

WE THREE KINGS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NIKKI BELAIRE

WE
THREE
KINGS



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PROLOGUE

Seraphina

six years old

When there's a full moon, most people think about werewolves or Halloween.

Not me.

I always think of Christmas. Because the snow sparkles and the stars seem to glow the brightest. Just like tonight.

I kneel on the couch and stare out of the living room window at the winter wonderland. Everything looks beautiful covered in white. Even the old cars no one ever drives parked in the backyard and the small shed that toppled over and no one ever put back up.

Gabriel and I don't have any windows in our room since it was added on to the back of the trailer. Well not actually part of the trailer—just sort of built next to it so you can see a tiny line of light peek through where the metal and wood are supposed to touch.

My foster mom smacked the back of my head hard enough that spots danced in front of my eyes when I tried to poke my finger in between the siding and plywood. I never did that again.

“Go to sleep Seraphina!”

Gabriel fusses at me in the darkness. He sounds mad, but I know he's more worried. If we get caught sleeping in the living room our foster mom will start yelling. Yelling leads to hitting. Hitting leads to Craig getting involved. I can't let that happen again.

I look back at my brother. Fear burns in his expression as he glances toward their bedroom. He's as scared of our foster father as I am. He smiles though.

He smiles a lot when he doesn't mean it. I hate that he has to pretend because I know deep down, he's really sad.

"I'll keep watch while you sleep and then we'll switch, okay?"

He always says that, but we never switch. I guess boys don't need as much sleep. He just wakes me up while it's still dark outside and carries me back to my bed.

I hate that part since it's freezing in our room. He says it's because we don't have any vents or ducts since it's not a real room. That's why it's so cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

We only get one blanket each, and my pillow smells like pee since Melissa's cat Chester keeps using it as his litter box.

When I asked her for a new one, my foster mom squeezed my arm so hard the bruises lasted for a month. Now I just sleep on the mattress and stuff the pillow under the bed until morning.

I lie down on the sofa cushion and snuggle into the quilts from the basket by the TV that Gabriel draped over me. He says he's not cold, but his skin feels like ice. I switch sides and curl up into a little ball next to him, so the thick fabric covers him too.

"Thanks sis."

My hair ruffles under his hand. One of his big magic quarterback hands that everyone talks about. They love football around here and they love him.

Gabriel's the most popular kid at his high school. They cheer his name at the games, and a bunch of girls constantly hang around afterward waiting for him when the team comes out of the locker room.

A pretty blonde girl who smells like flowers and wears glittery lip gloss always asks him to go with them to get pizza or to a party. Every time he'll glance at me waiting, and he'll say no, that he'd better get on home.

I feel guilty he doesn't get to have fun, but I'm glad he doesn't leave me alone with Craig and Melissa. I hate that. Bad things always seem to happen when it's just the three of us.

A creak moans from the sagging floor, and Gabriel jumps to his feet, hauling me up with him and dragging me across the sticky carpet. I stumble from the covers twisted around me, but he grabs me under my arms and carries me straight to my bed.

Neither of us speaks until we hear Craig snoring. Thank goodness my foster dad's asleep, and I feel like I can finally breathe again.

The ache returns to my chest though when my brother creeps over and untangles the warm blankets I'm burrowed in. He piles them up and then folds each one into a rectangle.

"But I'm cold now."

He shakes his head and lays his finger against his lips, reminding me to be quiet. So, I don't say a word while he stacks them on top of each other and carries them back to their basket. I just try to get warm again by tucking my knees up under my chin and pulling my tee shirt as far down my legs as I can. That helps a little.

Gabriel is silent as he climbs into his bed and curls up too. I want to cheer him up. "Maybe we'll get blankets for Christmas. Mrs. Thompson had us write letters to Santa and that's what I put. A new pillow too and real pajamas with long sleeves and pants to keep warm."

"Fuck!"

Despite his whisper I still hear the swear word. Our real Mom would have yelled at him for his foul mouth. But she's not here and she's never coming back so I guess it doesn't matter now.

"What did I tell you about saying stuff about Craig and Melissa? If the school reports that to the social worker and she comes here, then..."

I prop up on my elbow to see why he stopped talking. I can't see his face since he's lying on his back now and staring up at the ceiling. He's angry but I don't know why. I didn't say anything about them.

Maybe he's right though. My teacher stopped smiling as she read my letter. I thought it was because my writing wasn't the neatest, but now I'm not so sure. "I'm sorry."

Despite trying to sound okay, my voice cracks. I hate when he's upset at me.

I hate when anyone is upset at me.

He sighs and hops up, coming over and giving me a big bear hug that makes me feel safe.

"It's okay. Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

Not *we'll* but *him*.

My brother always fixes everything.

He's the only person I can count on.

The only person I can trust.

The only person I can believe in.

When he releases me and steps back, he studies my face, trying to see if I'm crying. I grin despite the burning in my eyes and throat.

The tears really stress him out, and I can't do that to him again. I can't bawl every time something goes wrong or that's all I'd ever do.

"I won't say anything to anyone I promise."

Some of the worry scrunching his face goes away so I feel better too. He playfully yanks a strand of my hair before returning to his bed. Maybe things will be okay.

"I'll see if I can get us some blankets."

I'm confused. Neither of us has any money to go shopping. "How are you going—?"

"Don't worry about it." He shakes his head. "Just go to sleep."

I'm too tired to worry about it, but it's hard to sleep when you're shivering, and your teeth are chattering. "Okay. G-good night b-bubby."

"One more thing. Santa won't stop here this year. So you need to stop wishing for stuff, okay?"

He's using his mean voice that I hate since I know he's not mean. Every once in a while he talks like that to me when he's serious and wants me to really listen to him. And I do want to listen since he's my big brother.

But just because Santa didn't come last year doesn't mean he won't this year. We had just started living here, and he probably didn't know we had to move. Now it's been a really long time, so I just know he'll find us.

"It pisses them off, and I can't deal with their shit anymore."

Despite the bad words, I know he's right. They do get mad when I talk about Christmas. They get mad when I talk about anything. Melissa says she just wants me to *shut the fuck up and stay out of her god damn way*. Then there won't be any problems.

So, I try to, and it works. Most of the time anyway.

Melissa's always extra grouchy around Christmas. I don't understand why. It's my favorite time of the year. She tries to ruin the fun, but I won't let her. I can enjoy the decorations and songs and cookies at school. She can't take that away from me.

"No more talking about Christmas okay. Just...just be good. Please?"

His voice sounds all wobbly, like he's crying this time. If I'm a good girl, my brother will be happy.

Everyone will be happy.

Then Melissa won't have any reason to be mad at me. No one will ever be mad at me again.

Not if I'm *always* a good girl.

*“We all know Christmas is a big commercial racket. It’s run by an Eastern
syndicate, you know.”*

*—Lucy Van Pelt
Charlie Brown Christmas*



CHAPTER 1

Balthazar

A surprise, she teased.

Come over and she'll make it worth my while, she promised.

I'll absolutely love it, she swore.

All of which means I should be anywhere but on my way to see my best friend. Because London knows how much I hate surprises. Going all the way back to my twenty-fourth birthday when I tried to bend her over and fuck her against the slick black desk in my new office, and she wanted to tie me to the leather chair instead and torture me first.

Each of us are too damn dominant to concede to the other. Or, ever be together. I knew, as she stared me down with those unblinking ice blue eyes full of defiance and challenge, I would be better off with her behind me rather than underneath me.

Although neither of us got laid that afternoon, I never regretted my decision. We both found an unexpected ally in a world teeming with enemies.

That's why I drive twenty minutes out of my way to her office at five thirty on a freezing Friday afternoon to get whatever *it* is. Because I love her enough to have to deal with her.

And, traffic.

And, fucking Lionel.

Who I would've put a bullet in the back of his head already if he wasn't her brother, and she didn't still deny that he's not the fuck up he continually proves himself to be. Always expecting something more from him even when

he disappoints her again and again. Eternally optimistic about him despite him being a bastard to her for all thirty-two years of their lives.

At her office, I ignore the disapproving look of the woman failing miserably to convey even an ounce of grace or modesty climbing into her gargantuan SUV in six-inch stilettos as I pull across three spaces at the end of the lot.

A chuckle vibrates in my throat when I read her lips. Yeah, I *am* an asshole. Talk to me when you've dropped three million on your car and see how you park.

Once I know my Bugatti's flawless paint continues to be safe from any idiot's errant door, I hop out and stride to the entrance, gliding between the textured glass doors like I own the place.

Since I do.

The building anyway. I lease the space to London so she can manage my legit legal issues, keeping her clean in the off-chance things go bad with the family business. Got to protect my friend.

A rare ache stirs in my chest thinking of the family. Dad's never been the same since Mom died. Although he refuses to admit the truth, I know he's depressed.

Worse, he drags his feet about me taking over despite his head not being in it anymore. Not because he doesn't trust me. Hell, he raised me in his mirror image.

I know exactly what to do and how to run the show. But, because as he reminds me too often, he thinks I need to enjoy my freedom for as long as possible. Avoid the burden and responsibility of being the boss for as long as I can.

Plus, I don't think he wants to admit any weakness. Even to me. Who idolizes him more than anyone in the damn world. Except for maybe my mother. Which is exactly the way it should be.

Every man needs the perfect woman in his arms and in his bed to make any of this worthwhile. Too bad he lost his way too soon, and I haven't found mine yet.

The twinge of unfamiliar worry fades from the pleasure jolting through me as I step into the expansive foyer. Fucking dumb ass Lionel isn't plopped in the receptionist chair jacking around on his cell phone like usual. The moron probably sneaked off to smoke on the back patio instead of performing what little work his sister assigns him.

No, a much better vision greets me instead. A tiny beauty with an enormous smile jumps to her feet and races around the gray speckled counter edging her desk to greet me as I approach. Involuntarily slowing my steps on the ebony marble, I take the seconds for her to meet me so I can drink her all in.

I usually like my women sleek and sexy. Dolled up from head to toe. Heavy on the everything. Over the top with fake tits, injected lips, and embellished behinds. All proof they want to be noticed. Craving attention to get what they desire. Undeniable they're desperate for cock and ready to be fucked. Hard and dirty.

But not this girl.

This girl...she's...cute.

Innocent.

Natural.

Long, wavy blonde hair reaches almost all the way to her ass. The strands are kind of wild and loose with coils that aren't quite curls—untouched by any kind of straightener or product most girls use. Bare skin dusted with only a few faint freckles on her nose and cheeks. A red, long sleeve dress decorated with white snowflakes swirling along the neckline that probably came from Target or some other cheap place. Nothing at all like the designer clothes the ladies I usually go for wear.

Yet, I can't keep my eyes off of her.

Especially when she leans closer, the slightest hint of a sugary sweet scent wafts over me, and she offers her small hand. Proper and polite and perfect.

Silky skin slides across mine with her firm handshake, filling my palm with slender fingers that grip me with a tighter force than I expect from someone so petite.

“Good evening Mr. Wiseman. I'm Seraphina. Ms. Fine said she was expecting you and asked me to bring you right in as soon as you arrived.”

Adorable as she smiles up at me, she's eager to be my escort. As if I can't find her boss by myself without any assistance. But who am I to stop a secretary so intent on her mission?

“Can I get you a water or coffee or something, sir?”

Her obvious desire to please strikes quicker than lightning to my balls. I'd love to tell her the 'something' I want from her.

But I force myself to shake my head because, for one, London will

fucking kill me if I scare off her new employee. And, two, if she freaks out and leaves, Lionel will return, and I hate that fucking cocksucker almost as much as I do my own lazy ass little brother. “No thanks angel. I’m good.”

She seems disappointed. Her smile wavers a bit before she lifts her chin and brightens her grin again. “Okay, well, if you change your mind, please let me know. I’m happy to get you anything you want.”

Anything I want.

Jesus. She’s worth risking London’s wrath. Before I can respond with the filthy comment rolling from my brain to my tongue, she raps on the heavy walnut door and pushes the curved platinum handle down. “Ms. Fine, Mr. Wiseman is here for you.”

A smug smirk, cockier than the Cheshire cat, twists my best friend’s plump lips. Leaning back in her white leather chair like the ice queen she is, she temples her long fingers, tapping the French tips together in amusement. Conveying a defiant sneer directed to me rather than the sweet woman standing at my side, who unfortunately misinterprets the attitude and recoils backward with a startled gasp.

“I’m...I’m so sorry. I thought you were ready for him.”

Leisurely rising to her feet, London finally directs a smile toward the concerned girl. Warm and sincere, she offers an approving nod. “Yes, I am. Thank you.”

Seraphina recovers swiftly, relief softening her taut body, and she backs out with her composure restored. Once the door glides shut behind her, I turn on my savage friend. “What the hell was that? You scared her for no reason.”

Now she cackles, rounding her desk, and striding towards me. Gorgeous as always in an iridescent white dress that accentuates her almost six-foot stature. Lean and lithe from lots of hard work and a little bit of artificial enhancements. That only I know about since I’m the one who foots the bill.

What her fiancé doesn’t know won’t hurt him. At least not until they’re married anyway. Then she and her expensive and extensive upkeep will be his problem. Poor naïve bastard.

Too irritated to allow her kiss to brush my cheek in greeting, I jerk away from her lips and beeline to the bar discreetly hidden behind the lustrous silver laminate armoire in the corner. Pouring myself two fingers of scotch, which of course makes her *tsk* at me.

Yeah, I drink too much. Especially when I’m tired and cross for no real reason other than she’s getting on my nerves.

“What do you care if I upset Seraphina? You just met her.”

I ignore her impertinence when she slides the glass out of my hand and brings the rim to her red-stained mouth finally halting her annoying smirk and make another for myself. Three fingers this time.

I deserve the extra alcohol after having to endure her ridiculous mind games. She swallows the entire drink in one long gulp and holds out the etched tumbler for a refill.

Yeah, and *I'm* the lush.

At least I'm nice and pour another one for her without comment unlike her nagging ass.

“I don't. Not at all.”

Now I'm really irritated. I hate it when she figures me out, especially when she rubs her righteousness in my face. “Well, what is it? Why did you lure me out here? I don't have time for games. I've got shit to do.”

“Stop being obtuse. You know why.”

Damn it. “No.”

I down my own booze just as quickly, ignoring her as she rolls her eyes at me. I toss the cup into the small sink, enjoying her flinch from the harsh clank ringing off the vibrating metal. I'm out. I'll find someplace else to get wasted. Without all the noise or drama.

“She's perfect for you. I know it and you know—”

“Please do not tell me you hired her for me.”

The jackhammering in my head grows stronger from the realization of what she's done. Unlike most people, London's not terrified of me and doesn't back down from my glare. Like the lunatic she is, she thrives under my fury.

“Of course, I did. She's sweet, smart, submissive. Exactly what you need because as much as you hate to admit it, you're bored with the sluts you usually fuck. And, besides, Gaspar would absolutely adore a nice girl like her for his oldest son.”

I wince from the mention of my father. He does want a daughter-in-law who's good and docile and innocent. Seraphina's exactly that and more. So much fucking more.

Damn London for being right. I have very few weaknesses, but she's one of the only people who knows exactly what they are and how to use them against me. “I can find my own women.”

