his attacker had predicted his movements, and a vicious uppercut was on the way to connect with Cormac's jaw. He dodged at the last moment, but the hit made an awful noise when it connected with the corner of his chin.

"Cormac!" Lucy started moving toward the fight, wanting to help—needing to help. She'd jump on the other guy's back. She'd rake his eyes out. She'd do *something*.

As the men battled, Lucy stood there, useless. For the first time since her career had imploded, Lucy *wanted* to get involved. She was no longer happy to be on the sidelines, to watch, to avoid any pressure or confrontation. Right now, as she watched Cormac fight for all of them, Lucy wished she could do something. Anything.

So she ran toward them, no thought in her mind except helping the man who had done everything to protect her.

Lucy only made it three steps before Cormac *moved*. He rolled out of the way of his opponent's next hit. His fists blurred, they moved so fast. She heard the crunch of the other man's face, and blood spurted from his nose. Meaty's next punch went wide, and Cormac caught his arm, used his own as a lever, and neatly dislocated the attacker's shoulder.

The scream the big man let out was high-pitched and horrible. His arm hung oddly when Cormac dropped it, and Meaty stumbled back, eyes glazed.

Lucy found herself leaning against the hood of the attackers' car. It was warm beneath her palm, the engine still rumbling. Her breaths came fast and heavy, like her throat had been coated with cut glass.

"Who are you?" Cormac asked, his voice a rough, low growl. She'd never heard him speak like that before.

The lanky man on the ground sat up, wincing as he touched his leg. "This isn't your fight. Don't get involved."

“It’s been my fight since you blew up my woman’s car,” Cormac replied, still in that terrible voice.

It took a moment for Lucy to realize he’d called her his woman, because she was distracted by the slow advance that Cormac had started toward the two men. He was like an oncoming storm, unstoppable, deadly, terrifying.

Meaty, clutching the arm with the dislocated shoulder, was red-faced and huffing. His eyes were fully black, betraying his fury. He snarled. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with, rent-a-cop.”

So they knew who Cormac was—or at least they knew that he worked in security. Lucy’s heart beat so hard the sound of her pulse rushed in her ears. They needed to get out of there. Needed to get somewhere safe.

But Cormac wanted answers. “Who. Are. You.”

“We work for the Phillips,” Meaty said. “Aaron sent us here with a message.”

Cormac’s neck cracked as he tilted his head from side to side. In that moment, he wasn’t human. He was just pure, uncompromising death. Lucy couldn’t see Cormac’s face, but she could see the set of his shoulders. She could see the way his hands curled and uncurled, like he was trying to shed tension and failing. “What message is that?” His voice was low, but it had turned cold.

“Stay away from here, and stay away from Phillips.” Meaty’s gaze shifted from Cormac to Lucy. “And shut down that pathetic excuse of a business before it gets you in trouble.”

Cold seized Lucy’s muscles, but before she could answer, Cormac began to march forward.

Meaty saw him coming, because Cormac wasn’t moving fast. He was simply advancing like a tank or an invading army, telegraphing his intent.

And his intent was pain.

Meaty widened his stance, preparing.

Cormac dodged a slow punch and landed two of his own. Two rapid jabs to Meaty's already broken nose, and the big man went down like a tree that had lost its battle against a chainsaw.

Cormac wasn't even breathing heavily as he stood over the two men. "Look at her again, and I'll kill you. Speak to her again, and no one will ever find your bodies."

The way he spoke was icy and factual. Lucy inhaled in little sips, her ribs winched too tight to allow a deeper breath.

Cormac turned and met her gaze.

The side of his head was matted with blood. Rivulets of the ruby liquid ran down to his chiseled jaw, dripping onto his dark top. His entire body was hard and clenched, like he'd turned to ice.

And his eyes—his eyes were burning. She'd never seen them so dark, so utterly furious.

And then the door to the attacker's car slammed shut. Lucy jumped back, meeting Vicky's gaze through the windshield. Vicky, in that moment, looked nothing like the friendly, doting older woman she'd been since they'd pulled up to her house a few hours ago. She wasn't warm.

She was ice cold, just like her son—and she hit the gas.

"Mom!" Cormac managed to yell the word, but it was too late.

Vicky jumped the curb, tore up the patch of weedy grass that separated the front of the shop from the sidewalk, and drove the car right through the front of the Stirling Stationery Store's windows, narrowly avoiding Lanky's leg on the way.

The car crashed through the glass as it stopped, sending shards and dust and debris raining down on the hood. Cormac ran over and ripped the door open, pulling his mother out of the wreckage.

Not a hair of hers was out of place. She shook off her son's touch, sneered at the two men, and spat on the pile of broken glass at her feet. "You hurt my son," she told the men, "and

you deserve everything you got.” Then turned and strode toward Cormac’s SUV where the rest of the group waited.

Cormac jerked his head, and Lucy jumped to follow his unspoken command. She hurried to the front seat and clipped herself in by the time Cormac got behind the wheel.

Through the windshield, they watched the two men gather themselves together as Meaty made a phone call. Cormac started the engine and drove away, the silence in the car thick enough to cut.

FIFTEEN

ADRENALINE from the fight flooded Cormac's system. He could barely keep his focus on the road as he used the buttons on his steering wheel to make a call.

"Boss," Elton said through the speakers.

"There was an incident at the shop," Cormac clipped. "Should be on my dash cam. I want IDs on the two perps, and I want to know if any other cameras in the area caught the... altercation."

"Altercation?"

"I'll give you a full report in an hour. I'm driving my mother to the hospital, and then I'm going home. I want to know how much trouble we're in by the time I get there."

"Hospital?" Elton seemed incapable of doing anything but repeating Cormac's words, which was making Cormac angrier than it should. The bloodlust from the fight was still riding him hard. He could still see the sneer on the bigger man's face when he'd shifted his gaze to Lucy, when he'd threatened her.

Right in front of Cormac, the man had had the guts to warn her off. It made Cormac want to rip the steering wheel off and smash it through the window.

“I’m not going to the hospital,” his mother supplied from the back seat as Cormac ended the call. “I’m fine.”

“You drove a car through a plate-glass window.”

“The airbag didn’t even go off, Cormac. I’m *fine*.”

“That car was old enough not to have airbags installed. You’re going to the hospital.”

“I am *not*.”

“Mom,” Ruby interjected, entreating.

The fact that his sister was on his side for this meant he was definitely right. He took the turn to head for the hospital.

“I’m perfectly all right,” his mother repeated. “Take me home. I’ll even arm that stupid alarm.”

“I’m taking you to the doctor.”

“You are taking me *home*. I just watched my son beat the snot out of two men who were bigger than he was, and it scared the life out of me. I want my own couch and my own things. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

The steering wheel creaked as Cormac gripped it harder, and distantly, he was afraid he’d snap it in half. Beside him, Lucy sat silently. As he rolled to a stop at a red light, he stole a glance in the rearview to see his mother sitting with her arms crossed, a mulish expression on her face. Then he glanced over at Lucy, who was busy gnawing on her bottom lip.

“I’ll go home with her,” Ruby said quietly, caving.

Cormac huffed but kept driving toward the hospital. He glanced at Lucy. “Your parents have a security system at home?”

Wide-eyed, she met his gaze. “What?”

“Do they have a security system?”

“No. Mom, Dad, you don’t have a security system, right?”

“Why on earth would we have that?” Dolly replied, as if she hadn’t just admitted to antagonizing the man who’d terrorized her daughter.

If he took her and Gus home, they'd be vulnerable.

His jaw ached, and he realized he was grinding his teeth.

Cormac wrenched the steering wheel and turned the car around. He was sick of making decisions based on the desires of irrational people, but what choice did he have? If he took his mother to the hospital, he'd have to take the Barlows to the safe room at the office. It was Sunday, which meant he'd have to stay there. And what he really wanted to do was take Lucy home so he could go through everything that had happened and figure out how to stop the madman with a vendetta against her.

When he spoke, it was through gritted teeth. "I'm taking you all back to my mother's house. Mom, you will arm the alarm. You will keep the doors and windows locked. I'll send one of our guys to keep watch."

The best thing he could do to keep all these people safe was have them in one secure location where he could watch over them. At least until he could figure out who those two guys were and why they had attacked.

One thing was for certain: Aaron Phillips wasn't in the wedding stationery business. Something else was going on.

"Meaty said 'the Phillips,'" Lucy said in the silence that settled in the car.

Cormac frowned. "What?"

"That big guy's message. He said it was from 'the Phillips,' implying there's more than one."

Cormac hadn't caught that. He'd been too focused on quelling the urge to kill the man who'd threatened Lucy and the rest of his family. His ability to reason had been low when the big man—Meaty—had spoken.

"A family," Cormac said.

Lucy nodded. "Does he have any siblings?"

"Nothing came up in his background check. I'll get Elton to dig deeper."

By the time he made it to his mother's house, the sweat that had beaded on Cormac's body during the fight had cooled to a clammy coating on his skin. He parked the vehicle in the garage and herded everyone inside, making sure the alarm was set properly while his mother made for the kitchen to play host for all her unexpected guests.

He turned to see Gus watching him, a frown drawing the older man's brows low over his eyes. Lucy's eyes, Cormac realized. Warm brown and kind.

"You were telling the truth back there?" Gus asked quietly.

"Sorry?"

"You'll take care of my little girl until this is over?"

Cormac's heart punched against his ribs. His throat constricted as he dipped his chin. "Yes," he said, even though what he wanted to say was that he'd take care of her long after this was over. If she let him, Cormac would take care of Lucy for the rest of his life.

But that wasn't true. Lucy was a client, and this situation had spiraled. He needed to get his feet on solid ground before he could make any sort of pronouncement about him and Lucy. Having yet another person to protect was too much to bear. Cormac couldn't do it.

Today was proof. He'd let himself go along with their families' crazy plans, and it had ended in disaster. Someone could have been seriously hurt. His mother, his sister...*Lucy* could have been hurt. That thought sent another wave of adrenaline tightening his muscles.

He'd fight until he was bloody and broken to stop that from happening.

"I'll take care of her," he finally said. Gus nodded, then extended his hand. They shook, and Cormac's vow was set in stone.

Lucy appeared at the top of the three steps that separated the foyer from the living room level. She arched her brows. "Vicky wants to know if you two want sandwiches. She's making turkey club."

“No,” Cormac said. “You and I need to head home and talk about everything that happened today. We need to call the detectives on your case and report it too,” he added, almost as an afterthought. An old wound pulsed in the pit of his stomach.

The police had been useless all those years ago, in this very house. They hadn’t done their jobs, and Cormac had never really regained full trust in their abilities.

But he wasn’t an eleven-year-old boy anymore, and he had to maintain a good relationship with the force for his business to succeed. Logically, he knew that they were good people who only wanted to serve the population of Stirling.

But at that moment, standing in the house where that trust had first been damaged, logic was far, far away. Cormac wanted to take this fight on himself, pummel Aaron Phillips into the ground, and make sure he and his goons were nowhere near the people he cared about.

He forced his voice to quiet, though the need to rage still fanned the flames in his gut. “The longer we stay here, the bigger the target we put on our families’ backs.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Gus went up the three steps and put his hands on his daughter’s shoulders. “You listen to Cormac,” he said. “And stay safe. This will all be over soon.”

“Love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, pumpkin.” He kissed her forehead, turned to nod at Cormac, then ambled to the kitchen.

The sounds of lively conversation and overloud laughter resonated from the other room as Lucy and Cormac stared at each other. He knew their families needed to vent their stress, and they’d do it over food and conversation and laughter. They’d be safe here. Cormac had already called one of his men to stand watch.

Cormac needed to vent his stress too, but being around so many boisterous voices wouldn’t help. He extended his hand toward Lucy without a word.

Her eyes followed the movement, and she descended the steps without hesitation. Her palm slid against his, and it felt like a key fitting into a lock. He curled his fingers around her warm, soft skin, and a slow sigh slipped through his lips.

“Let’s go home,” he said, and Lucy nodded.

LUCY FELT the weight of fear lift from her shoulders as soon as Cormac latched the final lock to ensconce them in his citadel of safety. Yesterday, she hadn’t realized how much she appreciated being in his home, where she knew she was protected.

That wasn’t something she was used to. She’d been on her own for so long, in her run-down apartment that she’d worked hard to make a home. She’d gotten used to the ear she always kept open to unfamiliar sounds. A creak in the stairwell made her pause. A shout on the street made her glance at her door to make sure she’d locked it.

It wasn’t until she was truly, utterly secure in Cormac’s home that she realized how good it felt to be safe.

Cormac touched the keypad by the door to get the shutters up and deal with the beeping alarm warning them that it was about to go off, and she noticed that the tension in his body didn’t drain the way it had from hers. The muscles in his neck were stark, and he held himself straight and stiff. His nostrils flared as he breathed a little heavier than needed, the blood on the side of his face beginning to dry and flake.

“I’ll make us some food as soon as I’m cleaned up,” he told her, not meeting her eyes as he curled an arm around her back to lead her inside.

Princess Snowball yowled by her food bowl, then came closer to wind herself around their legs. Cormac reached down to scratch her ears, but still, the tension in his upper shoulders and neck didn’t ease.

Lucy moved before she knew what she was doing. She touched his shoulder, and Cormac went utterly still. With a delicate touch, Lucy ran her fingers up his neck to tilt his head toward the light.

“Let me clean this up for you,” she said, her voice a whisper.

“I’ll shower and it’ll be fine.”

“You might need stitches.”

“It’s fine,” he repeated.

Lucy gave him a flat look. “At least we know where you got your stubborn streak.”

He must’ve realized he sounded exactly like his mother, because he huffed a breath and tilted his head toward his room. “I’ve got a first aid kit under the sink. But it looks worse than it is. Head wounds bleed a lot.”

“You rushed in and saved us all earlier,” Lucy said, letting her hand slide down to his arm. “Let me look at your injuries for you.”

He nodded, fed his cat, and then aimed for the bedroom.

Padding across the apartment as the shutters stopped their ascent at the top of the windows, Cormac opened the door to his room and led her into the attached bathroom. Lucy glanced at the tidy bed, the sparse furnishings. Spartan, disciplined, spotless. Cormac always kept himself in check. But she’d seen the cold fury tightening the muscles of his body when those men had threatened them earlier. She’d seen the viciousness of his punches and the violence coiled in his muscles.

There was more to him than a neatly made bed and bare nightstands.

“Sit on the toilet lid,” she ordered, and Cormac obeyed. His jaw worked as he watched her root through the under-sink area, and she knew he was still riding the knife’s edge of his stress. She wanted to help him.

This big, strong man had rushed to her rescue. He’d entertained her kooky parents. He’d helped his mother and endured his sister’s taunts.

He was *loving*. Under the gruff exterior, there was a deep well of kindness and generosity.

He didn't have to bring her back here. Hell, he didn't even need to speak to her at all. Their contract was done. She wasn't paying him for his services anymore.

But he was here, and his head was bleeding because of Lucy. In a small way, she wanted to show him that she appreciated him. She understood what it cost him to be the protector.

When she had the first aid kit open on the edge of the sink, she wetted a washcloth with warm water and approached him. It was like approaching a wounded wild beast. Tension thrummed in the space between them as he watched her, wary.

Moving slowly like she would to keep an animal from spooking, she used the tips of her fingers to tilt his head to the side and started slowly dabbing at the blood caked into his pores. Standing between his spread legs, she could feel the warmth of his body, could sense the way he held himself utterly still.

Would she say no to another kiss? Of course she wouldn't. After seeing what he'd done for her outside Phillip's store, Lucy would climb into bed with this man without hesitation. He'd done something for her that no one else ever had—protected her, defended her, supported her. He believed in her abilities, and he'd made her want to *act*. She wasn't content to be a wallflower when Cormac was around.

But he was the one who'd recoiled after their last kiss, so she wasn't going to go there again. If all he'd let her do was clean up his wounds and bandage him up after he'd saved her, that was all she'd do, and she'd be grateful for it.

As she dabbed at his skin, the tension in Cormac's body eased. A long breath warmed her wrist as he exhaled, closing his eyes as he submitted to her ministrations. It soothed something in the depths of Lucy's heart to see him relax. It felt like she'd done something right.

"There," she said quietly, wiping his temple. "Let me wet the washcloth again."

She felt his eyes on her as she moved out of the notch of his legs and bent over the sink. The water ran pink as she rinsed the cloth, then clear, though the cloth remained stained. She wrung it out and approached him again.

This time, he tilted his head without needing her to ask, and when she stepped between his legs, his hands slid behind her knees. When his thumbs began to make slow sweeps along the outsides of her thighs, Lucy had to force herself to focus on the job at hand.

His hair was matted with blood, and as his hands slid up a couple of inches to the backs of her thighs, she saw the blood already congealing above his ear. She was no expert, but it didn't look like he'd need a stitch.

His palms were warm, even through her clothing, and the movement of his thumbs was making her dizzy.

“You should be careful when you shower,” she said, surprised to find her voice was steady, “but the cut is small. It should be fine.”

A rumble passed through Cormac's chest in response. His hands didn't move from her thighs, so she kept dabbing at his skin. There was a bit of blood on his ear, which she cleaned, but soon, her work was done.

Neither of them moved.

She studied the cut, her other hand resting on Cormac's shoulder. His body was still tense, but there was a softness to him now. She could feel his muscles shift as he slowly, gently stroked the backs of her thighs. The washcloth had gone cold, so she tossed it into the sink and placed both hands on his shoulders.

“Lucy,” he rasped.

It took all her courage to drag her gaze to meet his. What she saw was heat, and need, and pain. The look in his eyes speared through her, stilling every part of her body except for her thumping heart.

The seconds stretched. Lucy couldn't look away from that darkness in his eyes. She wanted to revel in the heat, slake his

need, share his pain. She wanted everything with him.

He must have read her mind, because the next words he spoke were, “Come here,” as he cupped one hand around the back of her neck and dragged her mouth down to his.

Lucy was powerless to resist. She wove the fingers of both hands through the strands of his hair and kissed him. She gasped as he tugged her bottom lip between his teeth, melted at the slight pressure of his hand on her thigh.

All of a sudden, she was straddling him, every hard inch. She could feel the heat and hardness of his arousal against her core. Her mind went blank. Cormac’s arms banded around her to hold her close as his mouth systematically destroyed every scrap of defense she could have erected against him.

He tasted like danger and fire and need. She moaned against his lips as he plundered her mouth, his tongue sliding against hers, his stubble abrading her skin. He gripped her jaw and held her head to the side so he could lave his tongue over the point of her pulse.

“Tell me to stop,” he told her, his voice almost unrecognizable. “Tell me to stop this and I will.”

Her heart hammered. Her breaths were gasps. Her fingers dug into the strong, corded muscle of his back. “No,” she replied. “I won’t.”

The sound Cormac made in response was one Lucy had never heard from any man. It was feral, savage need. It was victory and defeat all rolled into one. It made her heart beat against her ribs like the wings of a trapped bird—and then he was lifting her onto her feet and crowding her against the shower glass at her back.

The coolness at her back was no match for the heat of Cormac’s body at her front. His hand cupped between her legs, possessive, needy. He ground the heel of his hand against her bud, and she gasped, head knocking against the glass.

Their eyes met. His were dark, with only the thinnest ring of blue on the edge of his blown-out pupil. He looked like a

conquering hero, demanding his due. She spread her legs to give it to him.

“I’m going to fuck you, Lucy,” he informed her, hand grinding against her jeans. “Is that what you want?”

He sounded almost angry. He sounded like he wanted her to say no, to stop him.

But Lucy was way beyond any of that.

“Yes,” she panted. “Yes. Yes. Please. Now.”

He exhaled in a gust, curling his head into the crook of her neck. His hands trembled as they undid the button of her jeans and tugged the zipper down. When he slipped his palm against her bare skin, she couldn’t hold back a desperate moan.

“My girl is so fucking wet for me,” Cormac said, still in that rasping, savage voice that drove Lucy wild. His fingers slid through her folds and found her opening. His other hand wrapped around the back of her neck and tilted her head back so he could plunder her mouth once more. It was a kiss of teeth and tongues and intensity.

Lucy had utterly lost her mind. She clawed at his shirt until he made an impatient noise and ripped it off. She missed the touch of his hand between her legs, but she loved the sight of all that warm skin on display. Her hands went on an exploratory mission, feeling the rasp of his chest hair, tracing the carved lines of his body.

Cormac was in no mood to be patient, though, because he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her pants and tugged them down as far as he could with one violent yank, which was barely below mid-thigh. Then he picked her up by the waist and deposited her in front of the vanity, shoving the first aid kit aside so he could bend her over the edge of the counter.

Tubes of ointment and rolls of medical tape clattered to the ground. A pair of scissors fell in the toilet. Lucy didn’t care.

Cormac’s hand went between her thighs, pushing inside, and Lucy let out a gasping, “Oh.” Cormac gentled his touch, stroking her hips, her bare ass.

“Sorry,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut. His chest heaved in the mirror. “I’m sorry. I’m being too rough.”

Lucy hadn’t wanted him to stop. Feeling his hands on her—having him position her just like he wanted her—lit up some unknown pleasure center in her brain like a fireworks show. She backed into him, meeting his gaze in the mirror when he opened his eyes.

“Please don’t stop,” she begged, her voice a whisper.

He was all bronze skin and stubble and strength. The light carved shadows below the muscles of his arms and chest. The space between Lucy’s legs thumped with every beat of her heart.

Cormac closed his eyes for a long moment, his fingers digging into her hips. He seemed to want to get himself under control, but what Lucy wanted was the opposite. She wanted the man who yanked her pants down and bit her bottom lip. She wanted to see Cormac when the leash snapped. She wanted all of him—even the parts he kept hidden away.

But when she tried to reach behind her to touch him, he caught her wrist and pinned it to her lower back. Then his other hand reached between her legs to the slickness of her core. He let out a shaky exhale as he rubbed her, teasing her clit before sliding down to her opening. She watched him drop his gaze to the space between her thighs, felt him use both hands to spread her so he could see all of her.

Lucy’s cheeks burned as need built in the pit of her stomach. Bent over the bathroom sink, being spread open by the man of her dreams. The depravity of her position sent arrows of heat racing down her core.

“You are so beautiful,” he said softly. His thumbs traced her skin where her thigh met her sex. It was miles away from where she wanted his touch, but it still drove her wild. She squirmed. His thumbs made another sweep, a fraction of an inch closer to where she was neediest. “So pink and wet and soft for me.”

“Cormac,” she complained. She tried to spread her legs wider, but her pants were still bound around her thighs, and she was trapped exactly as she was.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want you inside me. Now.”

He hummed, thumbs moving slower. When Lucy made an impatient noise and tried to push back into him, Cormac huffed a laugh and swatted her bare ass. She gasped and straightened, and Cormac used the opportunity to band an arm around her stomach to pull her tight to his body. His other hand slid between her legs and went to work.

“Arms around my neck,” he ordered, the gentleness gone from his voice. “Look at yourself in the mirror. I want you to watch what I do to you.”

It didn't take long for Lucy to fly apart. The feel of his bare chest at her back, the hard cock she could feel between her ass cheeks behind the placket of his pants, the strong arm that kept her glued to his body, and the fingers that worked like magic between her legs all conspired together to make Lucy lose her mind in record time.

She knew her fingernails were digging into the back of his neck as her climax hit, but she couldn't loosen her hold. Pleasure spun through her, ripping away the last scraps of her sanity. She hadn't even realized Cormac picked her up until she felt something soft under her back and realized he'd draped her over the comforter on his bed.

The calluses on his palms rasped against her legs as he pulled her pants down and off. The bed dipped as he kneeled next to her, and Lucy turned her head to stare.

He was a beautiful man. Built, lean, and capable. But it was the look in his eyes that really did her in, brimming with heat and need. His touch was gentle as he helped her out of her shirt, the fabric falling to the ground with a soft whisper.

“Your turn,” she said, reaching for his belt buckle.

He beat her to it, shucking his pants and underwear off with an unhurried efficiency. He was magnificent. His broad

shoulders tapered to a narrow waist, with a solid pack of muscles over his stomach and a trail of dark hair leading to the proud cock jutting out below. Utterly masculine. Hers—at least for now.

Lucy let out a sigh of contentment as he draped his body over hers. His skin was warm, its scent intoxicating. He kissed her like it meant something to him, and Lucy spread her knees wider to cradle him between them.

His tongue slid over hers as his hands shaped her body. Sensations assaulted her brain—the contrast between the roughness of his palms and the softness of his touch, his hard, warm body above and the pillowy softness of the bed beneath her, the weight of him pinning her down, the scent of him in the sheets and on his skin, the silk of his hair between her fingertips.

And his cock, hard and hot against the crook of her hip.

“Cormac,” she sighed, and she kissed him again. The wetness between her legs drenched her. She wanted him desperately. Shifting beneath him, she moaned as his shaft pressed against the bundle of nerves where she needed friction most. They moved against each other, Cormac’s muscles going taut above her.

“I could come just from this,” he said in her ear, his breath warming the side of her neck. One of his hands slid down her side and wrapped around her thigh as he drove his body against hers. His cock slid against her core, thick and perfect. “Wouldn’t even need to be inside,” he continued, voice like gravel. “Just like this.”

Lucy whimpered in complaint. She didn’t want him just like that. She wanted him deep inside her. She wanted it all.

Cormac shifted and reached into the bedside table. He kneeled between her spread thighs and ripped open a small foil packet. Lucy watched him sheathe himself through half-lidded eyes. Her pulse thudded in her chest, her fingers, her thighs, her core.

He met her gaze. “Are you sure, Lucy?”

She briefly considered throwing a pillow at his face. Was she sure? *Was she sure?* Lucy had never been more sure of anything in her life. She was *aching* for him. Her body was a string begging to be plucked. He'd given her one climax already, but her sex pounded with every beat of her heart. She wanted him inside her, *now*.

She lifted herself onto her elbows and said through clenched teeth, "If you don't put your cock inside m—"

Cormac drove himself inside, and they both gasped. She fell back onto the bed, arms like noodles, and curled her fingers into the blanket as he paused, buried to the hilt, stretching her body with his intrusion. He dropped his chin to his chest and inhaled deeply, his hands moving to Lucy's waist.

"Fuck," he finally whispered.

"Yeah," Lucy replied on a gust of breath.

She wiggled her hips, already greedy for more. Cormac let out a low, animalistic growl and punched his hips into her again, again, again. She let out a soft *oh* with every thrust, clawing at the blankets, his chest, her pillow, desperate for—she didn't even know what she was desperate for. More. *Oh. Oh. Oh.*

A shuddering breath, and Cormac slowed. "I don't want to hurt you," he said.

Frustration snapped like a rubber band against her skin. Why did he insist on retreating? Why now, when she wanted it all? "I'm not made of glass, Cormac. You're not going to break me."

He met her gaze, hands tightening on her waist—and his control snapped like a dry twig.

Lifting her waist to arch her back, Cormac drove himself inside her deeper than before, setting a steady, punishing rhythm while his thumb found her bud and started circling. Lucy's eyes rolled back.

"You're so beautiful," he said while he stretched her with every punch of his hips. "Look at you. Look at how well you

take me.”

Lucy could only moan in reply. There were sparks going off in her blood. The muscles of her stomach tightened. Her thighs trembled. She’d never felt anything this good in her entire life.

“This is it, baby,” he said when her pleasure approached a new peak. “This is it. Right here. I’m not letting you go.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“I tried to fight it, but I’m not a good man.” He pushed her legs higher and wider, thrusting deeper. “I’m not good enough to let you go. After this, I never will. You’re mine, sweetheart. Mine to protect. Mine to fuck. You understand?”

His eyes were dark, his body hard. Lucy reached her arms toward him, and he lowered himself over her. His kiss was bruising; it was a vow.

“Yes,” she said.

“No going back.”

“You and me,” she said, and he kissed her again.

Lucy flew apart. Her mouth fell open as her back arched, and Cormac urged her higher with the low growl of his voice. When she shuddered around him, he joined her there, shouting her name as he came.

They panted, bodies stuck together, and drifted back down to earth one breath at a time.

SIXTEEN

IT WAS a long time before Cormac's heartbeat returned to normal. He lay in bed with his arm behind Lucy's head, enjoying the soft touch of her fingertips against his chest. Her nails rasped against his skin as she stroked him absentmindedly, the soft flesh of her body pressed against his side.

They were naked, lying on top of the covers, enjoying the silence and safety of the apartment. After the chaos of the last few days—the last few hours—the quietness seemed to pulse around him, alive, waiting.

Lucy's curves molded to his body like they'd been sculpted precisely so they fit against him. Her hair smelled fresh and sweet as he brushed his lips against her forehead in a gentle kiss. Lashes fluttering, she glanced up at him with those big brown eyes of hers.

He touched the curve of her cheek, marveling at the softness of her skin. She had a smattering of very pale freckles spread over the center of her face. He hadn't noticed them before.

“How are you doing?” Cormac asked, his voice rough.

“Not bad,” she replied, smiling. Her hand stilled, palm pressing flat against his chest. He folded his own palm on top of it, then lifted her fingers to his lips. She snuggled closer, and Cormac stopped fighting what he knew to be true.

This was where he wanted Lucy to be. Right here, in his home. In his bed. He wanted her at his side, always.

He hadn't seen it before, in the months and years they'd been acquaintances. He hadn't been interested in having another soul under his protection.

But Lucy wasn't just anyone. She was a woman who had rebuilt her life with grit and determination. She was talented and hard-working. She was stubborn, thoughtful. She bought him donuts. She saw him, and she wasn't afraid.

He stroked her cheek and kissed her forehead again. He couldn't stop touching her.

“Can I ask you something?” she said, shifting so she could meet his gaze again.

“Sure.”

“When my mom talked about the police being useless about Phillips when he let the air out of my tires, you made a noise like you agreed with her. What was going through your mind?”

Cormac's chest rose and fell with his sigh. Yeah, she saw him, all right. Maybe a little too clearly.

“You don't have to talk about it,” Lucy added.

“No, it's okay,” he said. Rolling onto his side, Cormac stroked Lucy's cheek and let his fingers drift down her shoulder and along her side. He followed the movement of his hand with his gaze, committing the sight of her nude body to memory. She was so beautiful he almost couldn't believe it.

And she'd asked him a question.

Dredging up the past always hurt, so Cormac did it as infrequently as possible. He drew comfort from the warmth of her skin and the soft stroke of her hand against his chest, his shoulder. Her fingernails moved up his neck and massaged his

scalp, pulling a groan from his lips. His wound was against the pillow, so Lucy could run her fingers over the other side of his head without hurting him. Every stroke of her fingernails felt like it tore away a layer of calcification around his heart. Her touch made it easier to speak.

“I was eleven,” he finally managed to say. Gulping past the lump in his throat, Cormac forced the words to keep coming. “It was nighttime. I’m not sure what time, around eleven or midnight. Everyone was asleep—my mom, my sister. At that point, my dad was already gone. He’d taken off when I was seven. Put his hand on my shoulder and told me to take care of the girls. Said I was the man of the house.”

“At seven years old?”

Cormac hummed. “Yeah. That was the last time any of us saw him. Last I heard, he’d moved to Oregon, gotten married, and moved on.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Cormac said, and it was. He’d been angry at his father for a long time, but there had been more important things to worry about in his life. His parents hadn’t been married, and his mother had never had enough money to hire a lawyer to get any kind of child support. His dad had been free to leave her with two young kids to restart somewhere else. “That night, I heard a noise downstairs.”

He paused as Lucy increased the pressure on his scalp, groaning at the feel of her fingernails running through his hair.

“What happened?” Lucy asked, voice quiet.

“Two guys had broken in to rob us,” he said matter-of-factly. “I caught them trying to haul our TV out through the front door. They tried to tell me to be quiet, that if I said nothing, no one would get hurt. I made a noise. I know I did. Because suddenly my mom was there. And then—”

Cormac stopped speaking, because his throat had constricted and made it impossible to continue. He tried to clear the blockage in his throat once, twice, and finally felt like he could speak again. His voice was raspy as he continued.

“And then one of the guys hit her. The other one clocked me in the temple and I was too dazed to fight back. They took our TV, threatened her with a knife, and stole all the money she’d saved for who knows how long. When my head stopped spinning I tried to stop them, and that’s when I got this.”

He lifted his head and gestured to the scar on his temple, just a couple of inches from the fresh split in his hair.

“Oh, Cormac,” Lucy said. Her brows were drawn, her eyes full of pain for him.

He smiled bitterly. “Nicked me with the knife, and you know how head wounds are.”

“They bleed a lot,” she answered, wry.

He huffed out a laugh and let his hand run up and down her arm, drawing comfort from her warmth, her softness, her presence. “I failed. I should have stopped them. I was supposed to protect her, and I know I was a kid, but I could have done *something*...”

He’d started staring off into the middle distance, remembering the icy feeling in his gut when he’d spotted the two guys carrying the TV. He could still feel the tightness in his chest, the tingling in his limbs at the sight of his mother sprawled on the ground. Closing his eyes, Cormac tried to fight off the dizziness that always accompanied those memories. It was like it had happened a minute ago, and he was dazed and useless all over again.

Lucy shifted, but Cormac was still fighting the memories off. She brought her face closer and pressed a soft kiss to one eyelid, then the other, then moved to kiss his cheeks, his nose, his lips.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she told him, solemn.

He opened his eyes and found his vision blurry. Blinking the moisture away, he shook his head. “I know that. But I’ve always felt like I could have done something more... I don’t know... Maybe...”

“Cormac.” She put her hand on his cheek, stroking softly with her thumb. “Look at me.”

He did, part of him wanting to take all this comfort and care she offered, the rest of him regretting ever letting her in.

But it was too late for that. She was in, and he wasn't going to let her go.

"It wasn't your fault," she repeated. "Whatever thoughts go through your brain—all the guilt and fear and anger—those are just thoughts. They're not the truth. The truth is that you survived a home invasion and witnessed something really traumatic as a child. You took on responsibility that wasn't yours to take on. You did everything you could."

"If I'd just kept my mouth shut, she wouldn't have come downstairs. She wouldn't have gotten hurt."

"Having met your mother, I'm pretty sure she doesn't blame you for what happened," Lucy said. She grinned. "I'm pretty sure she thinks you're the best son she could ever ask for, even when she's mad at you for installing alarms she doesn't want."

Cormac let out a sigh.

"Your thoughts aren't necessarily true, Cormac." Lucy kissed his temple, smiling softly. "It's your choice to believe them or not. And don't you think that twenty-five years later, it might be time to change what you believe?"

His chest ached. Another breath slipped through his lips, and he tried to smile back. "Maybe."

"So what happened after? The police didn't help?"

Cormac snorted. "West Oaks wasn't always full of McMansions, you know. The neighborhood was rough when I was a kid. The police stopped by, made a report, and nothing ever happened. They said exactly what Rick told us yesterday. They'd investigate and let us know. Those guys got away with it."

"Is that why you went into the private security business?"

Wrapped around a beautiful naked woman, Cormac felt the tightness in his chest ease. "Yes," he answered. "Very perceptive of you."

“Well, I’m an introvert. I notice things.”

“How could you be an introvert when you were in sales, and when you killed it at the Wedding Expo?”

“I’m an introvert who fakes it as an extrovert and then needs days and days of alone time to recover.”

“Is that your subtle way of telling me my company is wearing you down?” Cormac asked the question lightly, but he found that he cared very much about her answer.

Her smile was pure sunlight. “Funnily enough,” she said, “your company doesn’t seem to drain me at all. It’s almost as good as being on my own. Maybe even better.”

Cormac laughed and pulled her closer. She tucked her head under Cormac’s chin and wrapped her arms around him, slotting one of her legs between his. She was all softness and warm skin, silky hair and drugging touches. He’d never been this comfortable in his life.

After a pause, Lucy spoke. “I don’t think I would have made it long in sales. I think my downfall was inevitable. The job was grinding me down, and that’s why I cracked. It was always going to happen. It might happen again.”

“The Juniper and Sage pitch?”

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his chest.

“You won’t crack,” he told her. “You’re stronger than you were before.”

“How do you know that?”

“Now you’ve got me.”

She tilted her head up to meet his gaze, gifting him with another blinding, beautiful smile. “Now I’ve got you,” she repeated softly.

Not long after, they made their way to the kitchen. Cormac fed her as she sat on a barstool wearing one of his T-shirts. He kept his hand on her thigh as they ate, feeling more peace after a day of chaos and fighting than he’d felt in the two decades that had come before.

SEVENTEEN

MONDAY MORNING BROUGHT delicious eggs and bacon, courtesy of Cormac, and a very nervous phone call to Belinda from Juniper and Sage. While Cormac cleaned the kitchen, Lucy sat on the bed in the guest room and let Princess Snowball plop herself on top of her legs.

Then she made the call.

It lasted all of three minutes. Belinda answered, seemed happy to hear from her, and set the meeting for the end of the week.

“The corporate team is thrilled to hear your pitch, but they’re only available on Thursday. Our company retreat breaks up on Friday, and after that, it’ll be at least two months before we can get everyone together, and if we want to get some designs in production before the end of the year, we need to get moving now,” Belinda told her, clearly used to getting things done. “They’re very impressed with the samples I’ve shown them. We’d like you to bring your portfolio of previous work as well as one to two new examples of greeting card designs you could create for us.”

“Sure,” Lucy squeaked. “No problem.”

They said their goodbyes and hung up, and Lucy tossed the phone aside. While she reclined against the bed's headboard, the cat deigned to walk up her legs and sit on Lucy's stomach, letting out a rumbling purr. She kneaded Lucy's abdomen for a few minutes as Lucy scratched her behind the ears, then jumped off the bed and pranced away, her tail sticking high up in the air.

"How'd it go?" Cormac asked from the doorway. He leaned on the jamb as he watched Lucy, who was sprawled on top of the blankets.

"Good. They want me to come up with two new designs by Thursday."

"Is that doable? Two new designs in less than a week?"

"Sure. As long as there's not a psychotic Stationery Man skulking around trying to kill me. That might cramp my style."

Cormac grimaced. "Speaking of which, the police want to talk to us about what happened yesterday."

Lucy sat up. "Are we in trouble?"

"Only one way to find out."

THE POLICE STATION was just off the main square in Stirling, one block away from the Stirling clock tower. The building was brown brick, with a decently sized parking lot. The town council offices were part of the building, with the police station occupying about half of the total space. The inside of the building was old and worn, but not dirty.

Beyond the welcome desk, where a young officer had waved them through with a nod to Cormac, was a larger room with half a dozen desks and computers. The police chief's office was in the far right corner, separated from the main room with a glass wall covered with metal blinds. Along the left side of the room were interview rooms, and the back of the building was where the holding cells were located.

Lucy had half-expected to be tossed into a cell as soon as they stepped through the doors—but she'd underestimated Cormac.

He knew all the officers by name, nodding and greeting them as he walked in. He shook hands with a tall mustachioed gentleman who introduced himself as Detective Rick Holden, but Cormac called him Ricky.

“Congrats on the promotion,” Cormac said, nodding to the man’s gold badge. “You made detective.”

“Just in time for you to drop this mess on my desk,” Ricky replied, grim. “If I’d known, I would have convinced Jim to delay his retirement another year.” The lanky man had a thick head of salt-and-pepper hair, wore slacks and a button-down that were a bit too big for him, and had an air of no-nonsense competence about him.

Lucy was immediately intimidated.

As it turned out, they were in a bit of trouble. As they sat next to Ricky’s desk, the three of them stared at his screen as Cormac’s dash-cam footage played. Two more officers drifted over to watch; a bout of fisticuffs featuring Cormac McKenna and two unknown assailants was the most interesting thing to happen in Stirling all day. Maybe all year.

On the grainy footage, Cormac hammered a blow into Meaty’s gut. Ricky leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. One hand moved up to smooth down the sides of his mustache as he watched the footage play.

The worst part of it was the narration.

“Oh! Gus! Go help him! It’s two against one!”

“Whaddya want me to do about it? Oh—”

“That’s my boy,” Vicky crowed. *“Hit him hard, honey! Hit him where it hurts!”*

“Kick him in the balls!” Ruby yelled.

“Bastard!” Vicky shrieked as Meaty’s hit split the side of Cormac’s head open.

There was a silence as Cormac flipped the second man onto the pavement.

“Gosh, that boy packs some power, doesn’t he?” Lucy’s father said quietly, clearly impressed. *“Look at the way the other guy landed.”*

Lucy’s mother moaned. *“Do you really think he’s the right man for our little girl?”*

“You saw the way he looks at her, Dolly.”

“I know, but still...”

Lucy slapped her hands over her face and watched the screen through her fingers. Her parents were discussing her dating prospects instead of panicking about the two men who had decided to attack them in broad daylight.

“Well, he’ll fight off anyone who tries to hurt her. All that blood on his face doesn’t seem to even bother him.”

“But he’s so...”

Vicky’s voice cut in. *“Watch your next words, Dolly. I like you, but I won’t have anyone saying anything bad about my son.”*

“He’s a lovely boy,” Dolly answered, placating, then everyone on the recording gasped as Cormac dislocated Meaty’s shoulder. Lucy winced as she watched the screen, remembering the noise that Meaty’s shoulder had made. Remembering his shriek.

The crowd around the computer had grown, and all the assembled officers hooted. One of them slapped Cormac on the shoulder. *“You’re a lovely boy,”* the officer said, and everyone laughed.

Cormac just watched on, grim-faced. He knew what was coming.

Vicky appeared in the frame. The woman was in her early sixties, and she had obviously remained in shape. She sprinted across the street and dove into the car. On the recording, Lucy stumbled back from the hood as the driver’s door slammed.

“What’s she doing?” one of the officers asked, leaning forward. She was a sharp-boned woman with a very tight bun at the nape of her neck, and she watched the screen intently.

Another officer ducked around her shoulder to get a closer look.

Lucy glanced at Cormac, who met her gaze with pinched lips.

“*Mom!*” A door slammed and Ruby appeared on the screen, obscuring part of the frame. Behind her, the car crashed into the plate-glass window of the Stirling Stationery Store’s frontage as Lucy stumbled back, staring in shock.