“Yeah, but the ones who suck your dick under the table at Ardon's

aren't the kind you can bring home to your father. You think he really wants a whack job stripper like Josie to bear his grandchildren?"

Absolute exaggeration.

Kind of.

Josie isn't that bad, especially when she stays off the molly.

"Besides, I've invited her to go with Reid and me to the *Justice for All* Gala, and you're going to be her date. Because even though you're an asshole, I still love you."

Now I regret disposing of my glass. I definitely need more alcohol to deal with this bullshit.

And she thought Josie was nuts. "When did I turn into a fucking charity case? You've never cared about my love life before."

The nonchalant shrug is as fake as her hair color. Her nervous turn of the huge diamond around and around on her left ring finger reveals the truth. I should have known.

She's dumping me.

Reid's taken over her world now. Hell, she might even pop out a kid or two. Which I didn't think was possible with her formerly frigid heart, but I guess love does that to you. I never thought she and Reid would make it, let alone get married. Now she has bridesmaids and bouquets and boutonnières.

And I've got...nothing.

Except someone besides my father who loves me enough to want to see me happy too. But I refuse to admit it. Or let her know it.

If I'm doing this, it's on my own terms. "I'll think about it."

"Damn it, Balthazar, I'm only trying—"

"Save it. You're wasting your breath and my time."

I twist my wrist and tap on the platinum face of my new Audemars watch for emphasis. If I leave now, I'll catch my dad before he meets with Volkov.

As the Russians attempt to encroach closer and closer to our territory, I need to make sure the spy we've infiltrated in their ranks understands the consequences he'll face if he fails to deliver on my father's demands.

Ignoring the insults she pelts at my back, I jog out of her office and back to the lobby. Where Seraphina stares intently at her screen, short crimson fingernails rapidly tapping on the keyboard. So dedicated and focused, she doesn't notice my approach at first.

Strands of silky hair sway over her shoulder when she hears my shoes on the porcelain and jumps up again. I'm rewarded with another glorious smile

brightening her heart-shaped face.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Wiseman. I hope you have a fabulous weekend.”

It would be, with you in my bed.

Yeah, that admission probably won't go over well. Too much, too soon. I should try a softer tact. “It'd be better if I spent it with you.”

“I...I...”

Most women I use that line on flirt back with me. Or if they can't think of a witty response, they show their interest with their physical assets.

Leaning forward to give me a better view down their neckline.

Giggling with a brush of their fingertips on my arm.

Shoving against my chest before they bunch the fabric in their hand and tug me back to ensure I understand their meaning that pushing me away is the exact opposite of what they want.

Not Seraphina. Scarlet races from her dainty throat to her cheeks, and her gaze hits the floor as she tucks a wavy tendril behind her ear. Stroking the lock over and over in apprehension.

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

“Thank you for the invitation.”

She squeaks a whisper and shakes her head, sucking in a deep breath as if settling herself before she glances up. For only a second. Then her eyes are glued to her heels again.

“But I'm sorry I already have plans. My friends and I are going to watch the Bulldogs play.”

I shouldn't be surprised. She's cute and kindhearted. Probably has tons of friends. Doesn't sound like a boyfriend though, since she didn't specifically mention one like a girl who wants to make sure the guy talking to her knows she's off limits. Or if there is, he's a complete and total waste for not spending every moment with her. “Good night for a football game.”

The gorgeous smile returns when I let her off the hook. Not giving her a hard time for saying no might win me a few points. But obviously not yet anyway.

“Yes, I hope so.”

And...that's it. We stand there. Her grinning. Me waiting.

“Well...”

She ducks her head in uncertainty and slowly lowers herself down to her chair. “I guess I better get back to work. Ms. Fine needs these documents.”

She's fucking dismissing me? What the fuck?

I stare like a dumb ass as she begins typing again.

Fuck this shit. London really has lost it.

I have no interest in a girl who is this timid and boring. Zero fucking interest at all.

I rap my knuckles twice on the counter and walk out. Well aware of London's frown behind me that she should turn on herself for being so damn wrong.



CHAPTER 2

Balthazar

I admire and respect my father. Hell, I *love* my Dad in a world where such feelings are rarely felt, let alone communicated. But despite our DNA connection, we're more different than alike.

Especially now.

About this.

"You're too impulsive Balthazar."

I shake my head at him, trying to keep my voice level even as his raises in frustration. "I'm decisive. I do what needs to be done."

"Yes, in a way which always leaves me having to smooth all the feathers you ruffle."

Despite my irritation, I can't stop my grin from his old-fashioned phrase. Appropriate since technically he *is* old. "You care too much what others think. You make the rules, and your word is final. No one should question you. You *are* the boss..."

I'm only this candid since we're alone in his office. I would never speak so bluntly in the presence of others and appear to undermine his authority. Yet, the eroding confidence in the organization of his ability to lead forces me to share my concerns.

We can resolve them together before someone else decides to resolve them for us and attempts to overthrow the broken king.

"And you assume I need to behave more like it."

No need to rub in my insult. I made the implication, and his inference is

correct. I don't argue.

That would be a lie, and for all of my faults, I'm always honest. Especially with him. I'm the only one with the balls to tell him, regardless of how demeaning reality is for him.

"You're right. I am getting too soft."

Fuck me. I can't believe he admits the truth. I'm relieved he recognizes the issue yet also devastated the time has come for the man who's led our family to step down.

"I strive too hard for peace when war is the only answer sometimes."

Agreed. We all want peace—peace keeps our family safe, our fortune large, our territories productive.

There's also a time to strike, proactive or reactive. Unfortunately, due to his hesitation, we're in the position of the latter, needing to answer the growing threats against us. The Russians have killed one of our best exporters, forcing us to rebuild our network coming out of China.

We need to act before the chance and our hold on the country are lost forever. "I can do this. I'll confirm our strength to anyone who questions it."

His tired green eyes, not as bright as they used to be, meet mine. Sending more messages than just approval for my assertion, he nods. Slow yet consenting to the transition.

No one will know except for us until we're ready to make the announcement. I refuse to jeopardize him or the business if anyone suspects he's ready to retire before the time is right.

"I know you will son. I'm already proud of you and know you'll be a good leader."

Rare praise yet genuine, nonetheless. We're too busy to spend time celebrating our victories and thanking each other for our efforts. However, his compliment lessens some of my grief from hurting his pride.

I extend my hand, confirming my acceptance and conveying my appreciation for his faith in me. His grip is still as strong as his word. He pats my shoulder with his free hand. Not quite a hug but about the best we can do.

"You need to find a good girl, so you can be a good husband and father too."

And, there it is.

The time has come to be crowned king and find a queen. If I didn't know better, I'd think he and London set me up with this double team plan with Seraphina to settle down. The two of them ganging up on me is a lethal

combination. “Yeah, yeah. I know it. I’m working on it.”

His smile seems sincere. The lack of guile doesn’t mean duplicity isn’t there.

He releases me and nods before returning to his desk and sitting down more slowly than I like. My suspicion increases beyond him scheming with my friend, leaving me wondering if there’s more to his urgent desire to see me married.

When he picks up his phone and taps the screen, I know the time for discussion has come to an end. A wordless dismissal means the conversation is over.

He wouldn’t answer me honestly anyway even if I was permitted to ask more intrusive questions regarding his health. His version of protecting me only hurts him.

My own cell pings, and I read the message as I hustle through the house and out to my vehicle.

London: *I won’t even say I told you so. Just go get her!*

Why is my best friend always fucking right?

Somehow listening to London bitch at me for the forty minutes it takes to get to my father’s house has worn me down enough to agree to make another long ass drive tonight.

This time I end up at a high school stadium to talk to Seraphina. Because texting her isn’t enough. At least according to London since this is Seraphina’s third date with the same guy.

As London not so subtly reminded even a self-involved prick like me, the third date is the make or break. You either give up or you get serious. If it’s the latter, then I’ve got no fucking chance to win Seraphina’s heart if I don’t do something now.

So I have to go big. Make Seraphina feel special and flattered by a man who is relentless in pursuing her—literally all the way to the farthest side of the city. Because according to London that’s what most women like.

But I can already tell Seraphina’s not most women.

Or at least not like most women I fuck. And chasing her down seems a bit stalkerish, even for my standards. Which as I’m now fully aware are too damn low. For me and for my father.

If I want to make him happy, I need a girl like her.

With the game in the fourth quarter, the parking lot’s still pretty full. No

worries. I create my own spot in front of the white tent reserved for special events.

A clear night with a full moon brighter than the lights illuminating the field fills the horizon as I hustle toward the archway and wait at the edge of the wide asphalt path leading to the tan brick entrance.

The slow trickle of people exiting the building increases to a flood after a touchdown by the home team makes the outcome to the game clear. Mostly they're families with little kids, many of them waving small flags featuring the team's red and gray mascot. Tired but happy from a fun evening out with a great ending.

I can't fucking lie. My pulse picks up when I finally see her. Something about Seraphina intrigues me.

The ingenuous beauty she conveys with her beaming smile and clear plastic bag of pink and blue swirled cotton candy swinging in her small hand is the bright spot of my entire day.

Hell, my entire fucking week.

As much as I hate to admit the truth, I really like this girl already. Between what London told me about Seraphina while she berated me during our call to my Dad's, and then the brief meeting with Seraphina herself at the office, I'm willing to give this the shot my best friend and father want. I have to try and make her mine.

The tantalizing image of Seraphina coming toward me is ruined only by her walking with some smug bastard, who has his motherfucking arm around her shoulder and a shit-eating smirk on his face. Obvious from his swagger he's a bigger asshole than I am.

Third date is last date, motherfucker.

I've claimed her, and no one touches what's mine.



Seraphina

I force myself not to shrug off Casey's arm around me. He pretends like the gesture is friendly and playful, although we both know it's not. Bree gives me

the look. Well aware of Casey's crush and my embarrassment.

And guilt.

So much guilt.

He's such a nice guy. A really, really, genuinely nice guy. Despite how much I want to, I can't pretend feelings that aren't there. Although I want to be friends that's not enough for him, and I don't know how to be honest without hurting him.

I want to feel the sensation I experienced when I met Mr. Wiseman this afternoon. In just a few short minutes, he made my pulse race and my heart flutter. Not only because he's incredibly handsome but also confident and commanding. I get warm all over just thinking about him.

Which is wrong since he's my employer. And silly since he's not the kind of man who would be interested in a girl like me.

Or would he?

He did ask me to dinner. The question seemed surreal, and with my nervousness, I almost wonder if I imagined or misunderstood him. Maybe he meant a working dinner?

London has done that before with clients when there were tight deadlines. I order in food for them to eat while they work. That didn't seem to be the case but what else could it be? Could Mr. Wiseman like me?

Casey tips his head down to mine, reminding me I need to get out of my thoughts and back here with my friends.

"Do you want to come over?"

My stomach lurches from his lips on my ear. I'm not sure why his touch makes me so uncomfortable. I try not to cringe.

Instead, I smile and give him a side hug. Patting his chest a few times, hoping to seem just as casual and relaxed, before winding out of his embrace to snuggle against Bree as we all meander to the parking lot with no one in any big hurry for the evening to end. Pretending to laugh along with my best friend's comments even when I have no idea what she's talking about, I hide my remorse from avoiding answering his question.

Casey's disappointment radiates off his defeated shoulders, slumping and shaking his head at me. Even while I try to ease the blow with a sincere smile and small wave despite the fact he's only a few feet away. Awkward and futile but I hate how wounded he acts.

"Seraphina!"

Goosebumps sprinkle across my arms despite my jacket from the

demanding tone of the man calling in front of us. Everyone stops in unison almost as if choreographed in a cheesy movie from the unexpected shout.

The voice rumbles across the asphalt, thick with an accent that I've only heard once before. An imposing figure looms in front of us, but surely it's not him. There's no way it can be him.

I can't make out his features in the darkness until he steps closer.

Oh my god!

It is him.

Balthazar Wiseman.

Although he uttered my name, his seething gaze bores into Casey. Another chill shudders through me despite the warmth of my coat. I've never seen a man so angry.

"Don't ever fucking touch her again. She doesn't like it."

He's not wrong—I don't like it. Yet his overreaction is more irrational than I've ever known. My chest swirls in panic.

From his fury.

From Casey's fear.

From Bree's frown.

She stiffens next to me, her suspicion mounting from Balthazar's intimidation. "Who in the hell is that?"

"My boss."

"I thought you said your boss was a woman?"

"She is. That's her boss."

"Oh shit!"

Oh shit is right.

I nod to Bree's whisper. A man I've only known a few hours is threatening one I've known since freshman year.

While I appreciate Balthazar's defense, his reaction is over-the-top ridiculous and crazy. But telling him so will lead to only one thing—me unemployed.

My stomach drops further. I need this job. I struggled to put myself through school and land this opportunity. I can't do anything that will jeopardize my future with London.

With the only goal of calming myself and the situation, I take a deep breath and stride toward him, leaving my friends behind. Hopefully, separating them will diffuse the tension and keep me from being fired. "Good evening, Mr. Wiseman. What are you doing here? Is there something you

need for me to do?”

Finally, his gaze tears away from Casey, and he overwhelms me, studying me from my face to my feet and back up again. “Are you okay?”

Uncertain as to why he would think otherwise, I nod and maintain my enormous smile despite my confusion. “Yes, I’m great. Our team won.”

“But he touched you.”

Although his protectiveness is unwarranted since Casey’s harmless, the concern feels nice. I haven’t had anyone look out for me in years. Even if it’s a terrifying man with obvious anger issues. “I know. It’s okay. He’s just—”

“No, angel. It’s not okay.”

Angel.

I can’t believe he called me that. Even worse, I can’t believe how much I like it.

A cold breeze swirls around us, lifting the hem of my brother’s enormous jersey flapping from the gust. I palm the fabric and hold the soft material against my thighs. Smoothing the material is the perfect distraction from the awkwardness between us.

I offer him my brightest smile, attempting to remind him I’m a good employee. Everything I do must prove I’m a professional who wants to support him and the company. “My friends can take me back to the office. I can be there in less than an hour to help Ms. Fine with whatever she needs.”

“This isn’t about what London needs.”

I don’t know if it’s the gravelly tone of his voice or the darkness of his eyes or his hand moving down my arm in an intimate caress to encircle my wrist with a possessive grip, but I’ve never been so aroused and terrified at the same time.

I tremble under his fingers and his expression deepens even more, almost as if he is as affected as I am from us touching. “I can help you with whatever you need too.”

“I know you can.”

Somehow I know we’re not talking about the same need at all.

Or maybe we are.

With his presence, his accent, his touch, I want to find out even though I shouldn’t. I’m a grown woman with the student loans and past due rent to prove it, so I need to act like it.

Yet I’m letting my attraction to him impact my resolve to focus on my career. Which I promised myself I would never do.

I lift up my head to meet his gaze, offering him my most agreeable smile. “Okay then, I’ll see you in a bit.”

His grasp only tightens when I try to tug my hand away from his hold. “I’ll drive you. Then we don’t have to wait for our discussion.”

We should not be alone in a car together, but I’m not sure how to argue with him without seeming insubordinate. Before I can develop a reason to protest his suggestion, Bree’s anxious voice calls behind me.

“We’re heading to Kendall’s. Are you coming?”

She tries to sound calm, but I know her too well. From her tone I can tell she thinks that Mr. Wiseman touching me is worse than Casey. Surprisingly albeit confusingly, his grasp exhilarates me more than any man’s ever has. Including the one who wants to be so much more than friends.

I shake my head once she and Alex are next to me yet try to send a message with my eyes not to create a scene. As appreciative as I am of her protectiveness, I don’t want her to anger him any further. I try to soothe the uncertainty with introductions. “Mr. Wiseman, these are my friends Bree and Alex.”

Casey, Kendall, and Megan keep walking toward the parking lot. Obviously, they are avoiding us. Not that I can blame Casey for being disappointed, but I wish they all wouldn’t be upset at me. I can’t help it.

All I can do is fix the problem tonight when I get home. Right now, I have to smile and nod. “Mr. Wiseman came to get me for work. I need to go back to the office.”

Alex digs his keys out of his jeans pocket. “No problem. I’ll run you over there right now.”

He’s a genuinely good guy who won’t leave me stranded since Casey’s apparently abandoned me.

“No need. I’ve got her. That way we can work in the car on the way.”

I’ve got her.

I don’t know why Mr. Wiseman’s simple assertion excites me but butterflies flicker in my stomach. The first time ever in twenty-two years I’ve experienced the sensation.

Alex and I exchange glances, attempting to read each other’s thoughts regarding Mr. Wiseman’s assertion. Neither of us can seem to challenge his dominant tone or come up with a reason why I shouldn’t ride in his vehicle with him.

“Okay, then I guess we’ll see you later.”

Despite Alex's reluctant acceptance, Bree still double checks, giving me a hug and whispering in my ear.

"Are you sure?"

No, not at all but I'm somehow going with him anyway. "Yes."

"Call me when you get home."

Her brow still furrows as she steps back and releases me. Disappointed with this unexpected ending to our evening, she accepts Alex's outstretched hand, only tearing her gaze from me when they have to pause for the traffic cutting off their path to his truck.

There's no turning back now.

I'm leaving with Mr. Wiseman.



CHAPTER 3

Balthazar

Disapproval from my illegal parking draws down her stunning face, yet she doesn't chastise me. Instead, she beelines straight for the passenger door, not waiting for me to escort her. She doesn't realize yet that I'm not a complete asshole.

At least not when it comes to her.

I grab the handle before she can and box her in. Impatient to touch her, I hold back with her still nervous and jumpy.

Instead, I settle for running my thumb along the neckline of her jersey. The red fabric has faded to almost pink with white peeking through the frayed edges. "I like this."

Her shuddering breath from my intimate touch seems more intrigued than offended, pleasing me and my cock.

"Thanks. It was my brother Gabriel's. He played football so I'm carrying on the tradition of watching some of the games."

She points to her friends still hanging out by an older white SUV. Deep in conversation, I would bet a million bucks they're probably leery of me taking Seraphina but couldn't find a way to fight against my demand. Few people want to battle against me.

"Alex was his best friend and football crazy too, so we all try to go together during the season."

Her words are neutral, but I can tell by her nose scrunch the emotion bubbling in her from the reminder. Killing me that I've upset her about her

lost sibling, I move my hand to her shoulder and caress down her slender arm. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

“Thank you.”

Crimson races up her cheeks and circles her shining eyes, glistening with tears threatening to spill over.

“I miss him. I guess this is kind of sappy and sentimental, but when I’m here I feel like he is too. That he’s still with me.”

“Not sappy at all. I think it’s a great way to remember him.”

She seems surprised yet pleased from my approval, smiling a legit smile at me this time until she blows out a breath and nods her head a few times.

“Well, we better get going so I can help you.”

“You already have, more than you know.”

I yank open the door and clutch her small hand as she lowers herself down to the seat. I hold onto her longer than necessary but fuck me I don’t want to let her go. When uncertainty lines her face, I release her and hustle around to my side. Frightening her is the last thing I want to do.

I barely have my own ass against the black leather before she twists to face me, trying to catch my eye.

“You know Ms. Fine is absolutely amazing to work for, and I hope you know how much I appreciate this opportunity. I love what I do, and I’ve learned so much already. I feel very lucky to have landed such a great job right out of school.”

I hate that she’s anxious, worried that she’s somehow fucked up her career because of that bastard. Yet I’m also impressed that she’s not afraid to speak up for herself rather than just internalize her apprehension. “London raves about you too. You’re the best assistant she’s ever had.”

“Really?”

She slumps against the seat, seemingly relieved from my praise.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I’m glad I alleviated her anxiety. Well reduced some of her concern anyway. The way she strokes the seatbelt strapped across her torso, I can tell something else is bothering her.

“I feel bad that you came all the way out here to get me. You know you can always text me. Or call me, I mean. I told London that and I don’t mind if you...do too...if you...”

Her rambling is adorable. “Don’t feel bad. Coming out here for you was worth it.”

Supple lips part, and she breathes deep. “Oh. Thank you.”

God, she’s so innocent and sweet. Too pure for me but there’s no going back now.

Her whisper makes my already eager dick harden like granite inside my boxer briefs. “You’re welcome. I meant what I said earlier at the office. I want to take you out.”

Quiet for more than a minute, she stares at her hands in her lap, tucking her fingers between her legs almost as if she’s cold. Fuck that. I pump up the heat and wait.

I’m not sure if she’s going to speak but I hold my tongue. Giving her the chance to process my request. To tell me the truth.

Finally, she glances over at me.

“What about my job? I work for you and Ms. Fine. Won’t that be wrong or illegal or something?”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing for London. That doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

I let the suggestion of *us* hang in the air as I pull in front of her apartment building and idle to keep her warm, allowing her to absorb the idea. She doesn’t make a move to exit the vehicle, so I wait her out, not wanting to escort her inside until she seems ready.

Finally, her head lifts, and she startles from her home in front of her. Lost in her own mind for so long she didn’t think about where I was taking her until it’s apparent we’re not working.

I hop out and stride around to her side, welcoming her delicate hand in mine. The fine bones and smooth skin are so fragile against my thick fingers, rough from the physical side of my job.

“How did you know where I lived?”

Best tech in the world at my fingertips. “I always learn everything I can about what I’m interested in.”

Her gorgeous blush deepens, and she shakes her head. “This is all moving so fast. I mean we just met and you’re my boss and you want to go on a date and the—”

I stop her spinning head with a kiss. My lips nudge gently on hers until she begins to breathe again, and I invade when her mouth opens. Tasting the natural sweetness only amplified from her earlier cotton candy.

Unsurprisingly, she’s docile, permitting my entrance and exploration, clutching my shirt to keep steady on her feet. Unable to help myself, I delve

deeper when she moans and sheaths her body to mine, relishing her graceful femininity with her softness melting into me.

The honk of a car nearby interrupts me devouring her, and she pulls away, panting a little as she looks up to me. Magnificent with her puffy lips and lustrous eyes, she breaks through her timidity and brushes her fingertips across my chin. Almost as if confirming I'm real with the sensual haze engulfing us.

I tip my head and kiss her fingertips. "Give me the chance to convince you this is right, that we'd be perfect together."

"How can you think that? We don't even know each other."

Hope sounds in her tone contradicting with the doubt in her questions. She wants this too, but practicality generates the argument.

From what London told me about her past, I can see why she doesn't trust easily or believe in the improbability of a relationship. "I know enough to know I want to know more. I want to know everything about you."

When she smiles the sincerest of smiles, I confirm I've convinced her.

"I'd like that too."

"So you'll spend the rest of the evening with me?"

"I should be furious with you for lying to me."

She tries to untangle from my embrace, shoving against my chest without any real force. Borderline flirting with me that I find endearing with her inexperience. Her playfulness only makes me grip her tighter. "But you're not."

Only a grin and an indulgent headshake since I know she's probably mad at herself for not being mad at me. Now I just have to keep her busy enough to keep her head free of her doubt and on how good things will be between us. "Come on, let's get you inside. It's too cold for you out here."

Without giving her any chance to change her mind, I glide my hand to the small of her back and lead her to the front door. Just like I anticipated she snuggles into me, and I stop to kiss the top of her head, swearing right then and there I'm never letting her go.

Because she's exactly what I need in my life even if I don't want to admit the truth to London. Or to myself.



CHAPTER 4

Balthazar

She tucks her keys, dangling from a red elf hat ring, back in her pocket and shoves open the flimsy door to the shittiest apartment known to man. Only made more ironic from her attempts to make the dump more cheerful.

Dingy walls glow from the strands of tiny white lights edging the ceiling and a scrawny fir tree stands in the corner, branches drooping from the multitude of gold and silver balls. Green garland drapes above the windows and the passthrough to a galley kitchen.

Her snow-dusted boots cross the threshold, and she looks up at me.

“Well, what do you think?”

No way I’m telling her what I really think. “This is your place? All by yourself?”

A great tactic to distract her with some questions to get her talking instead of me. An enormous smile lights up her luminous face.

“Yes. It’s kind of expensive but when Ms. Fine hired me, I knew I could probably afford it for the most part. I’ve never had my own apartment before, and I felt bad staying with Alex and Bree for so long, even though they’re like family to me and said it was fine. Anyway, I know it’s not great but with the decorations I thought...”

The radiance dims, and her smile disappears. She looks down and fiddles with the zipper on her fleece. “Sorry, I know I talk too much.”

Hell no. I slide my fingertips under her chin and lift her face back to mine. “Who told you that?”

Exquisite brown eyes blink several times. “My foster mother.”

Her whisper jolts me like electricity. “She was wrong. Don’t ever let anyone shut you down. You can say anything you want.”

A stuttered breath parts her sweet mouth. Yet no words come out. I’ve stunned her. “Now let me help you with your coat and you can tell me about your Christmas decorations.”

You’ve never seen genuine joy until you’ve seen this girl’s face after she receives my approval. “Really?”

I nod and stroke her flushed cheek. “Really angel.”

“Okay.”

As soon as she sets her bag of cotton candy on the table, I glide the flimsy fabric down her arms. Her dainty hand slides into my free one, and she leads me to the hallway. She practically bounces when she walks, and when she looks back at me over her shoulder with such an ecstatic expression, I almost lose my shit and devour her.

“I love it when it smells like Christmas too. When my friends helped me move in, Casey—”

Motherfucker.

The monster in me erupts, and I spin her around, pinning her against the closet door with my fist around her slender throat. My other hand snakes behind her lower back, pushing her forward so she can feel my rock-hard cock against her stomach. “He’s been here? Did he hurt you?”

“N-no! Of course not.”

Her small body trembles in my clutches. Damn. I fucked up, but she pushed me too far saying that bastard’s name. “I don’t want you around him. I don’t trust that guy.”

She tries to shake her head, but my grip only tightens. There’s no argument because there’s no debate. “I won’t let him or anyone else ever harm you.”

My grasp softens around her neck, but I keep her caged with my thighs on her hips. “From now on, you’re mine and I protect what’s mine.”

Graceful fingers curl around my forearm, holding me just as strong, and she keeps my gaze. “I am?”

The tone sounds more pleased than terrified. Good. “Yes.”

Despite the uncontrollable urge to push her up the wood and fuck her against the door, I restrain myself for her. She’s not ready for me in so many ways. I have to be smart about this.

Slow and methodical is the only way to earn her trust and win her heart. I tip down to give her a chaste kiss, and as much as I hate it, slide my hand away from her heated skin. “Now what did you want to show me?”

All of her earlier delight returns, and her head bobs enthusiastically. “There’s a box of candles on the top shelf that I can’t reach. Can you get it down for me please?”

Such a simple, easy request for me to be a hero. “Of course.”

I hold out my hand, motioning for her to step forward. She giggles an innocent giggle that would be annoying as hell from anyone else and moves to my right. Her little hands clasp together when I slide out the container and carry the glass jars banging together to the countertop.

She scurries to follow me. This time I get out of her way. Long hair obscures her magnificent face as she bends over and roots through her choices, before rising and holding up a round, white tin with a reindeer on the label.

“This one is Snickerdoodle scent. I love it because it smells like cookies even if you can’t bake any.”

Weird. “Why don’t you just bake some?”

The glorious smile falters from my question. She sets the canister on the beige Formica and keeps her gaze down.

“Butter, eggs, vanilla, and all the stuff you need is kind of expensive. This was only seventy-five cents because the back is scratched up.”

At least she’s honest. I just hate that she’s embarrassed. “Well then let’s check it out. Do you have any matches?”

Some of the uncertainty fades, and she smiles. “Yes.”

She yanks open a drawer and pulls out a small red and blue box. The sudden blaze, after she strikes the tiny stick, mimics the inferno smoldering between us, that lasts long after she lights the wick and blows out the flame. “Perfect.”

I mean her, and I think she knows it with the blush streaking her cheeks as she sets the burning candle on her cruddy kitchen table.

Eager to touch her again, I hold out my hand and once her fingers wrap around mine, I lead her to the living room rather than the bedroom like I want.

The rickety couch creaks under my weight when I sit down, and I make a note to have the sofa replaced when my guys come in to install cameras and other security measures for her.

Zero resistance when I draw her down next to me and keep our entwined hands on my thigh. I give her a reassuring squeeze as she attempts to adjust her leg so she's not smooshed against me. I want her there. "It's only November so you must really love Christmas if you've already decorated."

Careful not to offend her, I keep my tone teasing. I don't want her to think I'm insulting her. Luckily, she seems thrilled and her plump lips part quickly to launch into her explanation.

"It's my favorite time of year. Everyone's usually in a good mood and all the lights and trees are so pretty. So even if you don't have much it still feels like something really special."

Bitch foster mother.

Dead brother.

Dumpy apartment.

All that trauma, and she's still cheerful. I don't think I've ever met anyone as irrepressible as her. "Yeah, that makes sense."

My agreement pleases her, and the exhilaration bubbling under the surface explodes. She twists toward me with her soft tits shoved against my bicep.

"My brother won a football scholarship, and I got to move into an apartment with him on campus. They made us promise not to tell anyone since he was a freshman and supposed to live in the dorm. But he said they made a special exception for us since he was my guardian and they liked how he handled the ball. He told them he wouldn't come without me, so they set it all up in secret."

I nod in encouragement, eager to learn more about her.

"Anyway, the girl he dated in high school went to college there too, and she came over all the time. Quinn loves Christmas, and said her family put up their decorations on November first. Halloween came down and Christmas went up. Now I do the same thing."

Emotion cracks her voice despite her grin, making me assume she lost the girlfriend when she lost her brother. "What happened to her?"

Seraphina wraps her other hand around mine, seeming to steady herself. "She dropped out of school after Gabriel died. She didn't handle it very well either. They were going to get married."

Grief hangs between us, and I don't push. I want to know the rest. My guys can get everything on her background, but I'd rather hear the details from her.

“She called me a couple of times after the funeral but when I had to move out of my brother’s apartment, we lost touch because I didn’t have a cell phone or anything.”

I’ve never experienced dread before. I do not like where this story is headed. A quick estimate of their ages makes me guess she was too young to be on her own. “Where did you go then?”

“Back to my old foster home.”