Behind her, the two men sat and stood bleeding and injured, gaping. Ricky leaned forward and paused the recording, frowning.

He glanced back at the female officer and pointed to Lanky on the screen. “You seeing what I’m seeing?”

The woman’s lips were pinched. “Paul Wendell. Didn’t take him long to get back into trouble.”

“And where Paul is, Pete isn’t far behind,” Rick said, gesturing to Meaty.

“Who are they?” Lucy asked. “You know them?”

“Paul just got out of prison,” Detective Holden answered, grim. “Arson. Burned down his grandfather’s house, and wasn’t subtle about it.”

“Firebug,” the female officer added. “Both brothers have been in the system since they were teens. Both done time. They have no real allegiance to anyone, but they get wrapped up in different criminal schemes every year or two.”

Lucy glanced at Cormac, who nodded. She’d told him she recognized Lanky’s face, and now it was time to tell the police. “I saw the tall one, Paul, on the day of the Wedding Expo. He’s the guy who kneeled in front of my car before it exploded.”

The detective let out a long sigh but didn’t look surprised. He pressed a button, and the dash-cam footage resumed.

On the screen, Ruby ran forward and gave a clear view of Cormac helping his mother out of the front seat as he ushered everyone back to the car. She’d blocked the screen at the

moment of impact, so it was impossible to see what Vicky had been doing. Where she'd been aiming.

Cormac advanced toward his SUV. The camera caught the look in his eyes as they approached his vehicle. He looked a hair's breadth away from snapping. Lucy stared into his eyes as Ricky paused the footage, remembering all that had happened after.

She'd helped him shed all that energy, that adrenaline, that fury. She'd accepted him as he was, and it had been one of the most powerful moments of her life. Last night had altered her. This thing growing between them, it had been born from the chaos of the last few days, but it felt real. In her heart, Lucy knew that Cormac was the man for her.

"Hmm," the detective said, rewinding the footage to the point where Vicky appeared on the screen. "What happened here?"

"My mother tried to move their vehicle out of the way so we could drive off," Cormac lied with a completely straight face.

Rick had clearly been in the business for a while, because he didn't react except for a subtle arch of his brow. "Did she, now."

He played the recording again, and the store's windows came crashing down.

"Some would look at that recording and say that your mother deliberately crashed into the front of that store," Ricky mused.

Cormac shrugged. "She was overwrought and lost control of the car."

"Now, I've met your mother," Ricky said, narrowing his eyes at Cormac. "That woman doesn't do 'overwrought.'"

Cormac met his gaze and said nothing.

They stared at each other like two poker players who had just gone all-in. Cormac didn't even twitch.

In her hard metal chair, Lucy fought the urge to squirm. The tension between the two men continued to rise as their gazes bored into each other, and Lucy's heartbeat began to rattle.

This pressure wasn't even directed at her, and she was going to snap. She couldn't handle this. She didn't want to be here. Didn't want to answer any questions. She just wanted to design wedding invitations in the comfort of her home, make a decent living, and maybe have sex with Cormac every day for the next hundred years.

But when Ricky swung his gaze to her, she knew it was her time to be questioned. He was going to crack her open like a walnut, and she'd tell him that Vicky hadn't been trying to move the car at all. She'd intentionally smashed the store to smithereens, because she was a badass lady who didn't tolerate people attacking her son.

The pressure bore down on her. The detective's gaze was incisive, reading her weakness. She couldn't do it. She couldn't hold back. She had to tell him the truth. Tell him something. Get him off her back.

Ricky opened his mouth. "Is—"

"There's a secret room," Lucy blurted.

Ricky's mouth snapped shut. He leaned back, frowning. "What?"

"There's a window at the back of the building that doesn't match up with the inside. But there's no visible door on the inside of the store, so it's not a normal storage room."

Barely—just barely—did Lucy stop herself from adding, "That's where they build the explosives," because that would be a ridiculous statement based on nothing but the conjecture of her and Cormac's batty parents. Even though it might be true.

Cormac came to her rescue by tapping on his phone and emailing something through to the detective's computer. "The original blueprints for the building," he said. "There are four and a half feet that aren't accounted for in the dimensions of

the shop. We cross-referenced them against the permit applications sent in to the town council.”

Lucy arched her brows, impressed. Cormac and his men were good. He pointed to the area on the screen that denoted the back of the building.

Ricky grunted and stood. He strapped his shoulder harness on with practiced ease, black gun resting against his ribs, then covered it with his suit jacket. “Wyatt. Chrissie. With me.” Glancing at Cormac and Lucy, he lifted his finger to point at them. “You wait here.”

“I gave you the video,” Cormac noted.

“That was your civic duty, McKenna.”

Cormac clenched his jaw. “I want to know what’s in that room.”

“You’re civilians. We need to do this by the book.”

“Aaron Phillips tried to attack Lucy at her apartment yesterday morning. Then as soon as we showed up at his shop, two men attacked us again. I want to know why.”

“And you will. As soon as we investigate. We’ll find Phillips, bring him in, and let you know. Thank you for coming in.”

“You haven’t gotten a whiff of the man, and we’ve been attacked twice. We let you go check his place out, and while you’re doing that, Phillips comes after us; what happens then?” Cormac asked through clenched teeth. His anger was plainly written on his face. “I’m just trying to protect my girl.”

Totally, *totally* the wrong time to swoon about Cormac calling Lucy his girl. She knew that. But she couldn’t help it.

The detective was grim. He studied Cormac, then swung his gaze to Lucy. Finally, he let out a sigh. “You can come, but you don’t touch anything. Not a single thing. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Cormac said, and he led Lucy back out to his SUV while the officers headed for their cruisers. That’s how, twenty-four hours after their last visit, Lucy and Cormac ended up right back in front of the Stirling Stationery Store.

Except this time, they were going in.

EIGHTEEN

THE FRONT WINDOW hadn't been fixed, with only some black garbage bags duct-taped to the opening. The wood-paneled Crown Vic was gone. Lucy stared at the building from their parking spot across the street, her stomach sloshing uncomfortably. The police had circled the building and seen the plywood-covered window, and now they were back out front.

"I can drop you off at home," Cormac told her. "You can work on your pitch. I'll handle this."

"No," Lucy said. "This is my mess. I want to know why Phillips hates me so much. I want to fix this."

Cormac slid his hand over her neck, tugged her close, and kissed her. When they separated, he leaned his forehead against hers. "Stay close to me," he said quietly. "Don't wander off on your own."

"I won't."

"Good."

"Is it okay that we're here?" Lucy asked. "Shouldn't we let these guys do their jobs?" She waved a hand at the two

officers and the detective surveying the building with practiced efficiency.

“There are a grand total of seven officers on Stirling’s police force, Lucy,” Cormac said. “Not all of them are on duty. Ricky knows that after yesterday, if we’re not here, he’s got to assign at least two officers to stick to us. He doesn’t have enough people to do that, but he needs to keep us safe.”

“That was sneaky of you to point out. And a little manipulative.”

Cormac grinned. “Are you impressed?”

“Yes,” she said, because her chest was glowing with warmth even though tension still thrummed through her.

Cormac chuckled and kissed her again, just a quick, soft brush on the lips.

They stepped out and watched the officers tear the plastic bags off the window frame. Detective Ricky knocked some shards of glass out and stepped over them, followed by the two officers in uniform. They cleared the main room, then inspected the bathroom and came out to look at the back wall of the shop.

Cormac stepped into the room, and Lucy followed.

Ricky scowled at them. “You were supposed to stay in the car, McKenna.”

Cormac blinked. “Oops.”

The detective sighed and turned around and got back to work trying to find an entrance to the secret room. If there was a secret room, and the window hadn’t simply been covered up with drywall.

Lucy glanced around the store. She’d been in here a few years ago, but she was seeing it with fresh eyes. Aaron Phillips sold a lot more than just wedding stationery. He had craft supplies and writing implements, journals and diaries. There was a price list for printing costs as well, with only one section of the side wall dedicated to wedding stationery.

“I’m not competing with any of this stuff,” Lucy said, her annoyance rising. “We could have coexisted without any issues at all. Why was he so threatened by me?”

“Holden,” Officer Chrissie called out, jerking her head. On the back wall, next to where the powder room was, was a very faint, almost imperceptible joint.

The detective hummed, and the three of them went to work trying to get the thing open. Cormac was busy watching the police try to figure out the secret room as Lucy drifted closer to the wedding display. Phillips’s work was good, but it leaned more traditional than hers did. As she inspected his samples, her frustration grew.

Why had this man terrorized her? They offered completely different services! He’d gotten a bee in his bonnet about Lucy, and there was no need for them to be enemies at all. They served completely different segments of the market. Her customers wanted a contemporary, modern feel. His obviously favored tradition. They could have coexisted easily. They even could have collaborated!

If this was about business, Lucy didn’t understand what was going on at all.

She picked up one of the invitations displayed on a clear plastic stand, studying the floral design, the swooping gold lettering. It was beautiful, but it looked nothing like her work. Maybe he’d been intimidated? He hadn’t wanted to evolve? But plenty of people loved tradition! There was no need for them to be enemies at all.

Huffing to herself, Lucy went to replace the invitation—and saw a small silver rivet. She frowned.

“I think we can pry it open,” the male officer said to her right. “Cormac—give us a hand?”

“Sure,” Cormac said, his boots crunching on broken glass as he crossed the space.

The little button was strange. It almost looked like one of the screws holding the shelf up, but it was slightly bigger and didn’t have the cross shape where the screwdriver would fit in.

“On three,” the officer said. “One, two, thr—”

Lucy pressed the rivet and discovered it was a button. Echoing screams and a crash made her jump, and she saw two sets of legs sticking out from an opening in the back wall, with Detective Rick and Officer Chrissie looking on, unimpressed. Cormac had landed on top of the male officer, who was groaning in pain. Cormac scanned the room and glanced back at Ricky. “Clear.”

“Well, at least it worked,” Ricky noted, frowning.

Lucy cleared her throat. “Uh... I think...” Her voice faded to nothing as the detective skewered her with a look. She pointed out the button, which made Ricky arch his brows. He pressed it and watched the latch on the side of the opening flip up, which had allowed the door to swing open.

“Huh,” he said, and he nodded to Lucy. “Good work.” The detective spun on his heels and strode for the opening, disappearing inside. “Wyatt, keep watch,” Ricky ordered from inside, and the third officer stepped outside and took up a post outside the store.

Lucy watched him, then turned back to the secret room. Only hesitating a moment, Lucy went in. She held her breath as she stepped into the darkness, then blinked when someone hit a light switch.

It was a tiny room, long and narrow, with a desk shoved against the left wall. On the right, a row of filing cabinets filled the space. A bare lightbulb lit them from above, but there was also a task lamp tipped over on the desk. A few drawers in the filing cabinets were half-open, as if someone had cleared them out and left in a hurry. The walls were covered in old, yellowing wallpaper with a brown-and-orange 70s design. The floor was bare plywood. It was dusty and dank and awful. Directly across from her, a plank of plywood was secured to the wall with screws all around its perimeter. The window.

The police officers had slipped on latex gloves. Ricky pointed to Cormac and Lucy, then pointed to the door. “Stand there and don’t touch anything.”

Cormac looked like he was chewing glass. His jaw worked as he scowled, but he did as he was told. He put his hand around Lucy's shoulders. Immediately, the tightness in her muscles unwound. She leaned into Cormac's bulk and inhaled the scent of his skin, watching the police work.

"No explosives," Cormac noted quietly.

Lucy huffed in agreement. "But it doesn't look like paper storage."

"No," he said, glancing from one end of the room to the other. "It looks like a workspace."

"Pretty depressing one."

"Nothing," the female officer, Chrissie, said, closing the last drawer in the filing cabinets. "They're all empty."

"The desk too," the detective said, kneeling to get a look at the underside. He moved to the plywood-covered window and traced the edge with his fingers, finding nothing. With pinched lips, he surveyed the scene. "It doesn't smell right," he said, "but there's nothing here. Someone's cleared it."

Lucy took in the room, and she had to agree with Ricky. Something was off. This wasn't a space where good things happened.

Cormac glanced out toward the front of the building, noting that Wyatt was still in place. Then he drifted toward the desk and started looking. Cormac was not a man who did well standing still while he watched others work. Lucy saw the moment Ricky opened his mouth to order him back, and she also saw the other man come to the same conclusion as she had. The detective sighed, gave Cormac a pair of gloves, looked at Lucy, scowled, and gave her a pair too, then moved to the filing cabinets to ask Chrissie to help him move them away from the wall so they could look behind.

Lucy snapped the gloves on, part of her feeling silly, the other part brimming with excitement. Then moved to help Cormac with the desk. They hefted the desk away from the wall as the broken lamp slipped on its surface, then set the desk down and glanced behind it.

“What’s that?” Lucy asked, pointing to an item that had been pinned between the desk and the wall. The desk had a back panel made of wood that had warped, so it had bulged against the wall and trapped a flimsy piece of paper against the wall. When they moved it, the paper slipped to the ground.

Cormac reached down, but his arms were too big. He straightened and nodded for Lucy to try. She climbed over the desk and shoved her arm down between the back panel and the wall, wiggling her fingers, smooshing her face against the desk to get maximum length...

Coming up for air, she ducked under the desk and saw the corner of the paper wedged between the baseboard and the back panel of the desk. She used the tip of her glove-clad finger to slide the paper through the tiny gap. Triumphant, she pulled it up to show the three other people crowded around her.

A hundred-dollar bill. She held it between her hands, shoulders dropping. That was it?

Ricky frowned, taking the bill from her. He turned it over so they could see the back, and everyone stilled.

The back of the bill was completely blank.

It took Lucy a second to work out the implications, but she got there a second before Cormac confirmed her suspicion: “Phillips isn’t in the wedding stationery business. He’s in the counterfeiting business.”

The detective sighed, turning the bill over to see the printed side once more. “And he’s not particularly good at what he does. This looks like Monopoly money.”

“Maybe it was a trial,” Lucy said in the grim silence that followed. “A prototype.”

The detective stared at her, lips rolling inward beneath his mustache. His eyes narrowed. “We have a bomb-building arsonist, a counterfeit money business, and a woman who sells wedding invitations. I’m not seeing the connection. Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Lucy was suddenly outraged. “No! I have no idea why they’re after me. All I do is design and sell wedding stationery.”

The detective studied her for a moment, then nodded. Officer Chrissie offered him a clear evidence bag, and he slid the one-sided bill inside.

Suddenly, the space was too cramped. Lucy sidestepped out of the hidden room and leaned against the counter that held the cash register, taking a deep, gulping breath. Cormac appeared at her side, his hand running down her spine. She leaned into him—until his touch stilled.

He tugged a small notebook closer, frowning at the scrawled writing. Then he reached into his back pocket, opened his wallet, and pulled out the name card that Lucy had found pinned to her windshield the day of Camilla’s wedding.

The handwriting matched. Lucy shivered. Aaron Phillips had been at Camilla’s wedding venue that night, close enough to deliver this threat, but no one had seen him. When she glanced at Cormac, his face was set in deep, grim lines. He tucked the name card back into his wallet.

“Come on,” he said quietly. “Let’s get some fresh air.” As Cormac led her out of the shop and into the sunshine outside, Lucy rubbed her hands over her arms, but she still felt cold.

NINETEEN

THE COPS WENT and did cop things while Lucy and Cormac went back to his place. They were silent, Lucy staring out the passenger window as she tried to come to terms with what they'd discovered. She was shaken. Her heart was still thumping a bit too hard, her lungs constricting a bit too much. Her hands trembled, so she clenched them into fists and relished the bite of her nails against her palm.

Once they were upstairs behind locked and alarmed doors, Lucy looked at Cormac. "What now?"

"Elton and I work on surveillance footage. I want to find out where Phillips is hiding. Once we find him, we'll get answers."

"And until then?"

"Work on your pitch," Cormac replied quietly, lifting his hand to brush his fingers over her cheek. "We'll stay here today, keep our heads down."

Work was the furthest thing from Lucy's mind, but sitting in front of her computer and getting lost in new designs might help. If she was going to present in front of the Juniper and Sage board, she needed to get her pitch deck created, her new designs completed, and her presentation rehearsed.

All while trying to not get herself killed.

Easy.

Snorting at the thought, she grabbed her laptop and sat at the dining room table. Cormac took his own laptop and sat on the couch, and the two of them spent the afternoon in companionable silence. When the light faded, Cormac put his laptop aside and moved to the kitchen.

The smell of Cormac's cooking drew her away from her work. She closed the laptop lid on the design she'd been working on, happy to have made some progress despite her roiling emotions. Work had helped. It was familiar, and it had kept the panic at bay for a few hours. She drifted to the kitchen, where she found him pulling a ridiculously thick cut of steak out of the oven.

"Steak's got to rest for ten minutes," he told her, glancing up, "but it's nearly ready."

"I think you might be a figment of my imagination," she replied as he turned back toward the oven and checked on the potatoes that were boiling on the back burner.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Why's that?"

"This smells too good to be real. Men who look like you don't also know how to cook and keep a clean house."

His grin was quick, but she saw it. As she slid onto her usual barstool on the other side of the kitchen island, she watched him move with ease in the kitchen, tasting, seasoning, and preparing side dishes as he went. It was very sexy to watch. Utter competence—that's what radiated off him.

Which reminded Lucy—

"Hey, I wanted to ask you something."

"Yeah?" He grabbed a bunch of fresh broccolini from the fridge and started chopping it, using the knife like he'd worked in a kitchen for decades.

"You think you could teach me to fight?"

The knife paused. Cormac looked up. "What?"

“I mean, like, you know... Self-defense.”

He resumed preparing the vegetable, a slight frown between his eyes. “Sure.” He stopped again and met her gaze. “Are you afraid? You don’t have anything to worry about, Lucy. I’ll keep you safe.”

Pinching her lips, Lucy tried to find the right words to explain what was in her heart. She trusted him implicitly with her safety, but there was something else...

“I want to feel capable,” she finally said. “For the past few years, I’ve always felt like I’m trying to catch up, or I’m an impostor, or I’m one big disaster away from crumbling again. I think learning some self-defense skills might...help.”

It sounded lame. Lucy cringed, but Cormac resumed his work on dinner and nodded. “Okay,” he finally said. “We can start tomorrow.”

AND THEY DID. The next morning, Lucy regretted her request when Cormac jumped out of bed at six o’clock and told her to get dressed.

She groaned. It was only the second night they were sleeping in the same bed, but she’d gotten used to waking up with the warmth of his body wrapped around hers. Now he was ripping the blankets off and opening the blinds, proving he had a sadistic streak.

“I take it back,” she complained. “I don’t want to learn to fight. I’d rather sleep.”

“Too late.” He leaned over her and planted a hard kiss on her forehead. “I’ll start the coffee.”

Lucy shuffled across the apartment to the guest room where she’d dropped her suitcase, got dressed in some comfy workout clothes, then downed a mug of coffee and a slice of toast. When they were done, Cormac led her to a door she hadn’t investigated yet across from the guest room.

It was a home gym. A rack of dumbbells lined the back wall, with a bench neatly tucked in against the side. Cormac pulled some mats out to the big open space and stepped onto them, barefoot. He nodded at Lucy to join him.

The mat was cool beneath her bare feet, its blue plasticky covering creaking slightly as she stepped to the center where Cormac stood. He watched her approach, assessing.

The top of her head reached his shoulder. His biceps were bigger than her thighs. There was no way she'd ever be able to defend herself against a man like him. This was a stupid idea.

"First rule," Cormac said. "If you can run away from a threat, you run."

Lucy frowned. "You didn't run from those two guys who attacked us outside Phillips's stationery store."

"I had five people to protect who were more vulnerable than I was," he answered matter-of-factly. "In that situation, running wasn't an option. But if you find yourself in a situation where you feel threatened, you get out of there."

Lucy nodded. "Okay."

"Ready position," Cormac said, bending his knees slightly. He held his arms up, palms facing Lucy.

She frowned, expecting him to curl his hands into fists. But he kept his palms up and nodded when she copied him. Then he circled around her body, adjusting her stance with a few slight touches. He widened her feet and told her to soften her knees.

"You get in this position, it might be enough for someone to change their mind. People who go after small women are cowards, and they don't expect you to fight back."

Lucy nodded. "Okay. And if they come at me, I punch them?"

Cormac shook his head. He wrapped his fingers around Lucy's wrist and brushed his thumb over the base of her palm. He was warm and broad, his fingers encapsulating her much smaller hand completely. The calluses on his palm rubbed against her skin, rough and warm. Calluses that had pushed her thighs wide last night while Cormac spent some time with his head between her legs.

She blinked, focusing.

“Use this part of your hand, and aim for the nose. Most of the power will come from the rotation of your hips.” He moved his hands to her hips, and warmth curled in Lucy’s abdomen.

She gulped. “Okay.”

“Like this.” Cormac stood beside her and demonstrated. He twisted his hips and extended his hand at the same time in an explosive movement.

Lucy mirrored him.

“The power comes from your hips,” he reminded her, moving behind her. His body dwarfed hers as he placed his feet behind her heels, his hands coming to rest on her hips. They twisted together as Lucy extended her arm, trying to mimic that explosive power Cormac had demonstrated.