A shudder engulfs her body. I release her hand only to wrap my arm around her and draw her against me. She clutches my suit coat seeking comfort I’m more than happy to give her. I stroke her head lying against my shoulder. “They were assholes to you.”

Not a question because I already know the answer. I already know they will suffer once the team tracks them down.

“Yes, they punished me for losing all that money while I was gone. It was a long six years with them.”

Rage coils my body, and I have to bring myself back to this moment with her snuggled in my embrace in her happy little holiday world.

“The day I turned eighteen they kicked me out, but it was fine. I was ready to go. I kept my grades up and won a scholarship just like my brother. I earned my business degree and then started working for Ms. Fine. I’m making it, slowly but surely.”

Incredible. My pulse races from her description. Indeed, she is surely making it. But I want to speed up the process. I want to give her everything her huge heart desires for Christmas and whatever else she wants. “I’m proud of you angel. You’ve accomplished a lot with the deck stacked against you.”

She lifts up to look at me, and I love the glow on her exquisite face. “Thank you.”

Powerless to resist, I cup her cheeks and kiss her. With all the restraint I can find, I keep us chaste with just a few lingering pecks. Otherwise, I’d flip her on the cushions and fuck her until the frame cracked underneath us.

She smiles against my lips. “Do you want some peppermint tea?”

No, I want to strip you bare and taste you all over. “Sure. That sounds good.”

When she tries to rise, I tug her back for one more kiss. I can’t get enough of her.

She tucks her lower lip under her teeth as she climbs off. Pretty sure she wants me too.

I let her go so I don't scare her and watch as she drifts around the kitchen filling the kettle with water and setting out mugs. The box she takes from the cabinet has an orange clearance sticker stuck on the front, reminding me how she thrives despite how poor she is.

After she drops the bags into our cups, she glances back at me. "It's from last year but the flavor is still strong. I think you'll enjoy it."

I give her a slow nod. "I know I will."

Just like I know I'll enjoy everything about her.

Framed in the opening between the living room and kitchen, she really is as ethereal as an angel. Shimmering from her holiday lights, she gives me a wistful smile.

"Now you have to tell me about your family."

She knows not what she asks. I shrug, pretending the truth is too boring to discuss. "It's just my dad and my brother. My mom died a few years ago, and it's been hard on everyone, especially my father."

Her fingertips touch her lips, and she tilts her head, shaking it with sympathy I know too well. She scrambles around the pillar and races to me. Unable to help myself, I hop up and catch her when she launches herself at me.

Despite her petite size, her embrace is fierce. Slender arms wrap around my waist, and she rests her cheek on my chest.

"I'm so sorry."

Me too, angel. Me too.

Silky strands of her long hair glide under my fingers as I caress her back. "We just have to be tough and keep going though, don't we?"

Her sweet head nods against my shirt. Neither of us makes the move to release the other.

I'd be a fool to let her go any sooner than I have to. Unfortunately, the teapot screaming for attention forces her to scurry back to make our drinks.

I'd also be a damn fool not to follow her.



Seraphina

Not that I'm trying to get away from him, I just never expected him to follow me into the kitchen. He's been nothing but sweet to me. Maybe a little intense, which I guess is understandable for a rich, powerful man like him.

From everything London's told me, Balthazar is used to getting what he wants. I'm just confused as to why that seems to be me.

With my back to him, I pause after picking up the kettle. I need to catch my breath in the silent reprieve after the shrieking permeated the room. One huge hand slides around my waist while the other glides down my arm. Strong fingers cover mine, and he gently tugs the handle out of my grasp.

"I've got it, angel."

Uncertain as to why, I feel like it's wrong for him to take over. I grip the black plastic a little tighter. "It's okay. I've got it."

"Seraphina."

The gruff sound of his voice growling my name gives me a twinge in unexpected places that I've never experienced before. When I look up at him, the twinge turns into an ache pooling between my legs.

"It's hot. Let me take care of you."

I've poured boiling water a thousand times and never once burned myself. But the sensation of him wanting to protect me overwhelms my need to be independent. The grin spreading on his handsome face proves I've pleased him, and I love that feeling too.

This enormous man bobbing tiny tea bags up and down is too funny, and I keep smiling as I grab milk from the refrigerator and sugar from the cabinet. "You're my guest so you at least have to let me finish them for you."

His head dips in approval, and he wraps his hand around the back of my neck, hauling me to him and kissing the top of my head, before sitting down at the table.

I stare at him longer than I should. Balthazar is all man. There's no other way to describe him.

The wobbly chair looks ready to crumble under his weight although he seems unbothered. He spreads his thick legs wide, practically taking up half the room. His fingertips press against his thigh as if he's mulling something over.

Embarrassing myself from studying him so closely, I focus on stirring our drinks. Shame burns my cheeks, and I blow out a low breath attempting to calm myself down.

“You’re adorable when you blush.”

Oh my god, the humiliation. I shake my head. “I...I was just noticing how tall you are.”

His head falls back, and he laughs. Hard. A long, deep humorous chuckle that immerses the apartment as well as my heart in pleasure. The joy steeps as rich and wonderful as our tea.

At least he’s not mad. I slide his mug to him and then hurry to sit in my seat across from him.

“It feels like a different world in here with you.”

The admission surprises me. His declaration sounds like a compliment with his tone, but I have to see his face to know for sure. I rally myself to be brave and peek up at him. When our eyes meet, he reaches across the table and caresses my cheek.

“That’s a good thing.”

Thank goodness. My body relaxes but I don’t pull away from his touch. The warmth of his rough skin makes me want to feel more. “I’m glad.”

When his thumb drags back and forth, I know *where* I want to feel more, and I heat up all over again.

“But I think it’s just being with you.”

I have no words. There’s nothing intelligent I can say in return.

He winks and sits back. I miss his touch but feel awkward with my lack of response. Sipping from my mug gives me an excuse to be quiet.

He doesn’t seem to mind the silence. He takes a big swallow too yet keeps his gaze on me. After he sets down his cup, he reaches for me. A simple act of holding hands overwhelms me, and I almost can’t look at him until he speaks.

“I like your friends. They watch out for you.”

He’s right, they do. “I think they were just surprised you came to the game for me.”

“I get it.”

He licks his lips, and a darkness takes over his eyes as he caresses my fingers.

“They’ll get used to me. They’ll soon know that I’ll never do anything to hurt you.”

Despite how warm I am, tiny goosebumps lift on my arms. He intends to be around and convince them he’ll be good to me. The idea thrills me even though everything is too much too fast.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?”

Even faster. “Um...nothing really.”

“Good, then I can take you out. Anything you want to do. I’ll pick you up at eleven and we’ll go for lunch first.”

Out.

Lunch.

Balthazar.

Opposite of me, he’s not stunned at all. He’s direct and definitive, giving me a squeeze, and then slowly rising.

“Where’s your phone? I want you to put my number in it.”

Hypnotized by his confidence and control, I stand up too and head to the living room to get my cell from my jacket. Devoid of any rational thoughts, I tap in the digits he gives me.

He’s not satisfied though. He slides the phone from my hand and types onto the screen. His lips press against my forehead as he curls my fingers around the case.

“I hate to leave but I’ve got to go do something for my Dad. I’ll see you tomorrow. Lock up behind me.”

In my fog, I obey, twisting the deadbolt once the latch clicks after he closes the door. I glance down to see what he added to the contact information.

Boyfriend.

I stare at the word and shiver.

I guess I’m dating Balthazar now.



CHAPTER 5

Seraphina

I'm glad Bree said to call her and not Facetime. Otherwise, she'd see the goofy smile that won't seem to leave my lips. Even after taking a shower and putting on my reindeer pj's, I'm still grinning.

She picks up on the first ring.

"Are you at home?"

That's a weird question. Not even a *hello*. "Yes, Balthazar just left."

"He was inside your apartment!"

The harsh shriek bellowing through the speaker hurts my ears, and I yank the phone away from me. She's usually a calm person so *her* freaking out freaks *me* out.

I switch to speaker so I can protect my hearing. "Yes. Why are you so upset?"

"He shouldn't have been there. He's..."

Now I'm really confused. "He's what?"

A long sigh blows into the room. My brother always did that when he was thinking very hard about how to say something important. Usually something bad. My friend's worry finally eliminates my giddiness.

"It's just that it's kind of weird that he came to get you at the game instead of calling or texting you. And he acted so crazy about Casey. He wouldn't let Alex drive you and then he comes inside after taking you home. None of that is okay."

I'm uncertain how to respond. I guess Balthazar's behavior is kind of

weird. Yet, I also feel defensive of him. He hasn't done anything wrong.

I don't think.

"He's your boss. It feels slimy, like he's creeping on you."

The accusation hurts. "It wasn't like that. We talked and drank some tea. Then he left. That's it."

"He didn't try to kiss you or anything, did he?"

Yes, and it was incredible. But I already know she won't approve so I hesitate in answering. I don't want to be dishonest, but I hate the way her question already sounds indignant.

"Seraphina?"

Worry pulses in her voice. Bree's like a big sister to me. She always helps me when I need it. I don't want her to be mad. I can't lie though. "Yes."

"Oh God girl. That is so, so wrong."

Much too familiar pity wafts in her tone. It didn't feel wrong. Balthazar's lips on mine felt like heaven and Christmas and everything right. "It was nice. He's very sweet."

"It's not sweet. It's sexual harassment."

I hate how ugly she's making his feelings for me sound. "We're consenting adults."

Fire burns my face, but I have to confess. "Besides, I liked him kissing me."

Okay, that was embarrassing to say out loud. But it's the truth.

"Well, it's still wrong. He's older than you and in a position of power. He's taking advantage of you."

Skepticism pits in my stomach. Is he taking advantage of me? Am I misunderstanding the situation? "It didn't seem that way."

My attempt to sound certain fails. The words come out hesitant rather than confident. As if I'm trying to convince her. Yet her suspicion causes me to doubt myself, and I hate my lack of confidence.

"Of course it didn't. He probably does this all the time and is too slick to make you feel anything but special."

Now my heart really hurts. I did think I was special. I don't want to be just another conquest to him. "What should I do?"

"Just keep things professional. This was a one off. Going forward, be polite and focus on your job. Say *no thank you* if he asks you out. If he won't stop, then you know it's harassment and you'll quit."

"I can't afford to quit."

“Yes you can. You’ll move back in with us until you find another job. We don’t mind. I swear.”

I mind though. I’m trying to do this on my own.

Yet, I’m grateful too that she’s so supportive and gives me options. There are probably lots of other women who don’t any choice. They’re stuck in miserable jobs with horrible, abusive bosses. That thought makes me sad too. “Thank you. You and Alex have already done so much for me. I appreciate it.”

“You’re like a little sister to us. We want to take care of you.”

At this point, I should be taking care of myself. My brother was younger than me when he had us set up in a nice apartment. I’m three years older and don’t even realize when someone is using me. God, am I really that stupid? “Thanks Bree.”

“Don’t be upset. This stuff happens all the time. That’s why there are laws to prevent it. It’s not your fault. You’ve done nothing wrong. The guy’s just a sleaze. We’ve got your back and will help you.”

Her comments do the trick and make me feel better—a little less foolish. And, loved too. I know she and Alex will do everything for me that they can. “I’m grateful to have you guys.”

“We feel the same way. Now get some sleep and let me know how it goes on Monday.”

“Okay, good night.”

“Wait. What do you have your thermostat on? It’s really cold.”

She knows me too well. “Sixty-three.”

“Seraphina! That’s ridiculous. Put it on sixty-eight. We’ll pay the bill.”

Even though she’s fussing at me, I smile. Besides my brother, no one else ever cared if I was warm enough. “Okay sis. I will.”

“I mean it. Sixty-eight!”

I can’t help but laugh at her bossiness. “All right, all right, sixty-eight. I promise. Now good night.”

“Good night.”

Once she’s gone, I shove off the covers and race to the hallway, bumping up the heat as promised. I grab my phone and dash back to bed. I need to let Balthazar know I can’t go tomorrow.

But how?

And why?

Any reason I give him will be an insult.

When he typed *Boyfriend* earlier, I thought the gesture was romantic. Now, I feel ridiculous for thinking he meant something endearing.

I change the heading to *Mr. Wiseman*. That's better.

Yet composing the message to him isn't as easy as correcting his name. Deep down, I know I should call him. This kind of discussion deserves a live conversation. But I don't like confrontation.

I hate for anyone to be mad at me. So I'll be a chicken and text him. Plus, I won't get flustered and talk too much or say the wrong thing.

Yes, this is good because I can word everything just right and minimize the chance of upsetting him.

Me: I've given it a lot of thought. You are very nice. But we work together and should keep things focused on the business. Thank you though for the offer to go out tomorrow. I know it would have been fun. Have a wonderful weekend!

Just like Bree advised, I keep it professional but also friendly. No way he can be mad about what I've said. Although my heart still pounds, not totally convinced that he won't be angry or offended.

I hit send.

And watch.

And wait.

My chest continues to flutter as I pick up my library book from the nightstand and try to immerse myself in the mystery of the story rather than why he doesn't answer.

Twenty minutes pass, and he still hasn't responded.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised. He's a busy man and said he had to do something for his Dad, which is sweet. I like that they're close.

It's almost eleven. He might already be asleep and probably won't even see the message until tomorrow. No sense fretting about his response now.

At least that's what I tell myself as I close my paperback, turn off the light, and slide down deeper under the comforter. I'm sleepy but can't stop wondering if he hates me. If he'll fire me. If he'll fire London.

Oh no! What if I destroy her career too?

Despite the heat blowing, I tremble and curl onto my side.

Am I wrong for listening to Bree?

Should I trust her experience?

Or should I trust my own instincts?

Should I trust him?

Now I wish I had called him. I may never talk to him again and he won't ever know how I really feel.



Balthazar

If she doesn't talk to me, I'll break this damn door down. I hustle up the steps and pound on the cheap wood. "Open up angel."

Nothing.

Not a word.

Not a sound.

Not a peep.

Maybe she's asleep since it's after midnight. I bang harder. "Seraphina! Open this door or I'll kick it in."

Finally, I hear the floor creak from her scurrying feet and the deadbolt turn. Thank fuck.

"Please stop yelling or the neighbors will call the police."

Finally the knob twists, and I burst in. "I don't give a fuck who they call. No one will stop me from seeing you."

She stumbles backward, and I grab her to keep her from falling. Which is perfect. I've got her in my clutches, her gorgeous face in my sights, her sugary scent in my lungs.

My roaring blood pressure instantly falls just from being close to her while my dick hardens. "Not your neighbors. Not your friends. No one. Not even you."

Crimson explodes on her face, and I realize my hunch was correct. Someone told her not to see me again.

Her gaze drifts away. "I...I just think..."

"What do you think?"

I keep my tone low and neutral, so she realizes I'm not goading her. I really want to know her thoughts.

"That maybe you've dated other girls from work and—"

“Nope, not even once. Only you.”

She frowns instead of smiles. I thought that knowledge would make her happy. Something else bothers her.

“If I say no, then you’ll fire me.”

“I’m not going to fire you but you’re not going to say no. Because you want me as much as I want you despite someone else telling you otherwise.”