“Good,” he said, hands lingering on her hips. Her top had ridden up a little, and Cormac’s fingertips brushed the bare skin of her stomach. Lucy tried to ignore it, tried to focus on the movement she was attempting to learn, but all it took was the slightest touch of his fingers to send her mind into a tailspin.

“Now,” Cormac said, wrapping his arm around Lucy’s chest. “What happens if your attacker has you in a hold like this?”

“Um,” Lucy replied. She blinked rapidly, trying to focus on the task at hand. The mat beneath her feet felt warm from the heat of their bodies, and she’d already begun to sweat. Cormac’s arm was made of steel as it clamped across her chest.

She struggled, trying to get out of his hold. She twisted, but he twisted with her. She clawed at his hand, and he tightened his hold. She tried to wriggle away, but she didn’t make it an inch.

The heat in her core ceded to frustration. She wasn’t turned on now. She just wanted to get away, to prove that she could do it. How—

“Two things you can do,” he said. “Stomp on my foot, right on the arch, and elbow my solar plexus. The foot will distract your opponent and it might make him loosen his hold. The solar plexus will cause an immediate contraction of his muscles and make it almost impossible to breathe for a second. And a second is all you need. Then you remember rule number one, and you run.”

Lucy listened, nodding.

“Try it.”

She didn’t move. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He tightened the arm around her chest. His voice was low, lips near her ear. “Lucy. Try it. You won’t hurt me.”

Huffing, Lucy braced herself. She lifted her leg and, as hard as she could, stomped—

The mat right beside Cormac’s foot. She’d missed him.

“Lucy,” he cajoled. “Stomp on my foot, baby.”

A noise she’d never made before—some kind of animalistic growl—escaped her lips. This time, she stomped on Cormac’s foot without hesitation. He grunted, and she took the opportunity to jab her elbow backward.

Cormac let out a gust of air and immediately loosened his hold. He gasped, going to one knee, and Lucy whirled. His face was red, and he clutched his chest as he struggled to take a breath.

She lunged for him. “Oh my God, Cormac, I’m so sor—” A yelp escaped her as Cormac grabbed her ankles and took the legs out from under her. Suddenly, he was on top of her, pinning both her arms and legs. She struggled against his hold and made that growling noise again.

“What was rule number one, Lucy?” Cormac asked, infuriating in his smugness.

“I’m not going to run away from *you*,” she shot back, still trying to yank her arms back. “I was worried I’d actually hurt you.” She aimed to knee him in the groin, but he saw her

coming a mile away and used the weight of his leg to pin hers down a little harder.

“You did hurt me,” he said, that stupid smug grin still on his lips. He didn’t look very hurt. “It was very good for a first time.”

Lucy glared. Cormac laughed.

A retort was on the tip of her tongue, but she lost it when Cormac kissed her. His hold on her loosened and her arms came around him, and then they were tearing at each other’s clothes.

When they were naked, Cormac whirled them around so he was on his back, Lucy straddled on top. Heat bloomed low in her stomach, but her anger hadn’t quite abated. His cock was notched against her, hard and hot against her wetness.

“I could punch you in the solar plexus right now,” she informed him.

His lips curled. “Try it, sweetheart.”

Just because he was so smug, she did. He caught her wrist, flipped her onto her back, and entered her. They gasped in unison. The tension that had built over their lesson crested and broke within her, urged on with every rough thrust of Cormac’s hips. It was a storm of emotions, something deep and wild and free. Lucy had never made love like this before. She’d never given and taken so completely, without reservation. It didn’t take long for them to lie panting, sated, and sticky on the mats as they caught their breath.

Her body twitched and pulsed all over, the space between her legs deliciously sore.

“I need a shower,” Lucy noted, not wanting to move.

Cormac hummed in agreement. They peeled themselves off the mats and headed for the shower, and later, before Cormac left to go to work, he pressed a soft kiss to Lucy’s lips.

“Same time tomorrow?” he asked.

She’d regret this in the morning when he opened the blinds and let sunlight assault her eyes, but Lucy was still suffering

from post-orgasmic stupidity. “Yes, please.”

BY THE END of the day, Cormac was frustrated to find out the police had made no headway in locating Aaron Phillips. Both he and Elton had put many hours into tracking the man and come up with nothing. How could a man disappear so easily in a town as small as Stirling?

As he powered down his computer and prepared to go home, Elton came out of his den of computers and leaned on the wall opposite Cormac’s desk. Cormac glanced up and arched his brows in question.

“What I don’t get is why Aaron Phillips would draw attention to himself like this,” Elton said. “If he had this counterfeiting business going, why jeopardize that by going after Lucy? It makes no sense. He blew up his business by getting this Paul Wendell guy to blow up her car.”

Cormac huffed. “I know.” He’d been turning every aspect of this situation over since the explosion had happened. He was missing something. “Phillips said something when he confronted her on Sunday morning. He said he knew what she was up to in her apartment.”

Elton crossed his arms. “He thought she was in on the same game. Thought she was using the wedding stationery as a cover for a counterfeiting operation?”

“Ridiculous assumption. Why would he think that?”

Elton nodded. “But nothing else makes sense. Why go after her unless he thought she had him figured out?”

Cormac’s chair squeaked as he leaned back. He crossed his arms, drumming his fingers on his biceps. “She told me it started when she made inroads in the local wedding business. He didn’t like her showing up at the Wedding Expo last year, and it’s escalated since then.”

“So it goes way back. And he saw the Wedding Expo as a real threat to him or his business. But why?”

It made no sense. Cormac rubbed his forehead and stared at the wood grain of his desk. “I’ll talk to her,” he finally said. “Get to the bottom of it.”

Elton grunted. “Okay. I only have a few hours of work to put into the Hampstead system programming. We’d promised them a commissioning date by Friday this week. You want me to finish that up, or keep hunting for Phillips?”

Marlon would kill Cormac if he came back from his honeymoon and found the business in shambles. Cormac sighed. “Finish it. We’ll complete the Hampstead contract on time. I’ll work on Phillips.”

A nod, and his tech wizard of an employee headed for the door. Cormac wasn’t far behind, stopping at Karin’s desk at the front of the building.

“Any messages?”

“Some lady called and asked if she could speak to you. Didn’t tell me her name, and wouldn’t say what it was about, so I told her she’d have to make an appointment.”

“What was the number?”

“Blocked. She sounded older.”

Odd. “All right. Thanks, Karin.”

“See you tomorrow.” She smiled at him and grabbed her gigantic purse from the drawer where she’d stored it. Her keys jingled, and Cormac waited until she’d locked the office up, made it to her car, and driven away before he drove home himself.

He turned over the conversation with Elton all the way back to his apartment and up the elevator. There had to be a moment where Phillips had switched. Something had happened to make him think Lucy was doing more than selling wedding invitations, and Cormac intended to get to the bottom of it—but as he approached his front door, he heard voices.

Frowning, he unlocked the door and stepped inside to see a crowd of people lounging on his furniture.

His mother ducked her head around the corner and smiled. “Honey! Welcome home! We heard about the fake money.”

“How’d you hear about that?”

“Rachael heard it from her sister-in-law,” Ruby provided. Rachael was Ruby’s friend from high school, and her sister-in-law worked at the police station as a 911 dispatcher and non-official town gossip, which meant the whole of Stirling probably knew everything about the discoveries they’d made the morning before.

“We were worried about Lucy, so we decided to stop by,” his mother explained.

“And to make sure you weren’t keeping her trapped here,” Scarlett called out from the couch. She had Princess Snowball draped over her shoulder, and the cat’s eyes were closed despite the noise of boisterous conversation in the room.

Maybe his cat actually hated men, because Cormac had never seen the feline be so friendly with anyone the way she was with Lucy and now Scarlett. Snowball certainly wasn’t this friendly with him, and he’d spent years plying her with food.

Archer nodded at Cormac and reached over to scratch the cat’s ears. Princess Snowball cracked an eyelid, then reached a paw over to rest it on Archer’s shoulder.

Nope—the cat didn’t hate men. She might just hate Cormac. Fickle creature. Didn’t she know he was the one who fed her?

Lucy stood from the armchair she’d been sitting in and approached, a slight cringe on her features. “Your mom and sister showed up with my parents an hour ago. I hope it’s okay I let them in?”

“It’s fine,” Cormac said, scanning the crowd. Apart from his mother, his sister, Archer, and Scarlett, Cormac saw both of Lucy’s parents, as well as Amelia and Leo. Maggie and Emory were there too, sitting across from Scarlett. Maggie’s golden-blond hair was tied up in a messy bun, her husband’s arm draped over her shoulders. She was deep in conversation with Dolly, while Gus and Emory seemed to be hitting it off. He’d never had so many people in his apartment at one time.

“Everyone else showed up not long after,” Lucy explained, following his gaze. “Your sister called them, apparently. And my mom happened to be in Scarlett’s shop, so Scarlett tagged along. And then she called Amelia and Leo. Leo called Archer, who was at Emory’s house.”

“We brought artichoke dip!” Leo called out, as if that made a difference.

“I tested seventeen different artichoke dip recipes over the past three years, and that one was the best one,” Amelia added, on the same wavelength as Leo about the importance of artichoke dip compared to ambushing someone in their own home. “I can show you my spreadsheet.”

“Babe, he doesn’t want to see your spreadsheet,” Leo said, wrapping an arm around Amelia’s shoulders to tug her closer so he could kiss her temple.

“It’s a really good one. I isolated the ingredients and tested variables like cooking temperature and baking vessel. There’s a pivot table and everything.”

“I believe you,” Leo said fondly.

“I also tested some common substitutions, so I have the data on that as well. Artichoke dip is fascinating, actually.”

“Have I ever told you how much I love you?” Leo said, grinning.

Lucy glanced at Cormac, who was still standing by his front door. “I can ask everyone to go,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry. I know I’m a guest here. It kind of spiraled out of control when your mom showed up.”

Cormac sighed. “It’s fine,” he said, reaching over to tuck a strand of dark hair behind Lucy’s ear. He shot a sideways glance at the unexpected guests and added, “At least they brought artichoke dip.”

Lucy’s answering giggle made everything better. He narrowly held back from wrapping her in his arms and kissing her, remembering that his mother was standing just a few feet away, watching them with avid interest. When Cormac looked up and met her gaze, she brightened.

“Dinner’s nearly ready,” she said. “Rubes, can you and your brother set the table?”

“On it,” Ruby answered, poking her head into the foyer. “Come on. I’m not letting you weasel your way out of this like you used to.”

“I never weaseled my way out of anything,” Cormac answered, offended.

“Yeah, right. We all know who Mom’s favorite is.”

“I love you both equally!” Vicky said from around the corner.

Ruby shook her head at Lucy, mouthing, “*Lie*,” then swept her hands toward the big dining table Cormac had literally never used for eating dinner. There’d never been any point—no one ever came here for dinner. And if someone did, they just ate at the barstools at the kitchen island.

But not everyone would fit at the island, so he moved the stack of papers from work from one end of the table and counted the chairs. He found some placemats buried at the bottom of one of his drawers, and then he and Ruby set the table for everyone. Vicky brought trivets to the table, and then she dropped a beautiful roast beef on the table, along with mashed potatoes, four different roasted vegetables (including Cormac’s favorite, honey-glazed carrots), gravy, and even popovers.

“Wow, Mom,” he said, taking a seat next to Lucy. “This looks incredible.”

“It’s nothing,” Vicky said, then waved for everyone to serve themselves from the various dishes. She put the carving knife in front of Cormac, and he did his best to slice the roast, then got to work piling food onto his plate. Utensils clacked against dishes and conversation flowed.

Lucy told the story of the exploding car to a delighted and horrified audience. Half of them had already heard the story, but it didn’t matter. Then she recreated the fight outside the Stirling Stationery Store with all the appropriate actions and sound effects. She laughed and leaned against him. Her cheeks

were flushed and her eyes were bright. She was still afraid, he knew, but she was brave.

He went back to his food, glad to feel the warmth of Lucy's leg beside his. The roast was moist and flavorful, the potatoes were creamy, and the honey-glazed carrots were tender and sweet. It was one of the best meals he'd eaten in a long, long time.

It wasn't until he'd cleared his plate, mopping up the last of his gravy with his popover, that Cormac realized what he was feeling: contentedness.

Surrounded by family, friends, and acquaintances, he ate a home-cooked meal and felt the tension of the day—the week—melt out of him. Life could be better than what it had been, he realized. It could be great.

He'd kept himself apart from people for so many years. Even his family, who he loved dearly, were kept at arm's length. He managed their safety and loved them as best he could, but he didn't let himself get wrapped up in the relationships. He protected them, but he didn't let them in.

But that evening, as he leaned back in his chair and refused his mother's offer of seconds and thirds, he draped an arm over Lucy's chair and realized he'd been missing these moments from his life.

Hearing the pride in his mother's voice when she talked about running the car through the store's front windows made him want to throttle her for being so reckless—but it also made him laugh. And watching Lucy was even better. Instead of curling in on herself like she had when they'd eaten pizza at Amelia and Leo's new place, she laughed and spun tales like a born storyteller.

He'd kept himself apart from all these people because he didn't want to be responsible for their safety. Except for his mother and sister, he'd put a gulf between him and everyone else. Even Marlon, who was his closest friend and business partner, probably didn't really know the real Cormac.

“No, Cormac’s a teddy bear,” Lucy was saying to Scarlett across the table, who didn’t look convinced.

“A teddy bear who can punch,” the other woman replied, glancing at him.

“Well, sure,” Lucy said, turning to gift him one of her beautiful smiles. “But he only punches people when he’s trying to protect. I bet he’s never actually instigated a fight.”

“That is definitely not true,” Ruby piped in, and everyone laughed. Even Cormac cracked a smile—right before he crumpled a napkin into a ball and launched it at his sister’s head. Ruby gasped and gestured at him. “I rest my case!”

A chuckle even rumbled out of Cormac, then, and he decided that he liked this kind of gathering. Maybe keeping himself apart from people wasn’t the best strategy. He’d thought that all he wanted to do was lock his loved ones behind stone walls and head off to fight dragons for them, but he’d been wrong. Lucy was teaching him that, with her soft strength, her iron will.

Cormac, suddenly, wanted more than his self-imposed isolated position as the family’s protector. He wanted to be part of the fabric of his community. He wanted Lucy there too, smiling and blooming into her strength.

Dolly stood and started clearing plates, and she was soon helped by everyone else. Leo and Amelia were the first to make their excuses to leave, taking the dish that had previously held artichoke dip. It had been scraped clean and proclaimed delicious. Amelia nodded, unsurprised. She’d made a spreadsheet, after all.

Dolly and Gus helped clean up, kissed their daughter, and then said goodbye to Cormac. His own family weren’t far behind. Archer left with Maggie and Emory, and then it was only Scarlett putting her shoes on by the door.

“You coming to bootcamp tomorrow morning?” she asked Lucy. “You’ve been slacking lately.”

“Might I remind you that my car exploded?”

“You can only use that excuse so many times,” Scarlett answered with a laugh.

Lucy gasped in mock outrage. Then she relented. “Cormac’s teaching me self-defense. I’m not being entirely lazy.”

“I’ll allow it,” Scarlett said, then wrapped her arms around Lucy. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

They said goodbye to the other woman, closed the door, and were finally alone. Lucy sighed, wrapped her arms around Cormac’s middle, and nuzzled into his chest. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything,” she said simply.

He stroked her hair, keeping her wrapped in his embrace. The house was quiet again, the way it usually was—but it was different. The silence was alive somehow. It was brighter.

He kissed Lucy’s temple.

She looked up at him. “I have to go to the print shop tomorrow to see how my new design looks. Will you come with me?”

“Yes,” he replied.

She smiled, but it looked a little strained.

“You good?” Cormac asked.

“I’m good. That was a lot of socializing, though. I’m exhausted.”

He kissed her temple and forced himself to ask a question: “You want to sleep in your own bed tonight?”

Relief swept through Cormac when Lucy replied, “No. Do you?”

He tightened his hold on her. “Not even a little bit.”

TWENTY

WEDNESDAY MORNING BROUGHT another self-defense session, which ended much the same way the first one had: with Lucy flat on her back, naked, raking her nails across Cormac's shoulders.

She didn't have many defenses against *him*.

After she'd showered and dressed, Cormac presented her with a blazer. "Put this on before we go," he told her.

Lucy frowned. "Why?"

"It's one of my bulletproof blazers. Put it on."

She blinked. "It's what, now?"

"The fabric uses carbon nanotubes that's half the weight of Kevlar, but it can still block the impact of a bullet. They take a couple months to get made bespoke, so you'll wear mine. We'll get your measurements taken to get you one of your own, but this will do for now."

Lucy stared at the garment, then at Cormac. "Carbon nanotubes," she repeated, trying to make the words make sense.

Cormac held up the jacket and nodded patiently. "If someone shoots at you and hits this blazer, it'll hurt but the

bullet won't go through."

Lucy took the blazer from him, feeling the fabric between her fingers. It felt like normal fabric, maybe a smidge heavier than she expected. "You think Aaron is going to shoot me?" Her voice squeaked at the end of her question, throat constricting on the last word.

"He made your car blow up. Or at least got one of his friends to do it for him."

Lucy's shoulders dropped. "Okay."

"You'll wear it?"

"Sure."

Cormac released a breath. His hands came up to Lucy's cheeks, and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Thank you."

She slipped the blazer on. It was huge, so she rolled up the sleeves and looked up at Cormac, feeling like a small child trying on her parents' clothes, if her parents had been the type to own bulletproof anything. But Cormac looked satisfied, so she left it on. He straightened one of the lapels, studying her critically, and a warm glow burned in Lucy's chest. No one had ever cared about her safety quite this much.

It was vitally important, she realized, that he be assured of her safety. She'd been allowed into his inner circle, or maybe she'd crashed her way through and demanded to be let in. It was a gift she wouldn't give up, not for anything.

They went down to the basement parking lot and got in Cormac's SUV.

When he drove out through the gate, he said, "Let's go through it again. From the start. What was the very first interaction you had with Phillips?"

Lucy scanned the street as they drove, half-expecting bullets to start flying. She clutched the blazer closed at her neck and felt ridiculous. When no bullets whizzed past, she answered his question. "It was nearly three years ago," she started. "I went to his store to feel the weights of different papers so I could get an idea of what they felt like and how

much I should charge. He was behind the counter, and he asked me if I needed help. We talked about cardstock, cotton versus linen, different inks. He was helpful.”

“You told him you designed wedding stationery?”

Lucy frowned. “Yeah. Thinking about it now, he did have a weird reaction.”

“What did he say?”

“It wasn’t really what he said, it was the look he gave me. Kind of like he was seeing me in a new light.” She gulped, remembering the slimy feeling that had dribbled down her spine. “I left pretty soon after that.”

“Can you remember what you were talking about when he gave you the weird look?”

“It was three years ago, Cormac. I don’t know, exactly. I probably told him I’d studied graphic design and was excited to start my own business. I said I was learning a lot by talking to him and thanked him for his time.”

“What did he react strangely to? Which words?”

Tightness banded around Lucy’s chest. She shrugged, frustrated. “I don’t know! We were talking about the benefits of linen vs. cotton for paper. I said I liked blends of cotton and linen rag, because you got the durability and texture of linen without the high price tag. We were talking about *paper*. Who gets weird about paper?”

Lucy grimaced. She knew who got weird about paper: people who used it to make counterfeit money.

“And that’s when he started bothering you?”

“It was a few weeks later, but yeah. A package got stolen from the back of my car. A couple of weird reviews popped up on my online store.”

“What did they say?”

“I don’t remember, exactly. I just knew that they weren’t from real clients. They said things like, ‘Invitations Etc. provides low-quality product for an inflated price.’ Just

generic bad reviews with one star. I'd reply to the review trying to be polite and professional, telling them to email me with their order number so I could rectify things, and the review would disappear. It happened maybe half a dozen times, and then it stopped. I don't know if it was him. It could have been anyone."

"Okay," Cormac said, turning onto Main Street so he could cross town to where the print shop was.

They clattered onto the bridge. Lucy stared at the water as they came to a stop behind a big truck trying to change lanes at the last minute so it wouldn't miss its turn. The bridge vibrated slightly, and Lucy watched the river rush below. "The only other time I really spoke to him was right after Amelia's wedding. All that crazy stuff was happening with Camilla's bakery getting broken into, and I ended up having to go to his shop again because I needed a specific type of paper for a rush order. He recognized me right away, even though he pretended not to. He was kind of rude, half ignoring me, half barking at me."

"What happened?"

"I just bought the paper and paid for it. At the till, I tried to make polite conversation, and he just sneered at me."

"What did you say?"

"I said what everyone was saying! I said, 'Did you hear what happened at Frank Goodhew's company retreat?' and all he said was, 'What's that got to do with you?' and I was sort of taken aback, and I said, 'Nothing. I just hadn't realized there was a dark underbelly in Stirling.' He looked at me funny, but I'd already paid, so I left."

She lapsed into silence, but there'd been something on her mind, and she had to speak to Cormac about it. "Do you think he thought I was doing forgeries too? That's what he meant by his turf? It wasn't wedding stationery at all?"

Cormac didn't even hesitate. "Yes," he said. "Somehow, he got it in his head that you were trying to get a cut of his business."