Her head droops forward, and I miss her exquisite features.

“Is that what happened? Your friend told you this was a bad idea?”

A small nod and a big breath. “She’s just trying to look out for me. She’s worried you’re sexually harassing me.”

The way she whispers *sexually* makes my cock strain against my zipper. “Have I asked you to do anything you don’t want to do?”

“No.”

Thank fuck. “Did I give you any ultimatums about your job?”

She softens in my fists and shakes her head. “No.”

“If I do, I want you to hire a lawyer and sue the hell out of me, okay?”

An ingenuous giggle releases the last of her tension, and she finally looks up at me again. “I’m serious. You report harassment directly to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. They have an office by the courthouse downtown. If I ever do anything that makes you think you’re going to be fired, head straight there. I’m going to email you the address and this promise, so you’ll have it in writing that our relationship doesn’t have anything to do with your job.”

She squints at me. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“As hell, angel.”

All the doubt melts away, replaced with a radiant smile. “I believe you.”

“Good. I’ll make your friend believe it too. Or anyone else who stands in the way.”

“Please don’t be mad at her. She just worries. I’m like a little sister to her, and she thinks she has to take care of me.”

I nod. “I get it and understand completely. I’d be suspicious of me too. But I’ll earn her approval just like yours.”

An emotion I can’t read flashes on her face as she stares up at me. I finally come to my senses and realize I’m still locking her down. My hands look huge wrapped around her slender arms covered in white cotton fabric decorated with red reindeer.

The innocence reminds me to dial back, and I release my hold on her. “I

like your pajamas.”

Instantly, her arms cross as if hiding herself. I’d get it if she was naked or something but she’s absolutely modest with her long sleeves and pants.

“Thanks.”

Hesitation wobbles in her answer. I don’t understand her ambiguity to my compliment, yet I don’t push. I’ve already overwhelmed her enough for one night. “It’s late so I better let you get to bed. I’ll be back to pick you up at eleven.”

Her brilliant smile returns. “It’ll be fun.”

“Yeah, it will be.”

I drag her to me and hug her tight, relishing her sinking into me. Indulging in the sensation, I stroke the back of her head, soft hair gliding under my fingers and pressing my lips to her crown. “You’re mine angel. Don’t forget that.”

She shudders in my arms from my confirmation. No response, which is fine. We both know the truth.

With one last chaste kiss, I force myself to head out. “See you in the morning.”

Her lips curl in as she nods. A blush burns her cheeks as she glances down at my cock bulging in my pants for her before she lifts her gaze to mine again.

“Bye.”

That whisper will destroy me. I wait on the other side of the door until the deadbolt engages.

I know I won’t hear from her again tonight, and I’m shocked how disappointing that feels. Morning won’t come soon enough.



CHAPTER 6

Seraphina

As soon as I twist the red band at the end of my braid, I slide the elastic back down my hair. If he doesn't want to go the festival, maybe I should do something more sophisticated. That's what he's used to, I'm sure.

He dates women like London.

Rich, confident, intelligent women who probably always know what a man like Balthazar wants. She never seems flustered or tongue-tied or hesitant. Which is my goal except I can never figure out how to feel that way, let alone look that way.

Shoot!

I rip through the plaits until the strands are separated and plug in my flat iron. Thank you once again to my wonderful friend Bree for giving me her old one. If I hurry, I'll be ready by the time he gets here.

I sprint to the bedroom and drop to my knees in front of the closet. Boxes topple from my search until I find the heels from graduation stuffed in the back. Plain black but better than the fuzzy boots I'd planned.

What else? What else?

Channel London. How would she dress?

She often wears all one color. Maybe because she's so tall.

And necklaces. Long, silver necklaces that look elegant and expensive.

I don't have that. But I stand and yank the brown pants off the hanger that I wore to the interview with her. They looked good enough I got the job, so they should be okay.

I grab the bronze blouse Bree gave me for my birthday. I've been saving the top for a special occasion. This definitely is the most special date I've ever had.

My chest hurts from the reminder of her. She's going to be disappointed in me when she finds out that I went on a date with Balthazar.

Maybe once I tell her what he said, she'll realize he's not a bad guy. I sure hope so.

I lay the clothes on the bed and beeline to my jewelry box. The gold chain with a sparkly star Quinn gave me for Christmas one year lies on the beige velvet. I miss her so much.

That was the best year of my life, living in the apartment with my brother and her coming over all the time. Thanks to them I was always warm and well-fed and wanted in our little family.

Doubtful I'd ever find that again, I'd agreed on a few dates with Casey even though I knew he wasn't the one. I was wrong and shouldn't have done that. In the nicest way possible, I need to tell him the truth.

Although the conversation will be awkward, honesty is best for both of us. Especially if I'm going to start dating Balthazar. I'm not a cheater and don't want to lead Casey on or appear ambiguous in my feelings about him.

That's not fair to a friend. Which is exactly what I want Casey to be going forward. Losing his friendship would hurt and forever be uncomfortable between us.

I clasp the choker around my throat and yank off my pajamas. Balthazar said he liked them but I'm sure he was just being nice. They're much too silly for his taste.

In the past I've never thought much about my bra and panties but today I wish I had something cute and sexy. Even though Balthazar won't see them, some silk and lace lingerie would make me feel more confident than plain cotton.

Nothing I can do about it now. I hurry and dress so I can finish my hair. Studying myself in the mirror, I give myself a six for sophistication. I need more.

I flip up my collar and unfasten my top button, so my necklace shows better. That seems London like. Sensual but not slutty.

I grab the gold hoop earrings that make my ears itch and race back to the bathroom. I'm horrible with the flat iron, always burning myself somehow. But if I don't want to embarrass myself with Balthazar, I need to be as fancy

as possible.



Balthazar

When I pull up in front of Seraphina's place, I park behind a cargo truck with the back gate already raised. Men unload boxes and place them in neat stacks on the asphalt. A guy wearing a toolbelt and holding a clipboard stands on the stoop to her building.

Excellent. I appreciate employees who are prompt and obedient, especially when it comes to her security.

As I climb out, I receive chin lifts of deference from each of them. Obviously, they know who I am and what this job means to me and quickly return to their work. The project manager rushes toward me.

"Good morning, Mr. Wiseman. We're all ready to install the security system for you."

I nod in approval. "Let me get my girl and then it's all yours."

His head bobs with anxiety. "Yes sir. Very good sir."

The tension in his voice pleases me. Not that I need everyone to be terrified of me. However, it always helps if they are. Then I can trust they'll do exactly what I demand.

Eager to see her again after our doubt filled discussion last night, I jet through the entryway and up the steps, banging on the cheap wood once I arrive at her apartment. "Open up angel."

The door unlocks too slowly, and I barge inside at the first crack, unwilling to wait for any pleasantries. A raging blush burns on her cheeks as she stumbles back a few steps from me crowding her space.

"Hi."

My balls tighten from her shy tone. Big brown eyes meet mine before her gaze drifts to the side. Almost as if she's intimidated by me again.

Unable to resist, I cage her against the wall, forcing her to look up at me. Luscious lips part with a deep intake of air, and I take full advantage. Cupping her face with my palms, I sweep inside her mouth tasting a cool

minty flavor that makes my cock pulse in my boxer briefs.

The effect must be the same on her as she moans slightly and tilts her head allowing me complete admission. Which has me imagining the sensation of her granting me the same access to every other place on her body. Will she groan and flush and writhe against me like she is now?

I lean back, drinking her in as she shivers and watches me with dilated eyes burning from the flames scorching between us from only a simple, single kiss. I sneak my thumb underneath her necklace and smile from her racing pulse. The chain is taut from my grasp and her breathing picks up, seemingly enjoying the pressure.

My other hand glides downward, lingering for too brief of a second on the swell of her small, pert tits to her waist. Fake silk fabric bunches under my fist when I stroke to the small of her back to keep her pressed to me, my cock nestled against her belly.

“Balthazar.”

When she breathes my name, I have to tamp down the beast inside wanting to taste the delicate skin of her slender throat while I explore her luscious pussy with my fingers that I know is just as sweet as the rest of her.

Instead, I release my grip from her neck and inhale her sugary scent. “Hi.”

Her giggle reaffirms her innocence and my mistake of manhandling her.

“I’m happy to see you too.”

My angel. So, so naïve and perfect.

I grin down at her. She holds my gaze for mere seconds before timidity returns, and she drops her focus to my shoulder. A frown mars her gorgeous face. Perplexed as to why she’s upset, I lift her head back up to mine. “What’s wrong?”

She worries her lower lip which makes me want to nibble on the plump pink skin too.

“I...nothing. Are you ready to go?”

Reluctance quakes in her voice, and I don’t like the uncertainty. “More importantly, are *you* ready to go?”

Her shoulders hunch, and she swallows hard. “Yes, I think so. But, I...I mean if you think I look all right?”

The hesitation radiating from her kills me. Fuckers from her past have destroyed her self-confidence. Lucky for me I can build her up again.

I step back and peruse her clothes. She looks great but something niggles

in the back of my mind that she seeks something more than reassurance on her outfit. “I think you look incredible.”

Praise works and her body softens. The smile I crave returns from my affirmation.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I caress over her shoulder and tug strands of sleek hair. “Where would you like to go for lunch?”

Her grin flickers, threatening to fade away before she regroups and stands tall with her shoulder blades against the wall. A similar stance to the first time I met her, portraying the positive professional she wants to convey.

“Anything is fine with me.”

She doesn’t lie. Anything *would be* fine with her. That’s not what this is about. I need to know what she really wants so I can give it to her. “You must have given it some thought. What were you thinking?”

Slender fingers scrape against her ear before she jerks her arm down. Not before I catch the angry red mark on the inside of her palm. I flip her hand over and study the burgeoning blister. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

A rumble vibrates in my chest. “Seraphina.”

She squirms from my threatening tone.

“I accidentally burned myself trying to straighten my hair. I’m not good with the flat iron.”

“Then don’t use it. I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

She scratches her ear again, fiddling with the earring that dangles against irritated skin there too.

“I don’t normally but I wanted to look suitable since you probably like fancy places.”

Anger courses through me from her admission. We come from different worlds, and she thinks she’s not good enough for me. When unquestionably the opposite is true. I’m definitely punching above my weight being with her.

“You know, like London.”

All of the insecurity coiling in her body unnerves me. Needing to eliminate her uncertainty, I rub down her arms. “You did this for me?”

A slight nod.

“I appreciate it, but I want you to be you. Talk like you. Dress like you. Act like you.” I press my thumbs into her biceps. “Not London or anyone

else. You.”

Her hands clutch my jacket. “I’m sorry. I was just feeling a little bit intimidated.”

“No need.” I cup her face. “Now where do *you* want to go?”

A pink glow spreads across her lifted cheeks. “The holiday festival at Grant Park. They have food trucks and bands playing and an arts and crafts show.”

Never in a million years would I go to an event like this by choice. Funny how I don’t mind when it’s with her. For her to make her happy.

“I mean only if you want to.”

Her little squeak at the end is undeniably adorable. “Yeah, angel. I do want to.”

She lights up like the stars. “Yay! Then let me change really quick and we can go.”

I kiss her forehead and step back. Despite how much I want to, I don’t follow her to the bedroom and watch her strip. I wouldn’t be able to withstand the temptation to do more than look.



CHAPTER 7

Seraphina

Balthazar eyes me with more than just approval when I step out of my bedroom. I swear hunger flashes in his expression, and my fear of disappointing him instantly evaporates. My long red sweater, black leggings, and furry white boots don't seem to bother him. He even grins at my snowflake knit cap. I can't help but smile back.

I feel like myself in my festive clothes and simple braid. With his admiring gaze, all of my optimism returns. We *are* going to have fun.

He grabs my hand, dragging me to him and kissing me again. This time is chaste as he seemingly holds back. A growl rumbles in his throat when he pulls away, and his grip tightens on my fingers. He doesn't seem angry. More frustrated than mad, I think.

I don't know why so I stay quiet. Talking too little is always better than talking too much I've learned.

When we stop for me to lock my front door, he acts unhappy to release me. With an apparent need to always touch me, his hands glide around my waist while I turn the deadbolt. As soon as my key ring is in my jacket pocket, he entwines our fingers again and leads me downstairs.

Outside, work men mill around. Boxes are stacked by the door and a man wearing an enormous toolbelt checks off a list on his clipboard. "I wonder what that's all about."

"No idea."

Balthazar doesn't even glance at the construction crew. He just tucks me

against him, with his arm tight around my rib cage, hurrying me to his car.

My heartbeat gallops when he opens my door, assisting me inside, and ensuring I tug my seatbelt across my body before he walks around to his side.

Once inside, he starts the engine and wraps his fingers around mine, just like last night. It seems like it would be hard to drive holding someone's hand, but he doesn't appear to have any difficulty.

"Have you been to this before?"

He glances at me with a seductive expression. Or at least that's what it feels like. He just pulses sexy with his wavy black hair, dark emerald eyes, and sharp jawline. "My brother and Quinn took me once. I had the best time, and I've always wanted to go back. I hope it's as good as I remember."

"If it's not, I'll take you any place else you want to go."

When he says stuff like that, I swear my heart is going to explode in my chest. No one has ever wanted to please me the way he does. "Thank you. I'm sure whatever we do will be fun."

He nods and brings our entwined fingers to his mouth, kissing the back of my hand.

"Always angel."

Only about a quarter of the parking spaces are taken when we pull into the lot. The festival just started about twenty minutes ago so I'm not surprised. The place will probably be a madhouse soon.

Balthazar navigates to the end of the fifth row, picking the last spot and hanging over the line a little bit. I can't blame him. With an expensive car like his, I'd probably have walked here and left my vehicle at home.

A gentleman as always, he comes around to my side and helps me out. More kisses and caresses before I loop my arm through his.

He seems thrilled I reached for him first. I guess with how tender and protective he is with me, I feel the need to hold on tight to him too.

"Where to, angel? I'm following your lead."

I scan the grassy areas. Food trucks edge the basketball courts, which are covered with plastic picnic tables surrounded by heat lamps. Booths with wreaths, ornaments, porch signs, and other homemade items fill the center in front of the playground. Stages are set up behind them and to the right for the bands that start at noon.

But it's the horse drawn carriage by the entrance to the petting zoo that catches my eye. Two honey mares with caramel tails and manes are hitched to an old-fashioned wooden sleigh with a red leather bench seat behind the

driver.

The sign by the gate advertises thirty-five dollars per ride. But for only two dollars you can buy a carrot to feed them, and all the proceeds go to charity. That is definitely worth the money. “Let’s check this out.”

I drag Balthazar in that direction, laughing from his shock. I dig in my pocket for the ones I tucked inside earlier and whip them out to the lady running the activity. “One carrot please.”

“Of course, dear.”

She exchanges the cash for the vegetable, which I promptly snap in half and hand the thicker end to Balthazar. “You can feed one, and I’ll feed the other.”

The vendor smiles and nods to us. “Hold your hand flat and they’ll gobble it right up.”

I eagerly comply while Balthazar watches with a deep frown.

Not at the horse.

But at me.

Fire burns my face despite the chilly air. The realization of my error hits me hard. This is childish. London would never feed animals.

I pet the stallion’s muzzle while she crunches. She’s a sweetie, and it’s not her fault I’m a dork. Once she’s finished, I step back and look up to Balthazar. I don’t want the other girl to feel left out. “If you don’t want to feed her, it’s okay. I can do it.”

Silent and impassive, he hands me the carrot. Humiliation swirls in my chest. Fully aware I’m all wrong for him. The proof of our differences smacks me in the face when I least expect it. I offer the mare the treat and suppress my giggle from her eager lips tickling my palm. I rub her smooth coat and whisper to both of them how beautiful they are.

Steeling myself to the embarrassment of facing Balthazar, I roll back my shoulders and offer the strongest smile I can manage. I refuse to look foolish when I suggest he take me back home. We can accept this didn’t work out and part ways as friends. Or at least professional employee and boss.

Hopefully.

Instead of meeting my gaze, he focuses on the woman and draws out his wallet. He hands her five hundred-dollar bills. Oh my god!

“We’d like to ride for as long as she wants.”

With a possessive touch, his hand wraps around the back of my neck, and he kisses my temple. The flames scorching my skin are very different than

before.

The lady's eyes widen, and she stares at him, then the cash, then him again. "Certainly sir."

She rushes over to the driver and converses with him in hushed tones, while I shake my head. "What are you doing? That's too much money. You don't have to do that."

Balthazar chuckles and presses his lips to me again. "I know I don't. But I want to. You're worth it."

I'm *worth* it.

Wow!

The man motions us forward, and Balthazar gives me a slight push when I don't react. Despite my shock, I force one foot in front of the other until we're at the sled and he's supporting me as I climb up. After he joins me, the woman hands us a thick red, black, and white plaid blanket.

With shaking hands, I help Balthazar drape the cover over our legs and up to our waists. Once we're finished, he wraps his fingers around mine.

The driver clicks his tongue and we're off. One of the horses whinnies and stamps her feet but they both amble forward with a smooth gait. We glide across the snowy grass and a few people turn in our direction as we pass by.

I used to be one of those people. Always watching but never getting to do something this incredible. I feel like a magical princess in a Christmas fairy tale.

Balthazar cups my cheek. "Your smile is breathtaking."

His generosity is what's breathtaking. "Thank you so much for this. I absolutely love it."

Even through my whisper, my voice cracks. I shouldn't be so emotional but after feeling nervous and then stupid and now excited, I can't help myself. The flurry of sensations overwhelms me.

"You're welcome."

I snuggle next to him, laying my head on his shoulder. Terrified of saying or doing something to ruin the most perfect day ever, I just enjoy the ride.

We loop around the lake twice where a man and two little boys feed the geese. Both of the kids stare so long their father calls their names to get their attention back to the birds. I know exactly how they feel. The longing to participate in something so special that you can't afford always happened to me too when I was little.

After we trek through the small, wooded area with paths made from

concrete and iron, I lift up. “Do you mind if we give the rest of our turn to them?”

Balthazar follows my finger pointing at the small family where the children are watching us again. His eyes narrow when he looks back at me.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but only if it’s okay with you. They look like they really want to ride and I’m not sure if they’ll get the chance otherwise.”

He nods and kisses the top of my head. I swear I hear him whisper *incredible* when his lips touch my hat. His words please me more than anything ever has before.



CHAPTER 8

Balthazar

Her smile remains huge and magnificent as she waves to the man and his sons as they trot away. She's just as happy for them as they are for themselves. I've never experienced anything like it. Anything like her.

"Thank you again for the ride and for sharing it with them. I loved how happy you made them."

I draw her to me, clutching her body so close she has to tilt her head all the way back to see my face. "No Seraphina. How happy *you* made them. Almost as happy as you make me."

I swoop down and kiss her gently. Inexperienced lips part for me, letting me own her and her mouth. I love how supple and submissive she is. I could do anything I want to her, and she'd let me. The thought makes my greedy cock strain against my zipper.

I'm standing here in the middle of a Christmas fair full of families, and I just want to shove my hand down her leggings and work her clit until she comes all over my hand. Fuck.

When she sags against me, I know she's had enough. Too much probably. I pull away and cup her face, relishing her cheeks fill my palms.

"You make me happy too."

So much damn happiness despite us fully clothed, standing upright in the middle of a freezing park. "Good."

She remains silent, waiting for me to direct her. "Are you hungry?"

Her head bobs furiously in my hands. "Starving."

“Then let’s go.”

A smorgasbord of scents drifts toward us as we get closer to the food trucks. Garlic from the pizza, vanilla from the cupcakes, and cumin from the fajitas. After mulling over the options, we choose the brisket. I carry our plates to an open table and chuckle as she digs into the cheesy potato casserole as soon as she plops onto the bench.

The heat lamps stationed around the edge of the eating area give off a surprising amount of warmth. Yet pink tints her cheeks and her hands tremble slightly from the chill. I drop right beside her to provide my body heat too.

As expected, she snuggles into me, looking up and grinning at me with pure joy radiating on her gorgeous face more scorching than the lights. I grab the back of her neck and hold her immobile as I kiss her hard. All of my self-control evaporates with this girl.

When I pull back, she watches me with heavy eyes. I know she won’t take another bite until I release her from the grip I have on her physically and mentally. “Eat angel before it gets cold.”

My instructions earn me a stunning grin, and she clutches her fork, delving into the tender meat. I mimic her, hungrier than I realized with her distracting me. The lunch is excellent, only marred by another couple sitting down across from us as the other tables have slowly filled with people.

They have street tacos but the girl who appears to be similar in age to Seraphina studies our trays and nods to her.

“Is that as good as it looks?”

Of course, Seraphina stays as sweet as the brownies they have too and answers her. Engaging in conversation about the festival with the young woman and the guy, she grins and chats while I keep my hand on her thigh and my mouth shut.

I’m rude, and I don’t care. I want my girl all to myself, not deep in conversation with some random people we’ll never see again.

Neither of them directs any comments toward me. I guess they realize I’m not friendly and kind like she is. Accurate.

Once she slides the last green bean into her luscious mouth, I lean over and brush my lips to her temple. “Ready angel?”

A shudder jolts her, and she nods eagerly. “Yes, thank you for lunch.”

“My pleasure.”

I stack our empty plates and rise, keeping my free hand on her lower back once she stands too. Waving good-bye to the couple, she wishes them fun and

recommends the horse drawn carriage. Literally I have to drag her away before she invites them to join us. After I deposit our trash in the bin, I tug her to me. “Where next?”

Tension seems to fill her small body as she stiffens in my embrace.

“Um...if you’re ready to go, we can leave. I know this probably isn’t your thing. And it’s totally okay. I just appreciate you bringing me and spending so much money on me. It was really fun. Even more than I remember, and I never—”

“Still.” I press my fingertips to her parted lips ending her nervous discourse. Instantly obedient, she quiets and stares up at me.

God she’s amazing.

I slide my hand to her cheek and caress the cold smooth skin. “What kind of man do you think I am?”

“I...” She swallows, getting her bearings. “I think you’re an important businessman who’s very busy.”

“I am very busy.” I grin down at her to alleviate the frown burgeoning on her face. “So, if I didn’t want to be here with you, then I wouldn’t be.”

The uncertainty remains despite my admission. Life has made her insecure, and I fucking hate her skepticism. “You never have to doubt me. I’m exactly where I want to be. You’re exactly who I want to be with.”

The lines above her eyes finally smooth, and she grins her bashful smile. “Me too.”

“Good. Then tell me what you want to do next.”

“We can check out the candles, if you want?”

Always with what *I* want. I’ve got to convince her to do what *she* wants. “Done.”

I tuck her into me and guide her to the booths. We pass tables with ceramic figurines and personalized stockings before stopping in front of a stall with several shelves of various sizes and colors of glass jars. She picks up a green votive and brings the container to her nose, breathing deep.

“This one smells wonderful. What do you think?”

She holds out the tiny candle to me, and I breathe in the scent of evergreen. “I like it.”

My approval pleases her with the slight wiggle of her body. She nods and turns to the lady. “I’ll take two please.”

She glances backward and catches my gaze. “One for me and one for you.”

Ridiculous for this poor girl with barely enough money to feed herself wants to buy me something. Yet here she is handing over three dollars to the merchant. I want to stop her but know how embarrassed and devastated she would be if I refuse her.

So, I accept when she kisses my cheek and holds up the bag with excitement. I'll just have to spoil her in other ways. "Thank you, angel."

"You're welcome. Now when we burn them, we'll think of each other."

"I'm always thinking of you Seraphina."

Her innocent giggle entices me more than the seductive laughter women I used to find attractive would emanate. Funny how things change so quickly.

Deep notes from a violin resonate around us, and Seraphina's chocolate eyes widen.

"That's *We Three Kings*. Let's go check it out."

She thanks the vendor and grabs my hand, leading us to the first stage. A lone woman wearing a huge silver coat with fur lining the hood around her face begins humming, accompanied by a trio of string musicians.

By the time we make it to the platform, about thirty people have gathered. I slide Seraphina in front of me and wrap my arms around her chest to help keep her warm. Despite the abundant sunshine, the air is still cool. Her small body trembles against mine, and her graceful fingers are red as they wrap around my forearms.

The vocalist launches into the lyrics and has one hell of a voice. Rich and throaty, she sounds like she belongs at a night club instead of singing Christmas carols in the park.

Seraphina lets out a small gasp. "Wow! This is my favorite song, and I've never heard it sung so beautifully before."

Heads bob around us in agreement with lots of murmurs through the growing crowd. I squeeze her tight, relishing her enjoyment of the performance. Enormous applause breaks out upon conclusion, and the soloist doesn't pause, launching into *Silent Night*. Her rendition of that classic is just as incredible.

By the end, Seraphina's teeth chatter, so I bend down to her ear. "It's time to go angel. You're freezing."

"Okay."

As expected, she offers no argument but disappointment thuds in her tone. She snuggles in tight as we walk back to my car.

"Thank you so much for bringing me. I had a great time."

I smile from her unwavering politeness. “Was it as good as you remembered?”

“Better.”

Breathless and vehement, she stares up at me with adoration that’s undeserved by a man like me. “I’m glad.”

At my car, I hurry to help her inside and then hustle around to start the ignition and pump the heat. An icy hand entwines with mine, reminding me I need to get her some gloves. I squeeze her fingers in approval of her touch. “Good girl.”

The shiver vibrating through her isn’t from the cold this time. Another confirmation of how much she needs my praise, that I’m just as eager to always provide.



CHAPTER 9

Seraphina

The vibe between us changes when my phone buzzes in my jacket pocket. Balthazar's body stiffens and his hand holding mine squeezes as he glances at me with squinting eyes. Unable to figure out why he's irritated, I wait until he looks back at the road before I dig out my cell.

My chest flutters. What if it's Bree? I already feel guilty and don't want to have to explain to her I'm on a date with the man she's overly suspicious of. Somehow, I feel worse when I see Casey's name on the screen.

Casey: What happened last night? You left with that guy and didn't even say good-bye.

Wow! He abandoned me, and he's the one that's mad? I don't understand his perspective at all.

"Who is it?"

Without thinking, I blurt out Casey's name in my own frustration from his accusation of my rudeness.

"That son of a bitch."

Fury thunders in Balthazar's tone. His grasp turns into a death grip crushing my fingers.

The expression on Balthazar's face as he jerks the car to the side of the road makes me think he's going to wreck. He slams the gear into park and turns his big body toward me as far as he can in the narrow space.

He grabs my hand again, cupping the back in his palm as he strokes over

my skin. “Did I hurt you?”

The horror shocks me from a man so normally poised and confident. He gave me a pinch but I’m fine. “No.”

“Angel you flinched.”

The tender way he caresses me and worries over me steals all of my focus. I don’t care anymore if Casey is mad at me or not. I just want to relieve any unwarranted guilt from Balthazar.

I’m not sure how—after knowing someone for such a short time—I can be this concerned with his feelings but I am. My heart knows he’s better for me than Casey. “I’m okay really. It was just for a second.”

“Fuck.” He twists back and slams his head onto the back of his seat, blowing out a long breath. “You’re making me lose control.”

I’m not sure how I’m doing that, but he seems upset by it. So I say the only thing I can think of to make him not mad at me. “I’m sorry.”

His head whips up, and he caresses my cheek. “How are you so sweet?”

The gentleness contrasts with the tension raging under the surface. He pretends to be calm when I can tell something bothers him.

I’m not afraid of him but I’m fearful to ask what’s wrong. Like not poking a bear as they say. I don’t want to make him more aggravated.

“I’ve never been jealous before in my damn life, and I’ve only known you two days. How am I not going to fucking murder him?”

Oh! Now I get it. He’s being silly.

Thank goodness. I wilt against my seat and laugh. I must have misread him.

He’s right—we’ve only known each other a short time, and we’re still getting to know each other.

I turn and kiss his wrist before facing him again. The intensity of his questioning scrutiny leaves me no choice but to explain everything. “You don’t have to worry about Casey. I’m going to tell him that it’s not going to work out. He’s just not right for me. I should—”

“Who’s right for you, Seraphina?”

An uncontrollable shiver engulfs me from his gravelly tone. Almost as if he demands I acknowledge the inferno burning between us already, despite us still learning about each other. I swallow hard. “You are.”

He groans and clenches his eyes shut. “Angel.”

I don’t know how to respond so I say nothing. My heart still races, and I feel like I’m struggling for oxygen. He sucks in a deep breath too and then

whispers a long string of swear words that make me blush.

After a few seconds, he punches the ignition, rams the gear shift into *drive*, and grabs my hand. We speed off like nothing happened. He doesn't speak so I don't either. Despite our fabulous afternoon, I feel like I'm back to where I started—intimidated and insecure.

When Balthazar parks in front of my building, he remains quiet. All I can think of is to show my appreciation before I hop out. "This may sound corny but today was one of the best days of my life. I really had a good time. Thank you for taking me."

The funny look on his face doesn't bode well for me. Maybe my honesty is too much. The date too lame. The activities too boring.

I push the embarrassment down deep and smile while I dig my keys out of my pocket. "Okay, well I better let you go. I know you're busy, so I'll—"

"Seraphina."

When he uses the growling tone that sounds like he's scolding me, my body tingles. Because I know he's not angry. Well, he is, but not in a mad way. More in a *don't try to get away from me* way that's utterly wrong but feels so wonderful.

I sit still, waiting for him the way he seems to like. True to his nature, he nods in approval and confirms that I'm a good girl. Which also makes my lady bits flutter and clench. How can two simple words be so powerful?

Maybe because they're voiced by such a powerful man. Physically proven as he climbs out of his fancy car and strides around to my side. Mentally proven when he opens my door and tugs me to him, embracing me tight as if he knows I need reassurance that he still likes me when I get up in my head and doubt myself.

The rich aroma of leather and wood with slight hints of fragrant fruit engulfs me, and I breathe deep. I love his cologne. The smell feels safe and comforting. Masculine too—like he's all man with his broad body and strong arms that feel so secure. I don't think I could ever get tired of him or his scent. "You give the best hugs."

His chuckle vibrating in his chest warms me more than his body. I like making him sound so happy.

"Let's get you inside."