The air whooshed out of Lucy's lungs. Her head spun. She focused on the car in front of them as they drove, trying to get her thoughts in order. "How long have you suspected it?"

"Since we found the bill."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"There's no real evidence, but it's the only thing that makes sense. Why else would he blow up your car, if not to make a statement? The underbelly comment is telling. He must have thought you were sniffing around his shop, trying to threaten him."

"But...*why*? I literally spent ten minutes talking about quality of ink for gold lettering. I showed him the design I was working on for a save-the-date card. And the time before that we talked about paper, for crying out loud. I was a complete stationery nerd!"

"Counterfeiters need to know those details too," Cormac noted. "Inks, papers, watermarks. A good forgery is all in the details. What kind of paper is money made from?"

Lucy turned to stare at him. Heart thumping, she pulled out her phone and asked the internet. "A special blend of cotton and linen rag," she read.

Cormac let out a long breath.

"Lots of paper is made from cotton and linen," Lucy protested. "He can't have taken that one comment completely out of context. Could he?"

"I don't know," Cormac answered grimly.

A weight pressed down on Lucy's shoulders. Sighing, she leaned back against the headrest and watched Stirling go by. It was a beautiful Wednesday in late spring, and the sun was shining, the town in full bloom. They'd made it past the bridge and were crossing toward the commercial center of town. Baskets of flowers hung from curlicued light posts. People milled along the shopfronts, smiling, buying coffees, meeting friends.

And behind the veneer, vermin like Aaron Phillips used this wonderful town to line their pockets. Amelia had experienced something similar when she and Leo had exposed the thief at his company retreat. Camilla had had a brush with the criminal element in town when she'd tried to get out from under a loan shark's thumb. And now, Lucy was getting a taste of it too.

Stirling wasn't as shiny and clean as it appeared.

“So Aaron Phillips meets me, misconstrues what I say about paper, and decides I'm making fake money. He's threatened. He starts a terror campaign that's frankly pretty mild, until me going to the Wedding Expo last year sets him off. He becomes irate. When I decide to go to the Expo again, he blows up my car in an attempt to intimidate me and, in the process, exposes his own criminal enterprise. Have I got that right?”

Cormac nodded and turned down the street where the print shop was. “Something about the Wedding Expo was significant.”

They parked in front of the shop, and Cormac cut the engine. He scanned the surroundings, told Lucy to stay in the car, and then got out and swept his gaze up and down the street. Lucy watched him, grateful he was here. She'd have no idea how to deal with any of this if she were on her own.

Cormac opened her door and shielded her while they shuffled the few feet to the print shop door.

“What's the point of a bulletproof blazer if you're going to stand behind me? My blazer is more bulletproof than your body, Cormac.”

He ignored her, opening the door to let her in. Lucy went inside and crossed to the counter while Cormac watched the door. They waited at the shop while her samples were printed. She inspected them, satisfied, and then she paid for the prints and was bundled back to the car.

They were all the way across town again and Lucy was beginning to relax when the phone rang through the car's

system.

Cormac glanced at the screen on the console. “Elton,” he said after answering.

“Boss. I found the car those two thugs were driving.”

Cormac flicked his gaze to Lucy, who folded her arms and bared her teeth at him. “Don’t you dare drop me off and go fight monsters on my behalf.”

“Hi, Lucy,” Elton said.

“Hi, Elton. Where’s the car?”

“Little hunting lodge east of town,” Elton replied. “I’ll send you the address.”

“How’d you find it?” Lucy asked, amazed.

“I have friends in high places,” Elton replied.

“Chrissie asked you to help review CCTV footage, didn’t she?” Cormac said, indicated to change lanes, and headed away from the freeway.

“It’s not my fault our police department doesn’t have an IT division. I just wrote a little script for them, is all. Doing my civic duty to speed up the process so we could get computers to do the work for us. If I happened to get some information out of the bargain, it’s only fair.”

“Good work.” Cormac hung up the call.

Lucy shifted to look at him. At first glance, he looked relaxed. His fingers drummed gently on the edge of the steering wheel, his elbow resting on the window frame. But Lucy could see the calculation in his eyes, the way his breathing deepened and slowed.

Cormac wasn’t relaxed. He was battle-ready.

“You’re going the wrong way,” Lucy pointed out when he turned down the street that led to his building.

“I’m taking you home.”

“To go do what?” she asked.

“Recon.”

“Cormac,” Lucy growled, which wasn’t very impressive, even to her ears. “I’m not going to hide in your apartment while you go face the man who tried to kill me.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You need to finish your pitch.”

“It’s nearly done,” Lucy informed him. “The samples look great, and now I just need to practice. I won’t be able to do that if I’m worried about you.”

Cormac pulled into the underground parking lot and slid into his spot. He cut the engine and looked at her. “I need to keep you safe,” he said, and that battle-readiness in his gaze eased slightly, so Lucy could see the fear that lurked there.

She put her hand on his forearm. “Cormac,” she said gently, “you’ve been keeping me safe all week. I can’t go hide in your apartment, not knowing what’s happening to you. Let me help. I’m the one who got you in this mess in the first place.”

Cormac’s jaw clenched, but he turned the key in the ignition and backed out of his spot. They drove onto the freeway and out of town, turning off on a smaller road when they’d gotten a couple miles out of Stirling. The landscape was hilly, wooded, and dotted with farms and a few small clusters of houses.

They drove past a red barn and a horse looked up to watch them pass. Then they were in the trees again, snaking up a gentle incline that took them deeper into the forest.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t wait for the police for this?” Lucy asked.

Cormac huffed. “What are they going to do?”

“Um, arrest the bad guys?”

Cormac didn’t answer. Lucy thought about what he’d told her, how the authorities had let him down when he was younger. The police hadn’t been there to catch the bad guys

when Cormac was a kid, and he probably thought he had to deal with everything himself.

“What’s the plan?”

Cormac let out a long breath. “We have a look around, set up a camera so Elton can keep an eye on them.”

“You have one?”

He nodded. “I keep spare sets of gear in the back.”

“Oh.” Lucy nodded, even though she wasn’t quite sure what “gear” meant, exactly.

They drove past the address that Elton had sent them and turned off on a gravel road a couple of miles farther on. Cormac parked the car under the branches of a few pine trees and cut the engine. Then he went to the SUV’s trunk, opened it up, and unlocked a long black box made of steel. Lucy peered around the side of his arm to have a look.

The first thing she noticed was the gun. Cormac slid the weapon into a holster and clipped it onto his belt, then grabbed a black pack that had been rolled up neatly near the edge of the box. He dumped a bunch of stuff into the bag: a knife, some rope, some duct tape, a bag of zip ties, a case that looked like it had a camera in it, and binoculars, among other things. Lucy hoped the police didn’t stop by and search him, because that stuff sure would be hard to explain. Apparently a “catch the bad guys” bag looked a lot like a “serial killing kidnapper” bag.

Cormac slipped the straps onto his shoulders, face set into grim lines. Then he closed the box, shut the trunk, and turned to face her. His hand came up to touch her cheek, and then he bent down and brushed his lips against hers.

“I wish you’d stayed home,” he said quietly.

“I know, but I can’t. I need to fix this.”

“It scares me, how much I care about you.”

Lucy’s heart went soft at his words. They were spoken openly, his face stark. She went to her tiptoes and kissed him.

“Let me help you,” she said quietly, “and then we’ll both go home.”

He sighed, then nodded. “The goal is to get the camera set up and working without being seen. Then we get out. Got it?”

“Copy that,” Lucy said, trying to sound competent and suspecting she fell short.

Cormac kissed her again, tenderly, then took a step back. His features turned remote as he faced the direction of the hunting lodge. His eyes scanned the trees and his body went still. He looked ready to pounce. The transformation was subtle but unmistakable, and it sent a little shiver of apprehension running down Lucy’s spine.

She had the distinct impression that she’d bitten off more than she could chew.

Cormac glanced at her, dipped his chin, and set off into the trees.

TWENTY-ONE

IT HAD RAINED the night before, and the ground was wet. Lucy tried to follow in Cormac's silent footsteps, but she found herself tripping over roots and getting whacked in the face with stray branches. This was not glamorous work.

They wove through the wooded landscape, pausing intermittently so Cormac could scan the forest. Lucy's heart thundered the whole time. Every twig snapping beneath her feet, every rustle in the bushes, every squirrel jumping from branch to branch made her stomach leap to her throat.

She wasn't cut out for this—but she wasn't going to let Cormac do it on his own.

That thought strengthened her resolve. Cormac had taken her in and coddled her, wrapping her in his bulletproof nanotubes, but she wasn't useless. She wouldn't crumble under pressure—not today.

These past weeks—especially the four days since the Wedding Expo—had taught Lucy a valuable lesson. Yes, she'd spiraled when she worked in sales, but that didn't define her anymore. She was capable of selling her designs so well she earned the opportunity to pitch the team at Juniper and Sage. She'd faced a feverish Aaron Phillips and his two mean thugs

and discovered a forgery scheme that she never could have imagined.

And now she was here, creeping around trees, seeing it through to the end.

Crumbling now would mean injury or death. It would mean harm for Cormac. It wasn't an option. So Lucy wouldn't crumble. She wouldn't fail. She would bear the pressure on her shoulders and prove to herself that she was capable.

She cracked the lid on a well of inner strength she hadn't known she possessed. With a few deep breaths, her pulse slowed, and she was able to keep her panic at bay.

She was here to help Cormac, just as he'd helped her. She'd gotten him into this mess, and she wasn't going to let him face it alone.

Glancing at his profile, she took in his narrowed eyes, his coiled muscles. This was a man who was used to taking care of things on his own. He carried the world on his shoulders, not letting anyone share the burden. She knew that over the past week, he'd let her into an inner sanctum that was reserved for the very few important people in his life.

Lucy wouldn't let him down.

She was here with him, and she'd stay. This was the man for her. With all his stubbornness, his overprotectiveness, his bossiness. As he motioned for her to crouch behind a bush and took the same position at her side, Lucy let certainty settle over her.

She was choosing Cormac. She wasn't going to let him go.

"You and me," she said quietly.

Cormac turned to meet her gaze, the same certainty reflected back at her. "You and me, Lucy."

A smile stole across her lips. Cormac grinned, then tilted his head toward the bush. They rose slowly, peering over the top of the greenery, to the sight beyond.

The trees thinned, revealing the side of an old cabin. The weathered boards were gray with age, and the roof was

covered in moss and leaves. The view through the grimy windows was blocked by dirty curtains, and a collection of rusting and dirty junk littered the porch that wrapped around the back and side of the building.

“There,” Cormac spoke, his voice barely a whisper. He nodded to the front of the building, where a familiar car was parked, its front bumper dented, the tan-colored hood scratched by all the glass that had shattered over it a couple of days prior, its wood paneling still intact down the side.

Meaty and Lanky’s Crown Vic station wagon. Lucy gritted her teeth. They’d found them.

Her pulse sped up as they scanned the hunting lodge, looking for movement. All was still.

Cormac moved slowly, slipping his backpack off and unzipping it. He pulled out the camera and the zip ties before motioning to one of the tall pine trees near the front corner of the house nearest them.

“I’m going to strap the camera to that tree,” he told her.

Lucy gripped his arm. “They’ll see you.”

“I’ll use the trees as cover, and I’ll be quick. I need you to keep watch. If anyone comes outside, signal me.”

“How?”

“Can you whistle?”

Lucy shook her head. “No.”

“Here.” Cormac picked up a stick from the forest floor. “Hit this against the trunk three times to warn me.”

Lucy took the stick from him, brows drawn. She regretted coming along at all, but that would mean Cormac would be here on his own. If she hadn’t come here, he’d have no one to watch his back. Steeling herself, she nodded. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Good.” He slipped back the way they came and circled through the trees, moving so smoothly that even Lucy had

trouble keeping track of him. She turned back to the house and waited.

The stick in her hand was rough with bark and slightly damp. She sidled closer to the trunk that would be her drum, scanning the cabin.

Movement drew her gaze to the side window. Behind the dirty curtains, someone stood. Lucy's breaths came in short gasps, and she tried to stay quiet. She stole a glance over to where Cormac had disappeared just in time to see him creeping out into sight near the tree he'd marked as the best location for the camera.

A bird twittered, and Lucy jumped. The bed of pine needles gave a soft landing for her knee as she fell over slightly, catching herself before she tumbled into the bushes. Glaring at the direction of the birdsong, she turned back to the cabin.

The person behind the window moved, and someone else followed. Lucy's mouth was dry. She gripped her stick and angled it at the trunk, ready to whack. Cormac was about twenty feet away, in the open, struggling with zip ties.

"Hurry," she mouthed to him, even though he couldn't see or hear her, then turned back to the cabin.

If someone walked out the side door, they'd see Cormac right away. What then? What could Lucy do? All she had was a stick.

Cormac dropped something, and she thought she heard him hiss a curse. In the distance, an engine rumbled. Lucy's heart hammered so hard she could hardly hear anything but her heartbeat, but she was sure the engine was getting closer.

Would they turn down the gravel road leading to the hunting lodge? Would they see Cormac? Friend or foe? Was it the police?

Sipping in little breaths, Lucy felt a dribble of sweat running down her spine. She wasn't cut out for this. All she had to do was keep watch, and she was on the edge of panic.

The crunch of gravel told her the car was coming closer. Cormac's movements became hurried, and Lucy held her stick, ready to whack the trunk. What was taking so long? Why wasn't he moving faster?

The curtains twitched, and a figure moved past and appeared near the side door. She could see the shape of a very stout, meaty man behind the frosted glass.

Crack!

She hit the stick against the trunk.

Crack!

She did it again and wound back for a third hit, but the stick dangled limply, broken in two halves that clung to each other with a bit of damp bark.

Cormac lunged for the bushes, diving onto the forest floor. Lucy could see the edge of his shoulder, but she didn't know if he was visible from the cabin.

Headlights lit up the back of the Crown Vic, and a second car drove in to park beside it. At the same time, the hunting cabin's side door opened, and Meaty stepped out, closely followed by Lanky. Lucy might know his name now, but Paul Wendell would forever be Lanky in her mind, and his brother would forever be Meaty.

The driver's door opened just as Cormac army-crawled beside Lucy. He nodded to her, then pushed aside a branch of the bush to get a look at the driver.

Meaty stood in the way, blocking their line of sight.

Lucy squinted, as if that would help her see through Meaty's body to the driver. It had to be Aaron Phillips. Who else would it be?

But just as the thought crossed Lucy's mind, a third person stepped out of the cabin. Aaron's footsteps clomped on the side porch as he made his way toward the front of the house, descending the three wooden steps that brought him to ground level near the corner of the building.

"You made it," he said. "Took you long enough."

Lucy jerked when it was a woman who answered. “You should be grateful I’m here at all,” she said, and Meaty stepped aside.

It took Lucy a second to recognize her, but when she did, her whole body froze.

The woman had a wealth of dyed red hair, gathered up in a messy knot at the top of her head. Rhonda, the woman at the check-in desk at the Wedding Expo.

Beside her, Cormac sucked in a breath. He recognized her too.

“Here’s your cut,” Rhonda said, presenting Aaron with an envelope.

Aaron took the envelope and glanced inside. “This wasn’t the deal,” he hissed. “This is only half.”

Rhonda pasted a bright smile on her lips. Lucy’s blood turned to ice. She recognized that smile. When she’d seen it at the Wedding Expo booth, she’d thought it was friendly. Now, it reminded her of a very hungry shark. “The deal changed when you blew up that girl’s car. It’s too much trouble dealing with you. This is all you’re getting,” the woman said, cold-blooded.

Meaty glanced at Aaron, who shook his head. Aaron crossed his arms and faced the woman. “We won’t give you anything. You pay us what you promised, or you get nothing at all.”

“You think anyone’s going to want to touch your shit now that you’ve been exposed? This is the best deal you’re going to get.”

“No deal.”

Rhonda’s cheeks grew red. She snatched back the envelope and tossed it into her car. “The boss won’t be happy about this,” she said.

“The boss can pay what he owes. He should know how this works by now.”

Rhonda clicked her tongue. “I’ll be back tomorrow. Same time.” Then she got in her car and drove away.

Aaron vibrated with rage, his face red, his fists clenched. Meaty and Lanky took a few steps forward, following Rhonda’s car, but she reversed with expert precision and was soon out of sight.

Movement drew Lucy’s gaze to the side of the house. There was someone else inside. She gripped Cormac’s arm as he shifted, tilting her head to the cabin. He peered through the bushes and went still until the three men had clomped their way back up the steps, along the porch, and inside the side door. The frosted glass rattled as the door slammed, and silence descended on them.

Cormac waited long minutes before grabbing his pack and getting to his feet, body bent in a crouch. Lucy did the same, following the motion of his two fingers as he motioned back the way they came. Her heart remained in her throat for the entire harrowing journey. When a white-tail deer jumped out in front of them and crashed through the forest and out of sight, she let out an inelegant scream before clamping her lips shut and stumbling back.

The deer bounded away, more terrified than Lucy.

It wasn’t until they were in the car and halfway to Stirling that she was able to take a full breath. “Well,” she said, breaking the thick silence that had settled over them. “That was unexpected.”

TWENTY-TWO

CORMAC DROVE straight to the Elite Security offices. He glanced at Lucy periodically, whose face was blanched and fists were clenched.

“You good?” he asked.

She nodded, then lied right to his face: “Yep.” A long sigh slipped through her lips. “So. Rhonda, huh.”

“Let’s talk about this when we get to the office,” he said, and he cranked the heat in the SUV. It was a nice day, but Lucy was trembling. He shouldn’t have brought her along, but as they crossed the town limits into Stirling, Lucy let out a long breath and said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For trusting me today.”

Cormac glanced at her for a moment. A shaft of sunlight carved out the soft lines of her face, making her dark hair shine with strands of gold. “You did great,” he said, which was the truth.

“The longer we spend together, the more capable I feel,” she admitted. “You’ve made me realize that I’ve been living my life way too small. I could do so much more.”

“You will,” Cormac replied, throat tight. “You’ll do that pitch and win a huge contract.”

Her smile was tight, but it was there. That was an improvement. A bit of color returned to her cheeks, and Lucy leaned her head on the headrest. “This has been the craziest experience of my life, but I feel like it’s forced me to realize some things about myself. I’ve been hiding. You helped me come out from under my rock.”

“If I had my way,” Cormac said, “I’d do that without any exploding vehicles and murderous stationery men.”

Lucy giggled, and Cormac’s shoulders relaxed in response. She’d be okay. He could breathe easier.

Once they got inside the offices, with the steel door barred and armed and all their personnel safe behind it, Cormac sat Lucy down in one of the chairs in Elton’s command center and told the other man what they’d discovered.

Sam drifted over and leaned against the doorjamb, grimacing. “I called her a nice lady,” he said, jaw hard. “I’m usually good at reading people.”

“Now I see why she was asking about you two,” Lucy said. Cormac glanced at her, not happy to see her wrapping her arms around her knees. She looked small and vulnerable. But she met his gaze and said, “She was fishing for information, and when I told her you were helping me lift heavy boxes, she obviously took it as a threat. She must have thought that I brought you there as part of my own criminal operation, as a show of force.”

“If she’s the broker for Phillips’s forgeries, they must be using the Wedding Expo as a distribution event,” Cormac said.

“Hiding in plain sight,” Elton added with a nod. “Makes sense. And it explains why you continuing to attend the Wedding Expo set them off.”

A knock on the security door made all their heads turn. “Open the door, McKenna,” a male voice barked—Ricky. The detective was here, and he obviously wasn’t happy.

Cormac stood, taking a moment to put a hand on Lucy's shoulder as he walked by, and checked their internal cameras before unlocking the security door to let Ricky into their secure area.

The detective sneered at him. "You want to tell me why your vehicle was seen driving out to a certain hunting lodge?"

"You use our resources for your tech support, this is what you deal with, Detective."

"Damn it, Cormac!" Ricky pinched the bridge of his nose. Behind him, Chrissie looked half-contrite, half-annoyed.

Cormac stepped aside to let the two of them in, closing the steel door behind them. He offered them coffee and grabbed one of the donuts from the box on the kitchen counter. He bit into it and met Lucy's gaze from across the room. She smiled, and Cormac felt a little better.

Everyone gathered in the office kitchen with a hot drink and donut of their own.

"You need to back off," Ricky told them, stern. "This is an official police investigation."

"We were simply taking a walk in the forest, Detective."

Rick glared at Cormac. "We're on the same side here, Cormac. You get in our way, that might not be the case."

Cormac gritted his teeth. He couldn't help the bitterness that swept through him. It was all well and good for the detective to claim to be on his side now, but where was he twenty-five years ago? Where was he when his mother was sprawled across their foyer tiles, when he was bleeding from a cut on his temple? Where was the cavalry when they were needed?

"We put up a camera," Lucy said, and all heads whirled toward her.

Cormac curled his hands into fists to stop himself from bundling her into his arms and carting her away. He watched the way she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. She clearly hated having this much attention on her, but when she

spoke, her voice was steady. “We saw a woman drive up and try to pay Aaron Phillips. If the camera was running, it probably caught the whole thing.”

Ricky looked like he was one frayed thread away from snapping, but he smoothed his hand over his mouth and swung his gaze to Cormac.

Lucy’s interjection had helped a bit of sense return to Cormac’s mind. She was right—they needed to cooperate with the police. He couldn’t go rogue. Not when the stakes were so high. He’d only get himself in trouble.

“Elton?” he asked.

The other man was in his den of electronics. “Got it,” came the reply, and everyone crowded in to watch the footage on the big screens.

Cormac put his hands on Lucy’s shoulders as they watched. Her muscles twitched and trembled as the scene played out on the screens, and he knew she was remembering the fear and adrenaline that had coursed through her body just an hour before. He needed to get her home.

Leaning into him, Lucy let her head rest on his arm. Something settled in Cormac’s chest. He stood behind her chair, his hands on her shoulders, and drew comfort from her closeness for the few minutes they spent watching the video, only loosening his hold when she straightened. His heart beat a little steadier, and his mind was clearer. Her presence had soothed him more than he’d anticipated.

“I want an ID on that woman,” the detective said to the officer beside him. “Call the Expo organizers and get whatever details you can. We’re going to that cabin at first light,” he said, then turned to Elton. “That camera going to record all night?”

“Yep. I can set up alerts if there’s any movement or sound.”

“Do it,” Rick said, then turned to Cormac. “I know you’re not going to stay away,” he said, “so I’m going to make you an

offer. You can ride along. We hire you as a consultant officially. But I'm in charge."

Cormac bristled until Lucy glanced up from her seat to meet his gaze. Then he dipped his chin. "Understood."

"Good. We have less than twenty-four hours, folks. We have work to do."

LUCY LET OUT a sigh when she stepped into Cormac's fortress. He dropped her at home on his way to the police station, promising to check in on her later. Lucy wasn't going to ride along in the morning; she had her pitch to finish and rehearse.

After the excitement of the last few days, it was strange to sit down at her computer to work. Graphic design was so quiet, so solitary—but it was also calming. Lucy's body relaxed bit by bit as her mind slowed down, focusing on typography and composition. She opened the pitch deck she'd started to create earlier in the week and edited the slides as the world fell away.

This was what she was good at, and everything that had happened since the Expo had only served to prove to her that she could reach for more. She could think bigger. She could accomplish any goal she set her mind to.

Yes, she'd crashed and burned in her sales career. She'd let her brain take her on a long and painful death spiral.

That wasn't going to happen again.

Lucy was stronger now—and she had Cormac at her back.

Princess Snowball lay curled at Lucy's feet for the hours she worked, occasionally following a shaft of sunlight on its journey across the living room floor, only to come back and wind her way around Lucy's legs. The cat's presence was comforting, and it reminded Lucy of Cormac. His complexity, his depth of feeling, the way he kept himself apart from most people. Lucy glanced down at the cat, then bent over to stroke Snowball's soft, dark fur. Really, Cormac was just an oversized cat in human form. He even purred when she stroked him, just like this.

By the time the locks on the front door turned, Lucy realized it was dark out. She'd worked for hours, not even getting up to eat or use the bathroom once. Her pitch deck was complete, and her samples were ready. She'd run through the presentation a dozen times already, and she'd do another dozen practice runs tomorrow, before she met with Belinda and her team.

Cormac appeared in the foyer, features drawn, exhaustion and stress written in every line of his body. Lucy closed her laptop and went to him. As soon as her arms wrapped around his neck, Cormac let out a shuddering sigh and pulled her close.

They stood like that for long moments, inhaling the scent of each other, drawing comfort from the touch. This was where she belonged.

Cormac pulled away and slid his hand over her jaw. "When this is over," he said, "I'm taking you out to a nice restaurant."

"No exploding cars?"

Cormac sighed. "No, Lucy. No exploding cars. No fights. Nobody trying to hurt you. I want us to try this—for real. You and me."

Lucy melted. She understood exactly what Cormac was trying to say: that what existed between them wasn't only developing due to the high stress of their situation. There was more between them than some sort of lust born out of stress and necessity. He wanted the date nights, the mundane, the normal.

And Lucy wanted it too. The only difference was, she didn't need a dinner date to prove that they belonged together. She already knew it was a done deal.

"I'm not letting you go after this," she warned him. "I hope you know that."

Cormac's lips curled into a smile. Some of the tension that had dragged his shoulders down melted off him. "That's good,

because I happen to share that opinion. I've chosen you now, Lucy, and I'm not going to let you go."

"You and me," Lucy said.

"You and me."

"Forever," she added, because that's how she felt. There was no one else like Cormac. No one who drew her out of her shell, who built her up, who showed her that she was capable of so much more than she'd thought.

His thumb swept across her cheek, and he dipped his head to hers. A moment before their lips touched, Cormac whispered, "Forever."

He kissed her hard, wrapping one arm around her back and letting the other tunnel into her hair. Lucy was surrounded by him, wrapped up in him, and there was nowhere else she wanted to be. In the way he gripped her tight, she could feel how worried he was about what the next day would bring.

Lucy was worried too, but she also felt calm. What existed between them was true. It was forever. The certainty of it settled over her, undeniable.

She pulled away and slipped her hand into Cormac's, leading him to the bedroom. They fell into bed and into each other's arms. Clothing disappeared in a blink, and Lucy wrapped herself around the man she'd fallen for.

In the fading evening light, he looked at her with dark-blue eyes, a vow written in his gaze. His body was carved by the shadows in the room, propped above her as she ran her hands over the hardness of his shoulders and arms.

Two and a half weeks ago, she'd stood before him, trembling like a fawn, asking him for help. She hadn't known what kind of man he was—the goodness, the depth, the care.

He lowered his body onto hers and kissed her like he was promising her the world. She kissed him back and sighed, complete.

They used their bodies to speak the truth to each other. With every touch, every kiss, every taste, Lucy showed

Cormac that she wanted all of him, and she felt it when he returned the sentiment. She ran her lips along his neck and gasped as they moved together, knowing that tomorrow, everything would change.

Tomorrow, she'd face her fears and make her pitch. Cormac would face the villain in her life and bring him to justice. Things would be different after.

But tonight, they had each other, and that was enough.

TWENTY-THREE

CORMAC DIDN'T WANT to leave Lucy. He woke before dawn and watched her slow, easy breaths, knowing that all he wanted was her.

It was like a switch flipped in Cormac at some point over the past couple of weeks. Before, there was work, and duty, and family. Now, there was all that—and Lucy.

Her softness, her strength, her stubbornness. He wanted to protect her from all that was bad in the world, which included Aaron Phillips and his ilk.

Now, more than ever, Cormac wanted to grind that man beneath his heel. He wanted to make sure that no one threatened Lucy and got away with it. She was his, and he was hers. Forever. She'd said it herself.

Lucy huffed in her sleep, and a hank of hair fell across her face. Cormac reached over and tucked the strands behind her ear, then leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. She let out a sleepy mewl, shifting her head closer to Cormac's shoulder, her hand sliding over his bare chest.

It took him a few long minutes to tear himself away from her. She'd anchored him to the spot with nothing more than a palm over his heart.

But as the light in the room turned from black to gray, Cormac knew he had to get up. He slithered out of bed and jumped in the shower, then dressed for combat and got some breakfast. By the time he went back to the bedroom, Lucy was rubbing her eyes.

The cup of coffee in his hand made a soft clunking sound as he set it down on the nightstand on Lucy's side of the bed. She saw it, sighed, and gave her luminous smile. "You're my hero."

"It's only coffee."

"Cormac," she said, lifting herself so she could lean against the headboard, "it's coffee *in bed*."

He grinned, setting one hand on her blanket-covered thigh.

She met his gaze and let out a heavy sigh. "Time to go?"

He nodded. "Sam will come by to take you to your meeting. He'll wait outside the building and take you home afterward. You'll wear the blazer."

She gave him an insolent little salute. "Yes, sir."

His fingers squeezed around her thigh. "Lucy, I'm serious."

Her own hand slid to cover his, thumb stroking the top of his wrist. "I know. I'll wear it. I just have the urge to give you crap when you order me around."

"Sometimes you like it when I order you around," Cormac answered, brow arched.

Lucy's cheeks went pink, and she gave him a flat look. "What I do or do not like inside the bedroom isn't the topic of this conversation, Cormac."

He laughed, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Be careful."

"You too."

Three words were on the tip of his tongue, but he held them back—barely. Now wasn't the time to blurt out his feelings. Not when he had to leave her here on her own, when

he had to make sure Aaron Phillips and his cronies ended up behind bars. “I’ll see you this afternoon,” he said instead.

She nodded and reached for her coffee, and Cormac left her in the bedroom to go do what he had to do.

By the end of the day, anyone who wanted to do Lucy harm would be imprisoned or incapacitated or dead. That was a promise Cormac intended to keep.

Cormac protected the people he loved. That was written into his DNA. It was inked into the fabric of his soul the moment those burglars robbed him of his childhood. He would never change, and today was simply one of the times that he had to rise to the occasion and do what needed to be done.

Because he loved Lucy. He fell in love with her the moment she let out that outraged gasp when he ate her donuts. Or maybe it was the moment she’d called him an animal and told him to leave her apartment, then smiled at him, cherubic. Maybe he’d fallen for her over the course of the day at the Wedding Expo, when he’d watched her glow at every new customer who stopped at her booth.

He’d protect her, even if it cost him his health, his safety, his life. She was worth it, because she was Lucy.

LUCY DRANK her coffee and listened to the clack of the locks sliding into place behind Cormac. She leaned her head back against the headboard and watched the light brighten as the minutes went by. The light was still silvery, not yet pierced by the sun’s golden rays.

She thought she’d be more nervous today, but her mind was calm.

Last time she’d choked, she was giving a presentation in a conference room for a product she didn’t care about. She was faking it until she made it—and then she failed.

Now, things were different. She’d pitch her own designs, and she believed in her own talents. She’d stand in front of the corporate team for Juniper and Sage and sell *herself*. For once, she felt worthy.

Cormac had made her coffee milky and sweet, just the way she liked it. As she took another sip, she thought of the man who'd changed her life in such a short amount of time.

He hadn't actually changed *her*, Lucy realized. He'd only made it possible for Lucy to unearth the confidence that had been buried under shame and embarrassment. He'd treated her like she was competent from the moment he met her, and Lucy had had no choice but to go along with it.

And, she'd discovered, Cormac was right. Lucy *was* competent. She ran her own business, which she'd built from a blank page. She could put on her sales face, even when she'd rather be alone. She could stand up against a bully and stand guard while Cormac installed a covert camera in a tree.

Lucy wasn't a quivering baby deer, ready to dart away at the first sign of danger. She was smart, and resourceful, and determined.

Whether or not the pitch today was successful didn't matter. Lucy would persevere. She'd make her own success.

As she swung out of bed and let her toes wiggle against the thick pile of the bedroom rug, Lucy straightened her spine and smiled. Then she got up and prepared for her big meeting.

This time, she wouldn't crack under pressure. She would fight her own monsters, and she'd win.

TWENTY-FOUR

A FAMILIAR HUM permeated the police station. It was the energy before a storm, the buzz in the air during a concert when the lights went down before the band took the stage.

The chief had evidently called on neighboring police departments to come help, because the station was full of officers. Cormac listened to Detective Holden's briefing, leaning against the back of the room. He'd worked alongside the Stirling Police frequently over the years he'd developed his business, either alerting them to attend scenes, debriefing them about incidents that happened while his team was in charge, or working as a consultant who helped plan security for large events.

The people in this room were good people, and he knew he was here because he'd built relationships with them over the years. Rick could have told him to get lost, and he would have been within his rights.

But Rick knew Cormac; he knew Cormac wouldn't stay away when the woman he cared about was involved.

So, Cormac found himself admitted to the briefing and under strict orders to stay out of the way. He had been temporarily hired as a consultant who could observe and

advise on security risks as they approached the hunting lodge, but he could not act.

As the briefing broke up, the detective made a beeline toward him. “You stay in the car, McKenna,” Rick said.

Cormac pinched his lips. “Heard you the first time, Detective. And the second and third.”

“I’m doing you a favor by letting you ride along, but I won’t have you messing up this case. We need to do this by the book to nail these guys.”

Cormac’s back teeth ached as he ground them together. “Understood.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

They drove through town, a convoy of police vehicles and unmarked cars that drew the attention of the handful of people who were awake and about this early in the morning. Cormac let the adrenaline coursing through him heighten his senses. He calmed himself, slowed his breathing, controlled his heartbeat.

He was doing this for Lucy. For their future. For the forever she’d promised him.

They turned off the freeway down the country road that would lead them to the cottage. Cormac checked his phone, where he had the live video from the cabin camera streaming.

“No movement,” he told the detective.

Rick nodded. “Good.”

Most of their convoy turned off a mile before the hunting cabin. They used a country road that circled around a big field to get as close as possible to the property without calling attention to themselves and then exited the vehicles. Two unmarked cruisers would park on either end of the road leading to the hunting lodge, in case things went south and someone made a run for it.

Cormac exited the detective’s car and took a deep breath. The air smelled of cow manure, grass, and pine needles. He

stared at the tree line that separated him from the targets, wishing it was time to storm the property.

But they had to wait for Rhonda to show up once more. If they caught her in the act of trading with Phillipses' gang, they could potentially find who she was buying the forgeries for. They could pull the weed out by the root.

So, Cormac found himself creeping through the forest once more. The officers around him fanned out, each knowing exactly what position to take. They'd surround the property and charge at the critical moment.

Cormac's vision narrowed. As the roof of the hunting cabin came into view, his pulse began to hammer. He worked hard to keep himself calm, but all he could see was Lucy's exploding car, the wide-eyed stare she'd given him when he'd dumped her in the van and told Sam to get her somewhere safe.

These people had put that look on her face. They'd terrorized her for years—and for what? They felt threatened based on an assumption that she was just as rotten as they were? They saw a competitor where there was simply a woman trying to build a life and business for herself?

It wasn't right.

They didn't get to hurt the woman Cormac loved and get away with it.

He hunkered down under the cover of some thick foliage, resolve draping over him like a blanket. The day brightened with every passing minute, the sun making its ascent across the clear blue sky. It was a beautiful day to rid the town of some scum.

With that thought soothing his nerves, Cormac settled in to wait. And wait. And wait.

MEANWHILE, Lucy was making preparations of her own. Today would be life-changing in more ways than one. While Cormac dealt with the Phillips mess, she'd propel her business to the next level. She'd overcome her demons and prove that no conference room full of overconfident men in suits could

keep her down. She was Lucy Barlow, of Invitations Etcetera. She was worthy of this deal, no matter what her previous failures might have said.

Her confidence lasted until Sam rang the buzzer and told her he was at Cormac's front door. She let him in and gathered her computer and product samples. The two new designs she had worked on looked polished and perfect. She slipped them into her bag next to her laptop and turned to face Sam. When she nodded, her heart gave a nervous flutter. Her palms began to sweat as the elevator took them down to the basement parking lot, and her legs trembled as she walked to the car.

"You ready?" Sam asked as he started the car.

"No," Lucy answered.

Sam grinned and headed for the exit. They emerged onto a sun-drenched street lined with flower baskets and fluttering green leaves. Spring was barreling toward summer, and the people of Stirling couldn't get enough. Lucy watched a little girl in a sundress sprint toward her friend at the end of the street while her mother jogged behind and yelled. A little farther on, a group of women holding yoga mats under their arms stood outside a studio and chatted.

It was a wonderful place to live, and Lucy knew this was where she belonged.

They drove on, leaving the happy townspeople behind. Lucy let out a long sigh and tried to settle her jangling nerves.

"You'll do great," Sam said as he turned to enter the gates that opened onto the long drive to the hotel.

The Juniper and Sage team were staying in the Old Road Hotel, just outside of town. It was the fanciest venue in town, with a dramatic driveway lined with trees and flowers. The hotel's stone walls were gray and solid, immovable, a permanent feature on the verdant landscape. It looked like a true fortress.

Lucy's heart rattled. The car slowed as they traversed the hotel grounds, and the building loomed ahead.

Somewhere inside those walls, Lucy's future would be decided. She'd either win a huge contract that would secure her future, or she'd have to keep fighting for every sale.

A deep breath, and Lucy settled herself enough to think. She could do this.

Sam parked in front of the doors and got out. He walked her inside, scanning the lobby, then nodded. "I'll be right here when you're done."

She nodded, then went to the front desk to ask about her meeting. She was directed to the third floor, which held a few meeting rooms, a gym, and a spa. In the elevator, Lucy took off the bulletproof blazer and folded it over her arm. She wouldn't need it where she was going.

The elevator jerked to a stop and spit her out in a narrow hallway. The carpet was dark brown with a pale pattern running through it, and the walls were a matching soft cream. Generic, upscale artwork dotted the walls. She glanced at the placard on the wall and followed its directions to turn left toward the meeting rooms.

Each step was harder to take than the last. She was walking to her execution, walking toward failure. The sound of conversation reached her ears from the far meeting room, and Lucy sucked in a hard breath.

She paused, leaning one palm against the wall, and squeezed her eyes shut.

Memories assaulted her. She remembered the sneering man who'd started her spiral, the way he'd scoffed when she'd given him her doomed pitch. She remembered the frozen feelings in her limbs, the way her brain turned sluggish and slow. It had been a horrible moment. An awful failure.

But this was different, Lucy reminded herself. She thought of Cormac, somewhere near that hunting lodge, putting himself in harm's way for her. She thought of his grin which she loved to coax out of hiding. She thought of his face when he bit into the donut he stole from her, the challenge in his eyes.

She'd risen to that challenge, and she'd rise to this one.

With one more deep breath, Lucy straightened her shoulders and walked into the conference room. It was similar to most other conference rooms, only slightly nicer. There was the same long table and the same leather chairs, but one of the walls had wood paneling around the projector screen. The wall opposite the door was one large window looking out on the hotel grounds and the forest beyond.

Belinda stood when Lucy entered, smiling warmly. "Lucy. Did you find us okay?"

"No problem at all," Lucy said, shaking the other woman's hand. "This view is gorgeous!"

Words of agreement rang around the room, and Lucy's shoulders relaxed. She smiled, putting her best extrovert disguise on, and began setting up her computer. She handed out samples while she introduced herself, and when the tech was set up, she turned on the projector screen and launched into her pitch.

It was a blur. She'd been careful to craft the pitch in terms of what she could offer Juniper and Sage as a designer, peppering in details about her own journey to build her brand. She focused on the mix of contemporary and classic, that specific blend she'd created over the years that set her apart from her competition. When she handed out her sample designs, her heart buzzed at the sight of all those executives studying them, turning them over, nodding to each other.

"Do you do anything other than weddings?" one of them asked, a serious, frowning man who sat at the far end of the table. Belinda had said his name was William Sage, one of the owners of the company. His hair was white, his face clean-shaven, and he leaned back in his chair like he was used to presiding over meetings like this. He'd been the first one to toss Lucy's sample onto the table after she'd handed them out.

Lucy's gut gave a pulse. He looked so much like the man who'd challenged her before that she had to blink away the double-vision that superimposed the past onto the present. Then she squared her shoulders and said, "I focus on wedding

stationery in my own business, but I'm willing to work with you on different projects. I'd welcome the chance to expand my range."

The man harrumphed, but Belinda gave Lucy a subtle wink. There were a few more questions from the team, and then it was all over.

Belinda got up and walked her to the elevator, grinning. "They loved you," she said.

"They did?"

Belinda laughed. "Oh, yeah."

"Even Mr. Sage?"

"He's a tough old nut, but yes, he's in. We're going to talk details now, but I hope to have an offer in your inbox by the end of the day tomorrow."

Lucy couldn't have kept her smile hidden if she tried. "I'll look forward to hearing from you."

They shook hands again, and Lucy got into the elevator. She waited until the doors closed and the elevator started moving before jumping up and down and letting out a squeal of excitement. She'd done it. *She'd done it!*

Despite the fear, despite her history, Lucy had marched in there and made them see her value. She couldn't wait to tell Cormac. She had to thank him—without his influence, she doubted whether she'd have found the confidence to come here at all. He was the one who'd seen what was inside her and coaxed it out. He was the one who'd believed in her when everyone else told her to use the safety net they stretched below her.

Her heart felt light, and her limbs were loose. She slipped the blazer back on, hugging it to her chest and sniffing the lapel, even though Cormac's scent had long since faded. She couldn't *wait* to tell him how her day had gone. He would be so proud! The soreness in her cheeks would only get worse, because Lucy knew she wouldn't be able to stop smiling all day.

That is, until the elevator stopped and the doors opened, and Lucy saw Aaron Phillips standing on the other side. His hair fell in greasy hanks across his forehead, his clothes rumpled and dirty. He had that same feverish look in his eyes as when he'd confronted her at her apartment building, and it made the scream in Lucy's throat die before it could be heard.

"Hello, Lucy," he said, reaching into the elevator to grab her.

TWENTY-FIVE

CORMAC'S NECK ITCHED. A mosquito buzzed around his ear as the forest inhaled and exhaled around him. Time dribbled on and on, one slow second reaching for the next.

It was excruciating.

He checked his watch. Lucy would be in the middle of her pitch by now, blowing all those executives away. And if they weren't blown away, they didn't deserve her genius.