A hoarseness I don't expect strains his voice. Maybe I shocked him by clutching his waist so tight. I need to be more careful. I think guys hate when girls seem clingy. I don't want to be that way. I'm independent and not

desperate. Although when he holds me like this I can't get enough.

He keeps me close as we walk up the steps. Inside the vestibule, the man from earlier, with the tool belt and clip board, waits by the stairs. He clenches a thick pamphlet in his hands.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Wiseman. Everything is finished and this has the instructions if you need them.”

Balthazar barely acknowledges him, offering only a head shake. “I don't need them.”

The guy jerks his hand back with the booklet. His gaze flits to me and then to Balthazar.

“Not a problem. Just let me know if you need anything else.”

Again, Balthazar pretty much ignores him. That is so weird. The man jogs out the door, almost as if he's thrilled to get away.

“Why are you mad at him?”

“I'm not.”

He guides me upstairs to my door.

Which isn't my door at all.

Instead, I have a brand-new door decorated with a fancy silver handle topped by a small black screen. “What in the world?”

I glance down the corridor. All of the other apartments look exactly the same as before. No one else had a change. “I'm so confused. Usually my landlord tells me when he repairs or replaces something. I wonder why he didn't say anything.”

“It wasn't him. I had it done.”

My head can't wrap around what he's saying. “Why?”

“I need to keep you safe.”

That's it? He has construction work performed on my apartment without telling me and doesn't seem to think it's any big deal. “Did Mr. Fetters say it was okay?”

“I didn't ask him.”

He taps buttons on the keyboard and then presses my thumb to the little glass. Once the blue light flickers, he does the same thing with his own finger. Another triple blink, and he's satisfied, nodding and ushering me inside.

Where a huge couch sits in the living room and a fancy table and chairs set crowds the kitchen. The door is one thing but new furniture too. I'm at a loss. “What have you done?”



CHAPTER 10

Balthazar

No one ever questions me, so I have to claw back my normal tendency to punish the insolence and shut her down. I grin at her shocked expression. She's simply stunning. "That flimsy piece of crap was too easy to kick in, so I replaced it with something solid and a heavy-duty lock and fingerprint security. Now only the two of us can get in."

She presses a dainty hand against her chest. "You and me?"

Her squeak makes me hard. "Yeah angel. Now you're protected even when I'm not here."

By more than just the door since cameras have been installed too. However, my admission doesn't seem to satisfy her. She frowns, mulling something over as her pink lips open and close a few times. Words remain elusive. I guess that's all that needs to be said for now.

Remembering to be a gentleman, I unzip her jacket, relishing her small shudder and heavy breathing as I slide the tab over her breasts and to her waist. I gently spin her around, drag the sleeves down her arms, and toss the fleece on the sofa.

While I yank off my own coat, she swallows and points to the couch and then the kitchen table. "Why did you get them?"

"I'm a big man and I was afraid I'd bust your old ones. Now it's not a problem."

There's a hint of desire in her enormous coffee eyes. Which surprises as well as definitely thrills me. I like her imagining us together on those

cushions.

Like the good girl she is, the longing disappears, replaced with a frown of apprehension.

“How much did all of this cost?”

“Hardly anything.”

To me anyway. She could never afford all that she deserves. That’s where I come in—the need to take care of her is stronger than any other sensation I’ve ever felt besides the need to fuck her. One will lead to the other, I have no doubt.

“Now why don’t you go and make us some tea?”

The instinct to please me kicks in as expected and she nods. Her uncertainty lingers as she scurries toward the kitchen. With trembling fingers, she twists the knob on the stove and moves the kettle to the warming burner.

She sneaks a timid glance at me over her shoulder. While she watches, I drop down on the sofa and spread my arms across the back. Durable frame and thick fabric just as I requested.

Scarlet pops on her cheeks, still pink from the earlier cold. I wonder if she too is imagining climbing on me to ride my cock until she’s spent. Probably not but that doesn’t mean we won’t be breaking in the sofa that way very soon.

When our eyes meet again, she squirms and twirls back to her preparations. She grabs mugs and a different box than last night. I suspect she doesn’t want to bore me, which isn’t possible as adorable as she is.

She bolts up from dropping the bags into the cups and races around the pillar back to the living room. “I forgot our candles in the car.”

When she strides to her coat, I’m on my feet in an instant. What the fuck? “I’ll get them. You stay in here where it’s warm.”

Her braid sways across her shoulders from the furious head shake. “But I should go. I’m the one who forgot them.”

I grab the back of her neck and haul her to me, loving how she melts into me despite her trivial meaningless worries. “Yeah, but I’m the one who takes care of you.”

Slender arms grasp me tighter. She wants that regardless of how much she denies the truth. From our short time together and everything London told me, Seraphina desires to be an independent woman who’s strong and self-sufficient.

Yet, deep down, the broken little girl inside of her can’t help but thrive

from the loving dominance I provide. “Get the milk and sugar and I’ll be right back.”

Even with my direction she’s slow to release me, smiling up at me shyly to make sure that I really mean what I say. That everything is okay. That I’m not upset with her.

I nod my approval and stroke her face. She lights up from the admiration and gives me her huge authentic smile.

“Okay.”

I have to adjust the rod in my pants before I grab my jacket and haul ass downstairs. Taking the steps two at a time, I’m on a mission to get her votives and back to her.

I blow through the entryway, hustle to my car, and grab the sack so quickly the glass clinks together. I must be more careful and not to crack them. Her soft heart would be so disappointed if I fucked up her gift to me.

By the time I return to her place, the scent of cinnamon permeates the air. Yet the sweet flavor smells bitter without her. The living room and kitchen are empty. Steam swirls above the milky liquid from our mugs on the table so I know she was just here.

Panic burns my muscles as I sprint to her bedroom. She stands with her back to me, facing her new king size bed that barely leaves room for her to open her dresser drawers or squeeze through to reach the closet. Thank fuck. I was ready to call my team and search the entire building for her. Hell, the entire city if need be.

“You bought me a new bed?”

Although she doesn’t intend to be sexy as hell, her hesitant whisper feels like a caress on my cock. I close the distance between us and sheath her back. “I bought a bed for us.”

The strangled noise in her willowy throat breaks my resolve. With one hand, I tug up her sweater while the other strokes the waistband of her leggings to warn her of my intentions. I tuck my head into her neck and whisper against her delicate ear. “That futon would never have survived me fucking you.”

She gasps and jumps from my confirmation. I slide down her soft stomach, past her downy hair, and slip between her lips.

Wet.

For me.

A growl rumbles in my chest yet I maintain control. Softly stroking

between her unbelievably tight walls while she shudders and fidgets. “You’re already wet for me. Was it knowing I’m always going to take care of you?”

Another gush on my fingers. “Or was it seeing the bed where I’m going to fuck you for the first time?”

She sways and I tighten my hold. “Or was it me feeling your perfect virgin pussy drenched from my touch?”

I take a risk but trust my instincts.

“All...all of it.”

Thank fuck. “You’ve been saving this for me haven’t you?”

She whimpers from my approving tone and starts riding my hand. I almost come in my pants from her innocence. I push deeper until her body resists the intrusion.

She lifts on her tiptoes to escape my invasion. She’s uncomfortable but not in pain. I ease back from the reminder, and she droops down. I keep her upright and return to working her. I thumb her clit, earning a moan. “This is all mine.”

No question yet she still nods. I kiss her pounding pulse under my lips. “You are mine.”

Another frantic head bob. “Say it for me.”

I love how the little nub throbs under my finger. My hand’s soaked, and she bucks into my palm giving in completely to me controlling her.

Yet she doesn’t answer the way she should. I drop the fabric in my fist and snake up to her throat. She pants now in anticipation. A new discovery. She wants me to own her a little more harshly. As punishment for her delay, I crush her windpipe for just a second. “Tell me who you belong to.”

As soon as I release my hold, she cries out, releasing a flood onto my fingers.

“You!”

I’ve never seen anyone come as hard and as fast as her. Damn, this girl is responsive. I clutch her tight, kissing her temple and then her cheek as she spasms in pleasure, riding out her orgasm. “You took my hand so well. I can’t wait to see you take my cock.”

When she stills, I bring my fingers to my mouth and suck off her musky juices. “Just as sweet as I expected.”

“Oh!”

A horrified gasp surprises me as she twists out of my one-armed embrace and dashes to the bathroom. Fuck!

I catch up just as she shoves the door shut. I grab the edge and push inside the narrow space. She trembles, hugging herself while her gaze stays glued to the floor.

“Could I have some privacy please?”

The catch in her voice kills me, and I slide my hand under her chin and raise her head, forcing her to look at me. Tears shine in her eyes, and a slight sob escapes her mouth. “What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head. I don’t know if she’s trying to keep from crying or she’s afraid to tell me. Both of which are fucking horrible options. So I talk instead. “You’re amazing angel. That’s why I took you out and installed a new door and bought you new furniture. Because I want to spend time with you and keep you safe.”

With rapt attention, she never blinks or looks away. I’m getting through to her. “You’re beautiful too. I can’t keep my hands off you so you have to tell me when I’m too much.”

“I’ve never done anything like that before.”

My already painfully hard cock twitches from her confession, needing release inside her. “You are gorgeous when you come.”

A raging blush explodes on her already pink cheeks. “I didn’t know it was like that.”

“It only gets better angel. I’ll show you.”

Trepidation returns to her expression, and I dial back the desire to show her right here and now. “Not today but soon.”

She gives me a soft smile. I’m back in her good graces. But not in her sights when she stares down at the tile again.

“I...I need to clean up.”

I get it now. She’s embarrassed from the unexpected mess. This virgin will be the death of me. “Then let me help you since I’m the one who caused it.”

I chuckle to let her know I’m happy to do so and twist the handle for hot water. “Take off your shoes and bottoms.”

Quick to obey, she slips out of her boots and socks then drags her leggings and panties down her legs. The fabric is soaked through. “Damn angel that’s sexy as fuck.”

“It is?”

There she goes with the adorable squeak again. I love this girl. “Fuck yes.”

Her entire demeanor shifts from my confirmation. I grab a washcloth from the small stack on the shelf, squeeze the fabric a few times under the faucet, and then gingerly wipe her pussy and thighs. She watches me, apparently seeking any doubt or disgust on my face. Never fucking happening.

Once I'm finished, I drop to my haunches and grasp her legs, pulling her nude body to me. I kiss her mound as my seal of approval.

"Balthazar..."

The longing in her tone tells me she'll be dripping again if I don't stop. I force myself to rise and kiss her lips. "Taste yourself angel. You're incredible."

Instantly, she opens, and I sweep inside. My encouragement makes her daring, and she slides her tongue along mine.

I groan in approval. Which makes her squirm against me.

Shit, I've got to rein myself in or I'll have her fully naked and spread on the bed in two seconds.

I pull back and smile down at her. The heady gaze is much better than her tears. "Let's get you dressed."

"Okay."

She seems dazed as I guide her back to her bedroom. Her grin never wavers as she slides on green panties, black leggings, and fuzzy white socks with Christmas trees decorating the fabric. Adorable. "Ready?"

With an eager nod, she grasps my hand. A good sign since she's normally too timid to reach for me first. I let her lead me into the kitchen and drop down into one of the new sturdy chairs.

"The tea's gone cold. I'll warm it up."

"Okay angel."

Her earlier relaxation seems to have evaporated. Seemingly deep in her own head again, she frowns as she carries the mugs to the microwave. In her haste, some of the tan liquid surges over the edge dribbling onto the floor.

After setting them on the turntable, she hurries to grab a paper towel and bumps her head on the microwave door as she jerks up from swabbing the linoleum. Her fumbling suggests a newfound unease I must eliminate.

As soon as she taps the buttons for a minute, I grab her by the waist and drag her onto my lap. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me."

I keep my tone firm so she understands avoiding an answer is unacceptable. The tactic works because her head flies up and her body stiffens almost as much as my cock with her in my vicinity.

“I feel weird.”

“About what?”

I clutch her wrists, holding her fidgeting hands still against her thighs. As much as I want her to be honest, I also want her to feel safe.

“We’re out here acting like...like nothing happened in there. But it did. And it’s a big deal to me.”

She’s so different from every other woman I’ve dated. I don’t know how I missed the enormity of the sexual aspect of our relationship to her. I stroke her back. “It was a huge deal to me. I didn’t realize you didn’t understand that.”

My confession earns me her eyes, still heavy with doubt. “That’s how relationships work. The physical in the bedroom and the non-physical like us going to the fair and enjoying your tea.”

Those plump lips form a perfect o before she exhales.

“That’s why we’re spending tomorrow together too. Because I want to be with you for everything in bed and out of it.”

Shock replaces her misgivings about my commitment. “You want to spend the weekend together?”

Her disbelief is charming. “I want to spend every day together, angel.”

“Don’t...don’t you think...that’s too much too soon?”

She’s skeptical. No problem. I’m more than willing to prove myself to her. “Nope. I want to be with you. Nothing else matters.”

Without even realizing her actions, she wiggles in delight. No one has the enthusiasm of this girl. Or the innocence.

She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek and hops up in response to the triple ding signaling our drinks are ready.

I let her go only because I know she’s coming back to me.



CHAPTER 11

Seraphina

For the first time all evening, Balthazar picks up his buzzing phone and reads the screen. He's ignored the slew of texts pinging the cell for the last hour as he taught me how to play chess.

I wouldn't have expected him to be interested in games. But after learning Quinn gave me a set for my birthday but we never had the chance to use the board after Gabriel got sick, he helped me get the box down from the top of the closet and patiently explained the goal and how all the pieces work.

Balthazar's an amazing teacher, and when he said I impressed him, I almost jumped in his lap again. I love when he's proud of me.

I also wanted him to know I take his instruction seriously. After he told me that touching me was a distraction, I stayed on my side of the new table.

"I'm sorry angel. I have to go."

He really looks genuinely sorry, so I try not to show my disappointment. I nod and set my pawn down. It's almost nine, and he's listened to me chatter on about my life for hours.

Now he knows I've never had a boyfriend before since my foster parents wouldn't ever let me go out, and I didn't really have the opportunity to meet anyone living with Bree and Alex. I was only on campus for class.

Casey's the only guy I've ever gone on a date with, and I realize after spending time with Balthazar how a relationship really should be. Is it wrong to be eager to tell Casey I don't want to see him any more so I can move on with Balthazar?

As soon as he has his coat on, I give him a huge hug. “Thank you for teaching me. I loved it.”

“Fuck if you keep grabbing me like this, I won’t be able to leave.”

My heart flutters in my chest from his hoarse voice. I don’t want him to leave. I don’t want to let him go. But I do. I have to.

I step back and keep my arms down to show I can control myself. I guess he can’t because he steps closer, and his enormous hands slide around my cheeks. He looks down at me like he wants to eat me up.

Even more so, I want him to. I open my mouth to tell him, and he attacks, kissing me bittersweet like honey and fire mixed together as he invades my mouth. My hands curl around his wrists, hanging on for all the pleasure. We both moan, and I feel my clean panties ruined again.

When he sighs against my lips, I flick my tongue to taste him one more time.

His fingers tighten in my braid.

“I’ll put you on your knees if you don’t stop teasing me.”