Maybe he didn't deserve her either, but it was too late. He'd found her, and now she was his. He'd move heaven and earth to be with her—and that included the criminals in the hunting lodge less than fifty feet away.

"Incoming," a voice in his ear crackled.

He glanced at Rick, who arched his brows. "You stay here," the detective warned—again.

Cormac nodded, hoping his face didn't betray the boiling impatience threatening to overflow inside him. He'd stay here, as he'd been ordered—but he'd watch, and be ready. If anything went wrong, if any one of those assholes inside decided to make a run for it, they'd have to get through him first.

After this takedown, he and Lucy would have a clear runway to launch the rest of their lives. She was worth the muddy forest floor soaking through his knees. She was worth the mosquito feasting on his exposed neck. She was worth the unbearable, excruciating wait.

Because Lucy had shown him everything he'd locked away. He didn't want to keep himself apart from her the way he did when they'd first met. Yes, he wanted to protect her, but that was who he was. The crucible of his childhood had molded him into what he was today. A protector. A defender.

Today, he'd do it for her.

A car rolled down the gravel driveway. Cormac peered through the trees and saw the redhead behind the wheel, his blood pounding a little bit harder. She'd come back to this grimy, godforsaken place. She'd regret that.

It felt like the whole forest held its breath as the car parked beside the wood-paneled Crown Vic. Birds stopped calling, and the leaves became still. Even the hungry mosquito stopped buzzing around Cormac's ear. Beside him, Rick watched with predatory intensity.

Rhonda cut the engine and got out of the car. She stood beside the driver-side door and regarded the hunting lodge for a moment before yelling, "Come out, you idiot! I haven't got all day!"

The side door banged open. Cormac was on the opposite side of the house, so he could only hear the heavy footsteps along the porch, then a short moment of silence before Meaty appeared in the driveway.

He held up a box in one gigantic hand. "You got the cash?"

Rhonda reached into her purse and extracted an envelope. "Every dollar."

"Hand it over."

The envelope disappeared into the purse once more, and Rhonda crossed her arms. "You hand it over."

"Lady, I haven't got all day."

“Listen, you brainless lump of meat. I pay you for the goods, not empty cardboard boxes. Open it up and let me see.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not as far as I could throw you,” Rhonda sneered, looking the big man up and down.

Meaty grumbled, then ripped the tape off the top of the box. Beside Cormac, Rick shifted his weight. His eyes were glued on the exchange. Cormac’s pulse pounded. His hands opened and closed at his sides, itching to pound his fist into that man’s face just one more time.

But there was someone else who was responsible for the explosion that almost took Lucy’s life. Someone else who needed to be taken down. Someone who was calling the shots.

Cormac listened to a new set of footsteps on the porch, leaning forward, then let out a disappointed breath when Lanky appeared. Where was Phillips?

“What are you waiting for?” Cormac breathed.

“Need to see the exchange,” Rick replied, not taking his eyes off the three people outside the cabin.

Lanky ambled over and crossed his arms, glowering at Rhonda. She paid the two men no mind, plucking a bundle of bills out of the box and flipping through it. She rummaged around the box, then huffed and nodded. “Fine.”

“Give us the cash.”

The woman rolled her eyes and grabbed the envelope from her purse once more. She slapped it into Meaty’s meaty hand and took the box from his other. “Nice doing business with you,” she said, and the forest erupted.

“*POLICE, FREEZE!*” a dozen officers shouted, jumping from their hiding spots to rush the group.

Beside Cormac, Rick rushed forward, gun in his hands, barking orders.

Meaty whirled, face an ugly shade of purple, fists balled up and ready to punch. Rhonda let out an impotent scream.

Lanky looked terrified and immediately dropped to the ground with his hands outstretched.

Officers streamed out of the forest and surrounded the cabin. Cormac drifted closer, eyes peeled, looking for Phillips. He took a step toward the door and Rick barked, “Back off, McKenna,” so Cormac froze.

He was utterly useless. His face must have been the same shade as Meaty’s, because all he felt was a burning-hot frustration. His eyes scanned the scene, the officers, the criminals. He heard shouts of “Clear!” coming from the hunting cabin, and his breaths became short and staggered.

An awful feeling gurgled in his gut. He hurried along the side of the cabin, peeking in windows, checking under piles of junk. His heart pounded harder and faster as the minutes dragged on, until he was jogging around the cabin and searching the nearby bushes.

Then he heard the words that confirmed what he feared to be true: “He’s not here, boss,” one of the officers told the detective. “But you’re going to want to see this.”

Rick, in response, swore so loudly a bird flapped away from a tree with a squawk. Cormac watched it go, surprised it had lasted this long with the din the police had made. And then he let the reality of the situation settle over him like a dark cloud.

Phillips had gotten away—again.

Hands balled into fists, Cormac stomped down the path at the back of the cabin, needing a moment to compose himself. His pulse rattled. His chest was hot and tight. His vision was hazed in red. The fury roiling in his gut needed an outlet, and he was afraid of what he’d do if he didn’t get it under control.

Tromping down the narrow dirt path, he sucked in deep breaths of loam-scented air and tried to get himself together. Flying off the handle wouldn’t help Lucy. He needed a clear, calm head to find Phillips and bring him to justice.

That’s when he saw the flash of pale fabric between the trunks of two distant trees. He was sprinting before he

consciously decided to move. Branches tore at his clothes, clinging to his arms, trying to hold him back. Leaves obscured his vision. Roots and lichen and ferns conspired to rise up and make him stumble.

But Cormac ran on.

And—there! Someone darted around a copse of pine trees.

He slapped a tree and used it to push off at an angle to intercept. His breaths burned through his lungs, great gasping inhalations that propelled him forward. Thighs burning, arms pumping, Cormac ran as fast as the forest allowed, leaping over a bush to finally crash into the person who was trying to get away.

A woman howled as he brought her to the ground. Her hat tumbled off, revealing iron-colored ringlets. One liver-spotted arm clawed forward, as if she could pull herself out of Cormac's grasp.

“Get off me!” she screamed.

Cormac, horrified at having tackled an old woman, scrambled up. But, wait, why had she been hurrying away from the cabin? No one lived in these parts—no one for miles except the farmer whose land they'd used to corral their vehicles.

The woman darted off, faster than Cormac expected. She found a little animal trail that slipped through the trees and took it, making it a good ten feet before Cormac wrapped his arms around her and lifted her kicking feet off the ground.

“Let go of me!”

“Who are you?”

“Put me down, you animal!”

“*Who are you?*” Cormac roared.

She stopped wriggling, but he could feel the tension vibrating in every inch of her body. She was heavier than she looked, but he could still hold her above the ground without too much trouble. He gave her a little shake.

She harrumphed, then turned her head to the side so he could see her sneer in profile. “You’ll never get your precious girlfriend back now. It’s too late.”

Ice jetted through Cormac’s veins. “What?”

“You heard me.”

He dropped the woman to her feet and spun her around. There was something about her face... Where had he seen her before?

She saw him looking and tipped her head back, cackling. “Recognize me, do you? Those damn reporters had my face plastered all over the television for months after my sister got caught.”

Recognition slammed into Cormac. This was Mrs. Gordon, Amelia’s old neighbor. She’d been a fence; she and her sister would steal precious goods and resell them for profit. She’d gone on the run when her sister was found out, and though the press in Stirling and the surrounding areas had been relentless, the trail had gone cold.

They’d discovered that Gordon wasn’t the sisters’ surname at all, but Brown.

“Ethel Brown,” the woman confirmed, laughing at Cormac’s shock, “at your service.”

He wrapped a hand around her bicep and turned toward the cabin. “Keep laughing, Ethel. You can cackle all you want when you’re behind bars.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so rash,” the woman said as she hobbled beside him. “Don’t you want to know where my son took your sweetheart?”

Cormac stopped. Turned. Stared into the dark, dark eyes of the sneering old woman at his side. “What did you say?”

“I said, don’t you want to know where my boy took your Lucy?”

“Your son is Aaron Phillips?”

Those dark eyes went flat. She clicked her tongue and shook her head, as if disappointed. “He tries, the poor dear, but he doesn’t have the stomach for this life. That stunt he pulled with that girl’s car was pure lunacy. And those two idiots actually went through with it. It’s so hard to find decent help these days.”

Cormac stared at her, his hand still around her upper arm. He had the feeling that if he let go, she’d turn into a snake and slither away in the leaves and grass and ferns that littered the forest floor.

“I know, I know,” she continued, clearly enjoying herself. “You don’t believe me. But I had nothing to do with that explosion. I *told* him that Lucy wasn’t in the business. You’re in it as many years as I am, you get a nose for this stuff. But he insisted. He said he’d prove it to me. And what could I say? He’s my son. I told him to go ahead, and next thing I know there’s a car blowing up in broad daylight. I mean, honestly, what was he thinking? I knew it would end in disaster. Tried to warn you off, too, but I couldn’t get past that bulldog you call a receptionist.”

Cormac frowned, then remembered the call Karin had told him about. Ethel had had the guts to call his place of business. She was brazen. Delusional.

She let out a sigh, still speaking. “And this morning, when I heard engines in the distance, I had a bad feeling. Took no time at all to convince those idiots to stay at the cabin while Aaron and I took our leave. When I heard your people crashing through the trees, I figured it was time to go.”

Cormac leaned forward, staring into those soulless eyes. “Where is she?” he hissed, the words burning as they crossed his tongue. “Where’s Lucy?”

“By now?” Ethel grinned. “Who knows? Maybe she’s no longer of this world.”

Cormac never thought he’d hurt a woman, but at this moment, his grip on her arm tightened. “Stop playing games, Ethel. Where’s Lucy?”

She arched a brow, staring at him through the wrinkled face of a long life spent doing terrible deeds. The bones of her face spoke of beauty, decades ago, but Ethel Brown was the ugliest woman he'd ever seen.

“It seems to me you have a choice to make, boy,” she told him, savoring the words. “You can let me go and save your sweetheart, or you can do the right thing and drag me back so those police officers can lock me up. What’s it going to be? Do you choose your ethics, or your woman?”

If he were a better man, a more moral man, Cormac might have hesitated. He might have considered the pros and cons of each option, might have wanted to bring a criminal to justice so she wouldn't hurt anyone else. This woman deserved to rot in jail until she died.

But Cormac's moral code started and ended with the people he loved. He let go of her arm. “I choose Lucy,” he said, and the old woman began to laugh.

TWENTY-SIX

THE BULLETPROOF BLAZER didn't seem like a very big defense against an actual gun. Lucy flinched as the muzzle of Aaron's gun jammed into her gut and wondered if carbon nanotubes worked at close range. She had no desire to play the guinea pig to find out.

"This way," Aaron hissed, dragging her out of the elevator and away from the lobby.

"Aaron, wait," she protested, but he shoved the gun against the small of her back.

"Quiet. You don't make a noise and I don't blow your spine out."

All the elation, the happiness, the relief that Lucy had felt a moment ago deflated like an old party balloon. She felt stretched out and flimsy, like she'd rip at any moment. She stumbled over a wrinkle in the carpet and Aaron snatched her back upright, hissing threats in her ear.

"You'll do as I say, and you won't say a word," he said, hauling her down the hallway toward the back of the hotel.

"Where are you taking me?"

“What did I just say?” His voice was fraying, and Lucy shut her mouth. She didn’t want to agitate him any more than he already was; that gun was far too close to her body for comfort.

They turned down a hallway and followed the glowing *EXIT* sign. Lucy’s stomach clenched, her throat closing like a fist.

She needed to think. *Do something*, she told herself, but they marched on and on, away from Sam and the safety of the lobby.

Aaron moved beside her, wrapping an arm around her elbow. The gun moved to the soft flesh at her side. She could feel its hardness through the layers of her clothes and knew a blazer wouldn’t save her, even if Cormac had said it would.

Could she risk her new self-defense moves? Cormac had mentioned they’d work on disarming an attacker, but she’d only had a few days’ practice with basic moves. She had no idea what to do when a gun was involved. If she screamed, would Aaron shoot?

He might; desperation wafted from him in noxious gusts.

“Morning,” Aaron said to a passing staff member who eyeballed them oddly. Lucy tried to make big eyes at the woman, who pushed a cart laden with towels and cleaning supplies. Lucy opened her mouth to try to call for help, but Aaron tightened his grip on her arm, laughed pleasantly, and cut in, “Or is it afternoon?”

The maid huffed politely, checked her watch, and said, “Still morning, sir,” and pushed her trolley past them.

He hauled Lucy toward the exit door and shoved it open with his side. Then they were stumbling down some concrete steps and half-jogging toward a waiting car.

“Aaron, whatever you’re planning, it won’t work,” Lucy tried, certain that if she got in that car, she’d never see Cormac again.

“Shut up. You’ve ruined everything.”

“I just make wedding stationery. I promise. You got it all wrong.”

“Keep lying, Barlow,” he sneered. “I know the truth. You swanned into my shop and started asking so many *questions*. And then you paid me with one of my own bills. Brazen of you. Taunting me like that. I almost throttled you on the spot.”

“What?”

“*Shut up!*” Aaron hissed. “And Mama was worried about the ring, because she and Aunt Meredith had never tried anything so audacious as what they did at the retreat. And look how that turned out. So she didn’t believe me when I said you were trouble.”

What was he talking about? His mother? Lucy tried to keep up, but Aaron’s voice slurred, like he was drunk or feverish. She thought of that first meeting, how his face had changed when she’d paid him. Was it possible? Had she unwittingly given him one of his own fake bills?

It made sense, she realized in a distant, horrified sort of way. He’d thought she was sending him a message, but Lucy had had no idea she was paying with a counterfeit bill at all.

They stopped in front of a rusty pickup truck in the employee lot.

“Get in,” he said, opening the passenger door for her. When she was in her seat, he nodded to the safety belt. “Put that on. And no funny business.”

Lucy’s fingers trembled as she grabbed the buckle and slid it into its latch. Aaron slammed the door and jogged to the driver’s side. Lucy had her hand on the door handle as soon as he closed the door, but it was locked. He must have enabled the child locks.

She was stuck.

Breaths coming faster, Lucy beat back the panic trying to rise within her. *Think*, she commanded herself. *Think! Get out of this!*

“If you let me go, I’ll never tell anyone about this,” she wheedled.

“Be. *Quiet.*” He started the engine.

“Cormac will come after you,” she said, changing tack. “He’ll never let you get away if you hurt me.”

“I’m not scared of that meathead you call a boyfriend.”

“He’s less of a meathead than that idiot who attacked us.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Aaron said, keeping the gun in his lap as he drove out of the lot. “He’ll never find you.” He grabbed the gun again, his finger curled against the trigger.

Lucy didn’t know anything about guns, but she knew you weren’t supposed to do *that*. Wasn’t that the first rule of gun safety? Trigger discipline?

This idiot would end up shooting her by accident. That would be just her luck. She shifted in her seat, covering her thighs with the blazer, for whatever good it would do.

Her bag was on her lap, and she knew that if she unzipped the top, she’d be able to reach into the little interior side pocket and grab her phone. But how could she do that with Aaron glancing over every few seconds? She shifted the bag so the zipper faced away from him.

She had to distract him. Get him talking.

“Did you write that threat on the name card at my friend’s wedding?”

Aaron let out a bark of triumphant laughter. It sounded scratchy and terrifying. “Liked that one, did you?”

“How did you get inside the wedding venue? No one even saw you.” She tried to make herself sound impressed. Stroking his ego seemed like a good way to calm him down.

“There was no need,” Aaron said, shoulders easing slightly. That was good. “I just paid one of the caterers to find your card and pick it up off the table. Cost me twenty bucks,” he crowed, grinning. His hand kneaded the steering wheel, and

finally, the hand that he'd kept on his gun moved to join the other on the wheel.

Lucy let out a small breath.

“How did you meet Pete and Paul—”

“Enough questions,” he barked, grabbing the gun again. Lucy froze, forcing herself to take deep breaths.

They drove toward Stirling, but instead of heading for town, Aaron veered off on one of the roads that bypassed the town. That led them on a huge gridlike route down country roads that bisected farmers' fields, and then they looped back on the far side of Stirling. They'd skipped the town entirely. Where was he taking her?

By that time, Lucy had gotten the bag's zipper open. Talking to Aaron was a minefield, so she had to find some other way to get out of this situation. Slowly, she reached inside and felt the edge of her phone.

Why hadn't she put Cormac's number on speed dial? How could she call him and ask for help without alerting Aaron?

To Lucy's surprise, Aaron looped back toward the interstate but didn't turn away from Stirling. He took the exit that would lead them to town again, on the opposite side of the Old Road Hotel. And when they made another turn, Lucy knew exactly where he was taking her.

The front of the building was boarded up with pieces of plywood where Vicky had driven through the glass. Yellow and black police tape was draped across the door and the plywood covering, proclaiming it a crime scene. It was dark and grimy, and it sent shivers of fear darting through Lucy's gut.

Aaron had taken her to the place where this had started all those years ago: the Stirling Stationery Store.

He parked in front of the shop. “Get out.”

She slipped her phone into the blazer pocket while she undid her seatbelt, but she had no time to dial. Aaron was at her door, scanning the street, jerking his head to indicate he

wanted her to get out of the vehicle. The shop loomed ahead, the dark window on the left looking like a one-eyed giant surveying their progress.

“Aaron, you don’t have to do this.”

“I do,” he said, “because Mama thinks I mess everything up. But I told her I could handle you.”

“You don’t need to handle me.” She slowed down as much as she could, not wanting to approach the building. “You can just leave, and I won’t say anything. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I don’t believe you,” he snarled, which was fair. She was lying, after all.

Aaron shoved, and Lucy stumbled forward a few steps. The shop’s door was only a few feet away, and she knew down to the marrow of her bones that if she entered that space, if she let Aaron take her to the secret room in the back, she would never get out. He’d kill her there, and no one would ever find the body. She and Cormac wouldn’t get their forever. It would break him.

In the distance, she heard the screech of tires as an engine roared.

Death was a cackling demon standing in the doorway of Aaron’s shop, beckoning her forward.

But Lucy wasn’t ready to die.

She’d *just* gotten over her fears of failure. How absolutely rotten would it be to die after bagging a deal with one of the biggest greeting card companies in the country? How could she crawl out of the hole she’d dug for herself after she crashed and burned in her previous career, only to have her life end like *this*? At the hands of a madman who’d thought she was selling counterfeit money instead of wedding invitations!

Something crumbled in Lucy, a barrier she hadn’t known existed. Behind it, she found an endless well of strength, and bravery, and honest-to-goodness rage.

She was *not* going to die at the hands of the freaking Stirling Stationery Man.

“Stop stalling,” he said, stepping forward, which Lucy knew was a mistake. Because she could feel him at her back, could sense just where his body was positioned.

That endless well of strength and fury and righteous anger exploded, and Lucy died and was reborn in the detonation.

“*HI-YAH!*” she cried, stomping on Aaron’s foot. He yelped, but Lucy wasn’t done. She jabbed her elbow into his solar plexus with a scream, her lips curling into a cruelly satisfied snarl when she heard the breath wheeze out of him.

That car she’d heard screeched to a stop on the street, and Lucy knew she had to get away. What if it was an accomplice of Aaron’s? What if it was his mother, who’d obviously been pulling the strings?

She turned to see the Stirling Stationery Man doubled over, gasping for breath, still clinging to that gun. He stood, his eyes burning, and let out a feral yell as he staggered toward her.

Lucy let her knees soften. She brought her palms up. She used the twist of her hips to lend power to her movements, and she jammed the heel of her hand into Aaron Phillips’s face. Cartilage crunched and blood spurted out of the man’s nose. Lucy stood there, slightly horrified at what she’d done, while Aaron staggered back with a cry of pain.

Then she heard a door open and felt the cool relief of a familiar voice. “Lucy! *Run!*”

Cormac was lunging out of Meaty’s wood-paneled Crown Victoria, his face tight lines, his eyes blazing with fury and fear. He took her in with one glance, then, clearly satisfied that she was uninjured, swung around to face Aaron Phillips.

Cormac’s face changed, and Lucy followed his gaze. Her stomach dropped as she saw Aaron clutching the gun with both hands, pointing it at the man she loved. His face was smeared with blood. It coated his cheeks and lips and teeth as he bared them in a snarl.

“Say goodbye, Lucy,” Aaron said. “Your boyfriend’s about to get his brains blown out.”

“Lucy, stay there,” Cormac commanded, like he didn’t have a gun pointed at his head.

“Yeah, stay there,” Aaron repeated, his face crimson, his eyes full of strange, murderous light. “That way I know where to aim when I take my second shot.”

Cormac moved, but Lucy already knew he’d be too slow. He was too far away, and Aaron would be able to get multiple shots off. One of them would hit him, and if she survived what happened afterward, she’d have to go through life knowing she had Cormac—and then she lost him.

Calm settled over her, and time seemed to slow. Cormac wouldn’t be shot today. He would live because he was a good man, and because Lucy loved him more than anyone who had come before. He was hers, and she was his—forever.

They’d made that promise the night before, and Lucy wanted forever to last more than a measly day.

She felt herself lunge, heard the echo of Cormac’s panicked yell, saw the moment Aaron turned to aim the barrel at her. Lucy’s nanotube-clad arm reached out to Aaron as she crashed toward him, knocking his arm to the side as Aaron’s poor trigger discipline failed him, and the gun went off.

Pain exploded through Lucy’s upper chest. She flew back and landed on the concrete path leading to the shop, and time snapped back to normal. Cormac collided with Aaron, disarming him with a flick of the wrist and bringing the other man to the ground.

Lucy groaned, her shoulder in agony, and watched as Cormac pinned Aaron to the ground then sat back and smashed his fist in the Stationery Man’s face. Aaron cried out. His nose was pulp. Cormac snarled again, winding back.

“Honey,” Lucy croaked, and Cormac’s fist stilled.

Chest heaving, he stared at the man on the ground. “I want to kill him.”

“Please don’t,” she said.

“He deserves it.”

“I know, but then you’d go to jail, and that would make me sad.”

She watched Cormac reel himself back in. Saw the moment he regained control over his murderous urges. He flipped the other man over and pulled a pair of zip tie handcuffs from his pocket. In the distance, sirens echoed against the buildings in the center of Stirling, coming closer.

Cormac staggered to his feet, found the gun, and emptied it. He dropped it on the ground and turned to Lucy, who was trying to sit up despite the pain in her shoulder.

“Hi,” she said lamely when he dropped to his knees in front of her. “My shoulder hurts.”

Cormac peeled back the blazer and they both looked down. He let out a breath at the sight of her unbroken skin, his eyes filling with tears. “You’ll bruise,” he said, “and we’ll have to get you checked out for broken bones.” He ran his fingers over her red, aching collarbone, jaw tensing.

“But the blazer worked,” Lucy said wonderingly.

Cormac put both hands on her face and kissed her hard, his whole body trembling. It was agony for her shoulder, but so worth it.

“I’m okay,” she whispered when he pulled away. Behind him, police cars were screeching to a stop and people were pouring out of them.

“I was too late,” Cormac said, tortured.

Lucy shook her head. “You were right on time.”

“You got *shot*.”

“Only because I wanted to stop him from shooting you.”

“Don’t ever do that again. Do you hear me, Lucy? Don’t ever put yourself in the path of a bullet for me.”

She traced the line of his jaw and felt the love in her breast swell. He was her man. This caring, beautiful, overprotective, bullish, stubborn, funny man was *hers*, and she was never letting him go. “I was the one wearing the bulletproof

clothing,” she said, “and besides, did you see my moves? I used my hips like you said, and then there was blood everywhere. His nose made a horrible noise when I hit it. You should have warned me about that.”

Cormac huffed and shook his head, his eyes still full of pain. “You shouldn’t have had to do any of that, baby. I should’ve been here to keep you safe.”

The police were doing their thing just behind Cormac, making noise, moving fast, and the detective was marching toward them with steely purpose. He looked very angry as he glared at the back of Cormac’s head. They’d have to deal with whatever consequences were coming. Lucy suspected Cormac hadn’t had permission to drive that Crown Vic across town to get to her.

It would be easy to pull away from Cormac and leave things as they were, deal with the storm gathering on the lawn behind him, but Lucy knew this moment was important. She put her hand on Cormac’s cheek and looked into those deep, dark-blue eyes.

“You taught me how to get away from an attacker. You gave me a bulletproof blazer. You did that, my love. And you know what else?” She stared into his eyes, smiling. “You made me realize that I won’t crumble under pressure. You’re the only person in my life that’s treated me like I’m capable. You gave me everything I needed to keep myself safe, Cormac. I was throwing the punches, but you were the reason I could do it in the first place.”

Cormac still looked troubled, but his shoulders softened. “You were amazing. Perfect form.”

“Exactly. Don’t take this moment away from me and try to claim it for yourself,” she said, stroking his cheeks. “This might be the only time *I* get to save *your* life.”

“You’re damn right it will be,” he growled, but his eyes had lost their darkness. The corner of his lips curled ever so slightly, and Cormac leaned forward to rest his forehead against Lucy’s. “I love you so much, Lucy.”

“And I love you.”

“I thought I lost you before we even got a chance to make this work.”

“I’m here,” Lucy replied softly. “And I’m not going anywhere. It’s you and me.”

“Me and you.”

“Forever,” Lucy added, for good measure. He looked like he needed to hear it, and, hell, Lucy needed the reminder too. She’d almost lost him.

Cormac kissed her, then, and the world fell away. Her shoulder ached when he wrapped his arm around her back, but Lucy ignored the pain. She was in the arms of the man she loved, and he loved her back, and a whimpering Aaron was being hauled off, and Lucy knew that absolutely everything would be okay.

EPILOGUE

LUCY'S COLLARBONE wasn't broken. She had an angry purple bruise for a while, and it turned into a mottled mess of yellow, green, and black, but it healed quickly. The blazer had done its job.

Inside the hunting cabin, the police found bomb-making supplies, printing supplies, and a huge stash of one-dollar bills. Aaron and his gang had been bleaching the ones and reprinting them as hundred-dollar notes. They sold them for twenty dollars each, making a tidy profit. Aaron admitted to it all, telling the police he hired the Wendells for muscle. The bomb had been Aaron's idea, which Lanky had been all too happy to carry out.

Rhonda refused to name her boss, which frustrated the police officers to no end. Lucy could tell Rick wasn't ready to let it go. He came to see her and Cormac at Cormac's apartment about a week after the arrests were made to explain what they'd found so far. He warned them that until they knew who was buying the counterfeit bills, someone might be looking for retribution.

Cormac didn't like the sound of that. His face was grim, his eyes dark. Lucy watched him absorb the information, waiting until Rick left to wrap her arms around her man.

“Hey,” she said, “I don’t like that look on your face.”

He held her tight, meeting her gaze. “If anyone were to hurt you...”

“I’ll elbow them in the solar plexus.”

Cormac’s touch was gentle as he brushed it over her bruise. It wasn’t nearly as sore as it had been the day it happened, but the skin was still tender.

“Cormac,” Lucy said, placing her hand over his. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know,” he said.

Cormac’s personality would never change. He would always be protective. He would always have more than one lock on his door. But he wasn’t blaming himself for what had happened; that was progress. Just like Lucy discovering her inner strength, Cormac had finally begun to let his childhood wound scab over.

Lucy wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. They made it to the couch before their clothes came off.

WORK-WISE, Lucy won the contract with Juniper and Sage. Working with the big company gave her something to focus on for the weeks that followed the arrests and helped her find her footing again.

Ruby introduced Lucy to her wedding planner friend, and Lucy quickly gained three new clients from the introduction. There was an influx of inquiries from the Wedding Expo—and the drama that happened after didn’t hurt her notoriety, either. Her brand got more exposure from the explosion and subsequent arrests than she’d ever been able to get on her own. She made the national news and got so swamped with orders that she had to scramble to hire an assistant. Business was good.

Similarly, Cormac completed the big Hampstead family contract in time for Marlon to come back, and the two of them continued on as if nothing had happened. After Cormac got chewed out for taking the Crown Vic and driving a significant

piece of evidence across town, no one mentioned it again. Cormac didn't seem sorry at all.

When her lease ended at the end of the summer, Lucy moved in with Cormac. She'd never envisioned herself moving in with a man after only dating him a few months, but things with Cormac were different. He was hers, and she was his. The certainty of it was imprinted on her soul. There would be no other man for her, so why would she hesitate? Most of her stuff was at his place, anyway. Making the move official was like turning the page on a difficult period of her life. Now she could finally move on.

They continued their early-morning self-defense classes, which often devolved into vigorous lovemaking. Lucy wasn't complaining about any of it. Her life was busy and brimming with happiness. It was hard to imagine things getting any better.

But they did.

A year passed in bliss until Cormac came home carrying a giant garment bag. Lucy, who had been lavishing Princess Snowball with affection on the couch, turned to watch him approach and frowned.

"What's that?" she asked.

Cormac dumped the garment bag over the back of the couch beside her and stood back to cross his arms. "It's for you."

She gently coaxed the cat off her lap and stood, smiling hesitantly. He'd already had a bespoke bulletproof suit made for her, and she doubted he'd get her another one. "What is it?"

"You have to open it to find out."

Lucy came around to the back of the couch where Cormac stood, gave him a searching look, then turned to the garment bag. It was black, and a little clear window in the breast showed her a patch of white fabric inside. Her heart began to thump.

Hands shaking, Lucy grabbed the zipper, tugged it down—and gasped.

Reverently, she pushed open the two sides of the opening and ran her hands over the intricately beaded dress within. It twinkled silver and white under the living room lights, all the way down to the froth of tulle at the bottom.

It was the dress. *The* dress. The one that had stopped Lucy in her tracks at the Wedding Expo, the one that Cormac thought was hiding an enemy. The one she'd babbled about because his hand had been on her elbow and she hadn't been able to think straight.

“Cormac,” she whispered, tracing the sweetheart neckline with the very tips of her fingers.

“I know you said you'd have nowhere to wear it, but you're wrong. You don't need a fancy venue to wear a dress. You don't need any excuse at all.”

“Well, it is a wedding dress,” she said, slightly sardonically. “I might need *that* excuse.”

She turned to Cormac, grinning, only to see a strange look in his eyes. There was vulnerability there, and a trembling sort of hope.

“Yeah,” he said, “but that could be arranged.”

Her heart punched her ribcage, and all the air left her lungs. She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “Are you—are you proposing to me?”

Reaching over, Cormac grasped her hand and pulled her close, as if he couldn't bear to not be touching her. “Yes,” he finally answered. “That's exactly what I'm doing.”

Bottom lip trembling, Lucy launched herself at him the same way she had at the Wedding Expo all those months ago. He caught her, laughing, his eyes full of tears. She cupped his face in her hands and felt her heart swell.

“Is that a yes?” he asked, gaze flicking between her eyes.

“It's a hell yes,” she confirmed—and kissed him.

When they finally broke apart, Lucy slid to the floor and turned to the dress, pulling it out of the garment bag to admire it.

It was as gorgeous as she'd thought that first day. Dramatic and elegant and *loud*. It was the opposite of what she'd ever allow herself to buy if she were to go out shopping for a wedding dress.

It was perfect.

"If you want something different, I won't be offended," Cormac said as he wrapped his arms around her stomach. "It was just the look on your face when you saw the dress...the longing... Lucy, I want to give you everything you could ever want."

She leaned her head back against his chest, her eyes on the dress. "I love the dress," she said.

"But?"

"I just never imagined having a wedding. I still... I just don't like being stared at. I'd have to walk down the aisle, and say my vows in front of all those people..."

Cormac squeezed her, his lips brushing her temple. "I was thinking, maybe we could get married with just the two of us, somewhere outdoors, a photographer, the officiant. We could throw a party for everyone else if you wanted, but maybe... maybe the ceremony could be just for us. You and me."

Lucy's heart melted. This man—this big, stoic, stubborn man—knew her so well it staggered her. What Cormac was proposing sounded so perfect she couldn't think of any way to improve it. She'd get the dress and the party, but she wouldn't have to deal with any of the pressure. They could have their special, intimate ceremony exactly how they wanted, and Lucy wouldn't have to be uncomfortable being the center of attention.

"You and me," Lucy answered, whispering. She turned in the circle of his arms and looked up at him, a tremulous smile curling the corners of her lips. "How soon can we do it?"

THEY GOT their license from the town clerk the following day but had to wait a little over a week to have their ceremony. Even with a simple wedding, arrangements had to be made. The dress fit perfectly—Cormac’s tailor had her measurements from when he made the bulletproof suit—but they had to find an officiant and a photographer, explain the plan to their families and friends, organize rings and a tuxedo, and check the weather. Then, on a balmy September Saturday, Lucy pinned her hair into a low chignon, put on her makeup, and slipped on the dress of her dreams.

She stared at herself in the mirror, a mix of nerves and excitement and pure love sloshing in her stomach. She turned to admire the back of the dress, with its row of tiny buttons and intricate detailing. She felt more beautiful than she ever had before. The dress was perfect. The lining brushed against her skin when she moved, and she found herself reaching beneath the bodice to feel it between her fingers. It felt familiar, somehow.

Cormac appeared in the bedroom doorway, looking dapper in his black tuxedo. She saw him from the corner of her eye, but she was busy staring at her dress, frowning.

“Lucy...” Cormac let out a gust of breath, the emotion in his voice making it tremble. “You look... You look incredible. I can’t believe... I love y—”

She straightened and faced him, and something in her face made Cormac pause.

“What?”

“Cormac,” she started, narrowing her eyes.

“What is it?” Something like fear entered his expression. “Are you—you’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

Silly man.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she answered, putting her hands on her hips. “But tell me the truth.”

“About what?”

“Is this dress bulletproof?”

Cormac's face went blank. "I, uh, might have asked for some...um...modifications...when I was getting it made. It's the lining, specifically, that... They told me it would be imperceptible, so..." He trailed off, then set his jaw. "Listen, they still haven't found who was buying that counterfeit money, Lucy. I'm not taking any chances."

They stared at each other for a beat—and then Lucy began to laugh. She laughed so hard she had to redo her makeup before they could finally leave.

SO, Lucy wore a bulletproof dress to marry the man of her dreams. The ceremony was performed in one of the many parks in Stirling, under the leaves of maples and oaks and elms that were bursting with a million different shades of autumn. The air smelled fresh and crisp, and Lucy's heart overflowed. She held Cormac's hands as the officiant proclaimed them man and wife, a sacred, special moment that would forever belong to just the two of them.

Their first kiss as a married couple made Lucy's toes curl. She clung to her husband, smiling against his lips.

"I love you," she whispered.

"You're my world," he replied.

They got in Cormac's car and headed across town to a purple Victorian, where all their loved ones had gathered. There were hugs and teary kisses and many congratulations, and then Lucy and Cormac went inside to see Lucy's parents' house transformed.

Scarlett had provided gorgeous flowers to decorate the space. Drinks began to flow, and everyone gathered in the backyard and the sunroom to celebrate the union of two people who were destined to be together. The meal was a barbecue, and their cake was a tower of donuts made by Camilla. Lucy wore her gorgeous, glittering, elegant dress the whole day, and she realized Cormac was right. She hadn't needed a fancy venue at all. All she'd needed was him.

SCARLETT HAD NEVER BEEN to a wedding quite like this one, and she loved it. Love thrummed in the air as people

gathered in Lucy's parents' backyard, everyone happy to celebrate the couple however Lucy and Cormac chose.

She'd worked hard that week to put together flowers for the reception, their sweet, fragrant perfume permeating the air. After just over three years in this town, Scarlett was beginning to feel like one of the locals. She adjusted one of the bouquets on the banquet table in the sunroom, plucking a wilted leaf from one of the stems.

"They're so gorgeous, Scarlett," Dolly said, approaching the table to deposit a tray of fresh-cut fruit. "You have a real talent."

She smiled at the older woman. "There's something special about flowers, don't you think? They're pure beauty, and you're forced to enjoy them while they last."

"A good philosophy for life in general," Dolly replied, smiling. She came closer and wrapped her arms around Scarlett. "Thank you for doing this for my daughter," she said, her voice muffled in Scarlett's hair.

Throat tight, Scarlett nodded. "Lucy and the girls made this town feel like home," she admitted. "I haven't felt that in a long time."

Dolly pulled away and cupped Scarlett's cheek. The touch was motherly; it made Scarlett's chest ache. "You belong here," she said, and for the first time in many, many years, Scarlett believed her.

She'd been through a lot, this past decade, but things were finally looking up.

Behind Dolly, Amelia and Leo were setting up a microphone and a projector. It was nearly time for speeches.

Dolly left Scarlett to continue restocking the food table, and Scarlett drifted toward Amelia and Leo. The two of them were frowning at the laptop on the side table just inside the sunroom door, pressing the power button and watching the screen remain black and lifeless.

"Everything okay?" Scarlett asked.

“Laptop died,” Amelia said, huffing. “I can’t hook up the projector now, and I had a whole slideshow prepared.”

“If you have the slideshow saved on the Cloud, we could use my computer? It’s in my car,” Scarlett offered.

Leo and Amelia met her gaze, eyes full of hope. Leo nodded. “That would be great.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Amelia added.

“Be right back!” Scarlett hustled to her car and grabbed her laptop bag. Her heels sank into the earth as she crossed the front lawn to get back inside, and she had to brush a few blades of grass off her shoes before reentering. When she made it to the back of the house with her laptop. Amelia and Leo were ready for it. Within moments, the projector was hooked up, the microphone was on, and Leo was tapping a knife on the edge of a champagne flute to get everyone’s attention.

Amelia had successfully gotten her slideshow working, so pictures were beaming onto a projector screen set up against the house. Photos of Lucy, Cormac, their families, and their friends faded into each other, drawing murmurs and laughs from the crowd. One particular photo made everyone say “aww” in unison: a candid photo taken just a few months earlier at Camilla’s birthday party. The two of them were on the couch, holding plates with thick slices of birthday cake, and Lucy was lifting her fork like she wanted to feed a bite to Cormac. She looked mischievous, grinning. Cormac smiled softly at Lucy in the photo, enamored, the two of them oblivious to the world around them.

Scarlett smiled, happy for her friends. It was a bittersweet kind of happiness, though. A secret part of her felt sad that she’d never have a man look at her like that. She’d never be loved as deeply as Cormac loved Lucy.

“You want to go first?” Amelia asked quietly.

Scarlett smiled. “Sure,” she said, happy to be able to share this day with the people who had become important to her.

So, after Leo had finished getting everyone's attention, Scarlett took the microphone from him. Movement from the sunroom doorway drew her gaze briefly, where she saw Archer Jones leaning against the jamb. The late-afternoon sunlight gilded his strands of brown hair, highlighting all the angles and hollows of his face. His skin was rough from the sun and wind and rain, its ruggedness making him look slightly dangerous. This was a man who worked with his hands, who spent time outdoors.

Their eyes met; she could read what was in his gaze. He was replaying the events that had happened seventeen months ago, after Camilla's wedding. The night that no one but Archer and Scarlett knew about. The night that had made Scarlett swear off men for good.

Eyes still on the man at the door, Scarlett swiped her thumb to unlock her phone. She'd saved the speech on the device, and everyone was waiting. She couldn't have predicted that with one swipe of her fingers, she'd invite disaster into her life once more.

WANT TO FIND OUT WHAT SURPRISE CORMAC AND LUCY FIND
WHEN THEY GET HOME FROM THEIR WEDDING?

[TAP HERE TO GET YOUR EXCLUSIVE BONUS CHAPTER!](#)

([HTTP://WWW.LILIANMONROE.COM/SUBSCRIBE](http://www.lilianmonroe.com/subscribe))

FIND OUT EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN SCARLETT AND
ARCHER...AND HOW THEY REACT WHEN DEATH COMES
KNOCKING AT THEIR DOOR...

READ BOOK FOUR: CALAMITY

[HTTPS://GENI.US/GROOMSMEN4](https://geni.us/groomsmen4)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lilian Monroe adores writing swoonworthy heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She loves making people laugh and is eternally grateful to have found people who share her sense of humor.

When she's not writing, she's reading (or rereading) a book, walking, lifting weights, or attempting to play the guitar with very limited success.

She grew up in Canada but now lives in Australia with her Irish husband. He frequently asks to be used as a cover model for her books, and she's not quite sure whether or not he's joking.



ALSO BY LILIAN MONROE

For all books, visit:

www.lilianmonroe.com

The Four Groomsmen of the Wedpocalypse

[Conquest](#)

[Craving](#)

[Combat](#)

[Calamity](#)

Manhattan Billionaires

[Big Bossy Mistake](#)

[Big Bossy Trouble](#)

[Big Bossy Problem](#)

[Big Bossy Surprise](#)

Later in Life Romance

[Filthy Little Midlife Fling](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Crisis](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Mess](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Mistake](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Disaster](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Debacle](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Secret](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Dilemma](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife Drama](#)

[Dirty Little Midlife \(fake\) Date](#)

Brother's Best Friend Romance

[Shouldn't Want You](#)

[Can't Have You](#)

[Don't Need You](#)

[Won't Miss You](#)

Protector Romance

[His Vow](#)

[His Oath](#)

[His Word](#)

Enemies to Lovers/Workplace Romance

[Hate at First Sight](#)

[Loathe at First Sight](#)

[Despise at First Sight](#)

Secret Baby/Accidental Pregnancy Romance

[Knocked Up by the CEO](#)

[Knocked Up by the Single Dad](#)

[Knocked Up...Again!](#)

[Knocked Up by the Billionaire's Son](#)

[Yours for Christmas](#)

[Bad Prince](#)

[Heartless Prince](#)

[Cruel Prince](#)

[Broken Prince](#)

[Wicked Prince](#)

[Wrong Prince](#)

[Lone Prince](#)

[Ice Queen](#)

[Rogue Prince](#)

Fake Engagement Romance

[Engaged to Mr. Right](#)

[Engaged to Mr. Wrong](#)

[Engaged to Mr. Perfect](#)

Mountain Man Romance

[Lie to Me](#)

[Swear to Me](#)

[Run to Me](#)

Doctor's Orders

[Doctor O](#)

[Doctor D](#)

[Doctor L](#)