I am not exactly sure what that means but I want to know. From the sound of his growl, I so, so badly want to know.

I begin to lower myself to the carpet, but he instantly yanks me back up. He smashes me to his body, thick and hot, with his heart racing and his desire hard in his pants. More swear words rip from his mouth until he’s finally silent, only stroking over my hair as he holds me almost too tight to breathe.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. Lock up behind me and I’ll text you later.”

All I get now is a quick kiss to the top of my head and he’s gone. I feel unsettled but I’m not sure why.

He didn’t seem mad, yet it was obvious he was eager to get out of here. Maybe a problem with work, which isn’t good on a Saturday night.

I twist the deadbolt and smile. The device is definitely sturdy. I push against the door, and the wood doesn’t give at all compared to the old one that kind of swayed and creaked if you leaned on the panels.

I feel safe because of him.

The containers from the food he ordered us still sit stacked on the counter. I sort the trash from the recycle, clean off the table, and grab the bag with our candles. He forgot his this time he was in such a hurry.

I light my votive in the bedroom and set it on the nightstand before heading to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. When I return, the scent of Christmas trees greets me. I’m humming as I put on my pajamas

and clean underwear.

My face burns from the thought of the reason why. Balthazar just affects me the way no other man has. It's unbelievable yet wonderful.

The mattress sinks as I climb in. So plush and luxurious, I feel like I'm floating on a cloud. I roll to my side and watch the flame dance, day—well night—dreaming about him.

Someday he'll be in this bed with me. I'm simultaneously excited and petrified. Ironic because he's such a blend too. Gentle but aggressive. Sweet but demanding. Rough but protective.

He says the f-word, but I know he'll make love to me. I just hope I can be as perfect to him as he is to me. The thought makes my stomach churn. Hopefully he won't be in here anytime soon because I really have no idea what I'm doing.



Balthazar

I know exactly what I'm doing.

Too bad this idiot doesn't.

The traitor finally breaks when Melchior uses his body for muay thai practice with several shin kicks to his jaw. When a second tooth rips from the socket, Haoyang finally pleads for mercy.

I'm surprised he's lasted this long. He's a tech mastermind for fuck's sake, used to sitting in front of multiple screens for hours at a time in a tiny, dark room rather than involved in any sort of physical work. From his scrawny form, he doesn't look like he goes to the gym in his spare time either.

It may be Christmas now, but I'm already planning for the holiday season in three years. We control the two hundred-billion-dollar gaming industry to ensure we produce every year's *must have* system or games. And this stupid moron leaked our new platform for a measly ten million bucks. What an imbecile.

“Back up M. He's ready to spill.”

His guts, I mean. Haoyang's already lost enough blood to pass out. I need him talking, not unconscious.

My brother bounces from side to side, keyed up and eager to keep using this guy as his practice dummy for his upcoming match.

"I was just starting to have some fun."

I roll my eyes. If he loved this business as much as he loves his damn MMA, my life would be a hell of a lot easier.

I turn my attention back to the sellout. His chin rests on his chest but he's moaning so I know he's awake. I ask him the same question as before. "Who?"

"Pavel."

Motherfucker.

Stupid Russian thinks since he lives closer to the North Pole than us, he gets to be Santa. Not fucking happening.

Haoyang gags from the effort of confessing, coughing up some black slime so nasty I want to vomit myself. He's not long for this world.

For seven years, we've treated him well and paid him like a king. All that time he's been a hundred percent loyal, so I need to know what made him turn on us. "Why did you do it?"

A tremor jolts his body. He's getting ready to seize. "Tell me."

"My...my mother. She's sick. She...she's dying."

Bullshit.

I know everything about my top programmer, and his mom is fine, living in a luxurious three-bedroom apartment in a modern high-rise rather than the squalor like most of the population in her province.

Trying to play the sympathy card to a man who knows everything is stupid.

Lying about death to a man who endured his own mother wasting away is fatal.

I lightly smack his bloodied cheek. "You deserve this."

I nod to Melchior. His face lights up with the brutality that would scare most men.

"Thank you, brother."

His deep voice roars with gratitude. He's a man of few words literally and with those three uttered, he begins his assault again.

With that problem taken care of, I head out. The sound of another bone breaking accompanies me as I jog upstairs from the dungeon to one of our

most lucrative factories. Ironic the gourmet chocolatier above hides the torture chamber below. I breathe deep but the rich flavor doesn't satisfy me the way Seraphina's sweet scent does.

It's two in the morning but I don't care.

I want her.

Only my brother's SUV is parked in the back lot making it easy to navigate the alley and hit the highway. Zero cars pass me for the first five minutes enroute to her apartment. Not that I'd let anyone slow me down. I'm on a mission to get to my girl.

Luckily, traffic remains almost non-existent, and I'm at her door in less than twenty. I press my thumb to her lock and glide inside to the quiet room. The smell of Christmas trees hits me, and I grin in the darkness. She burned our candle already. I'll buy her a thousand of them if she enjoys them that much.

When I cross into her bedroom, I strip down to my boxer briefs and climb in behind her. She stiffens and rears her head back, sucking in oxygen to scream. My hand instantly curls over her mouth. "It's me angel. I had to see you."

Her body barely relaxes, and she gasps against my fingers with the adrenaline coursing through her. I nuzzle her delicate throat. "All I've thought about is you since I left. I couldn't wait until morning."

She melts a little more into my chest as I talk her down with my assertion. "I needed to touch you and taste you. Somehow you've become my addiction already."

Not a lie. She seems to understand, and I swear I feel her hips jut forward in response. My girl's fucking responsive. I slide my hand from her mouth down to her pajama pants and slip inside her panties. "Is my pussy wet for me?"

"You scared me!"

Incapable of yelling, she admonishes me through a whisper. Adorable. I trail my fingertips along her soaked lips. "You're safe. I'm always watching. Always protecting you."

"What do you mean? How are you—?"

"Shhh." The truth will frighten her more, so I distract her by dipping inside. Her greedy pussy sucks me deeper and her mound surges into my palm. Already seeking friction for her release. Seems like she has an addiction now too. "I'm going to get you off and then you have to go back to

sleep. I want you to get your rest.”

She doesn't respond, yet she doesn't resist either. Guilt battles with desire. I decide for her and lift up, rolling her onto her back. My eyes have adjusted to the lack of light, and she watches me with the scrutiny of a cop.

I smile down at her. “You're stunning.”

Once the blush hits her cheeks, I know I'm good to go. I leisurely unbutton her top because I need to see those luscious little tits. Her body trembles as I push the fabric apart revealing her perfection to me. “You really are magnificent.”

I lean forward and kiss the smooth skin above her racing heart, skimming down her breast to her nipple. Already stiff, I tongue the hard nub while I palm the other one. Her pelvis rocks into me, enjoying the attention I'm thrilled to lavish on her. “Don't worry. I'm going there next.”

Her gasp pleases me. A reminder that no other man has feasted on my angel. My lips trail over her shivering torso. I leave love bites along the path, so she'll be reminded of me with every look at her exquisite body.

“Balthazar, maybe we should...maybe you...”

When I glance up at her, I grin against her flat stomach. The reluctance on her stunning face conflicts with the enticing scent of arousal drifting from her pulsing pussy. I grasp the waistband of her pajama bottoms and panties, dragging both down her legs.

Once she's free from her clothes, I don't hesitate and dive right in. I slide my palms under her ass and lift her clit to my mouth, reminding myself to be gentle with this delicate creature.

Starting with a simple kiss on her lower lips, I breathe deep so she knows I approve of her musky sweet aroma wafting over my face. “You smell delicious.”

“Thank you.”

Polite even when I'm tongue fucking her. I can't get enough. “I bet you taste even better.”

No objection so I delve in with my tongue lapping between her folds to lick the cream pooling for me.

Just for me.

All for me.

Approval comes in the form of a throaty moan and her hips shoved closer. I answer with the tip plunging as far as I can reach sucking and slurping from her ass to her clit until she comes in my mouth.

Perfection.

Utter perfection.

Little fists clutch the sheets, and I know I can wring more from her. I separate her labia so I can see the full beauty of her pink cunt. “You’re gorgeous too. I’ve never seen a prettier pussy than yours.”

“It’s not weird...looking at...it?”

I chuckle from her whispered question full of amazement. “No, angel. It’s incredible. Here...”

I suck on one side. “...And here...”

Then the other. “...And here...”

Then the middle. She squeals when I bite down. Tenderly at first—a little nibble on her ripe flesh.

Until her fingernails graze my scalp, and I can’t hold back. I tug her clit between my teeth and suckle while she cries out.

Another orgasm floods my mouth, and I swallow her essence down.

The thighs squeezing my head flail to the sides. She’s spent but I’m not. “One more to satisfy me until morning.”

I flip her to her hands and knees and thrust my thumb into her dripping mound. Slick and soaking, I press her forbidden hole.

“N-no Balthazar.”

Both her words and her ass resist, but I push forward anyway. Just the tip. I don’t want to hurt my girl. Not too much anyway. “My angel’s sweet everywhere, isn’t she?”

I wiggle in just to my knuckle. She stills and time stops. I have no other thought than to make her scream one more time. My other hand massages her pussy, threading in one finger then another while her walls milk me deeper to her resistance.

The smooth skin gives way to the spot that makes her groan, and I work that area while drifting in and out of her ass. She keeps time with me until she’s uttering nonsense of stopping and never stop. “Be my good girl and let go.”

My praise does the trick, and she falls over the edge, waves crashing over and over her until she collapses to her belly.

A vision sprawled on the sheets, she reaches for me. I have to keep my promise. “Sit up for me.”

As expected, she’s instantly compliant, rolling over and pushing up to her butt. “You always please me don’t you?”

Heavy eyes meet mine as she smiles, soaking in my praise. I nod in approval and slide off her shirt, tossing the top onto the pile on the floor. “Okay, you can snuggle back in.”

Once she’s curled up, I sheath her body. Skin to skin except my boxer briefs. If my cock felt her ass cheeks, I wouldn’t be able to control myself.

Instead, I wrap around her tight. “You did so good for me. I love watching you come.”

I relish her squirm of happiness. With just a little bit of encouragement, she blossoms into the confident woman I know she can be. “Go to sleep now. I want to spend tomorrow with you too, so you’ll need your rest.”

“Okay. Good night.”

Her sleepy, satisfied tone confirms that yes, it most certainly is.



CHAPTER 12

Balthazar

The shower stall is surprisingly big for her tiny apartment. I actually fit inside with the ability to turn around without knocking off the bottles on the small shelf. For once I'm grateful she's poor so I can use the plain bar of soap to lather up rather than any girly body wash. I want her to smell like me, not the other way around.

I squeeze my rock-hard dick to the point of pain. Until I can come inside of her, I'm stuck jacking off, my actions hidden by the sound of the spray. I close my eyes, remembering her glistening pussy from last night.

The thought of seeing her folds spread and my cock nestled inside makes the tip weep. I spread the pre-cum down my shaft imagining her release coating me before I pull out, flip her onto her knees, and drive inside of her again. When I remind her of what a good girl she is, she'll squirt all over me.

Fuck. Every muscle tightens and the sting travels down my spine to my balls. I explode all over her tile, wishing her pussy was milking me instead of my own fingers.

Soon.

Very, very soon or I'll lose my damn mind.

My cock only partially softens, unable to stand down completely with her in the next room. I scrub and rinse my body quickly, ensuring I save enough hot water for her. After I dry off, I dig in the drawer for a toothbrush. I chuckle from the green one in a dollar store package. Even her extra is Christmas colored.

When I emerge from the bathroom, I find her sitting on the bed, fully clothed in her pajamas, and brushing her long hair.

Damn, she's breathtaking.

The gold paddle stops in mid-motion as she watches me. Her timid nature returns in full force. I need to eliminate her uncertainty immediately. "Good morning angel."

I hold out my hand, and she jumps up, dashing to me. "Good morning!"

All about the hugs, I engulf her the way she loves and let her sweetness temporarily absolve the sin I bring to her world.

"I like you being here when I wake up."

She whispers against my chest. I'd sleep here every night if I could, but I can't risk her health by coming in at all hours from work. "So you forgive me for breaking in last night?"

I know she does, yet I still ask to stay in her good graces.

"Yes. Somehow, I can't stay mad at you even though I should be."

"Yes, you should but I'm glad you're not."

My agreement elicits a giggle from her succulent mouth. All is forgiven. "Take your shower, and I'll get us some breakfast."

The humungous smile fades, and her gaze drops from my face to my stomach.

"I'm sorry but I don't have much to eat. I wasn't expecting...I mean..."

In her effort not to be rude, she stumbles over her words trying not to admit she doesn't have enough food to feed a man. I cup her cheeks, forcing her head up to look at me. "I'm a terrible cook so you don't have to worry. I'm going to order something in. Don't say it's not necessary or too expensive because I'm doing it."

My tone allows for no argument, so she doesn't. Instead, she nods in my palms and waits for more. "Now get going."

I graze her lips with a soft kiss that's difficult to keep chaste with my cock tenting her thin towel. Reminding me that I need to keep some clothes here too.

She smiles when I pull away, so I know all is well. It takes everything I've got not to smack her ass as she scurries away from me.

Once the door closes, I grab my clothes that she neatly folded from the top of her dresser and then my phone. I order take out as well as groceries since I plan to be here a lot.

She'll want to take care of me, and I refuse to be a burden to her. I have

to make sure she never doubts who is actually taking care of whom.



CHAPTER 13

Seraphina

Act professional.

Focus on work.

Ignore all thoughts of Balthazar.

Easier said than done when I log into my computer and his email waits for me.

An inferno engulfs me as I read his words.

Seraphina Snow is an intelligent, capable employee who excels at her job as evidenced by her contributions in the short time she's been employed with the Magi Law Office. Her performance consistently exceeds expectations.

He continues on with the information regarding the EEOC and confirmation that if at any time I feel my employment is in jeopardy for any reason, I should contact them. I skim that part and go back to the top of the page.

I know I shouldn't be so thrilled with his compliments. But I've worked really hard to be successful and now I feel like I am. He takes my career seriously despite our personal relationship. I want my boyfriend to be proud of me, and he is.

He is.

"Seraphina?"

London's voice pierces my daydream, and I jump up from my chair. Humiliated that I didn't even hear her walk up despite her heels clicking on the marble, I brighten my expression and smile. "Good morning, Ms. Fine."

She chuckles, and I swear her grin is almost a smirk.

“You look like you were deep in thought already.”

Despite my guilt for not actually working, I nod. I made a mistake but for the rest of the day, I’ll only focus on my job. I swear. “Let me get your coffee.”

“Thank you.”

Relief floods me that she doesn’t seem to notice I was distracted. As soon as she passes by, I hurry to the little kitchenette and pour fresh beans into the hopper. My boss likes her espresso extra strong on Mondays, so I scan through the settings for that preference and then grab the milk.

Although I used to be intimidated by the three-thousand-dollar machine when I first started here, the process calms me now. I know exactly how she likes her beverage and feel confident again that I can overcome anything I’ve messed up going forward.

Once her drink is ready, I carry the cup carefully to her office. Silently too after I push open the door with my hip to find her typing intently on her laptop. I set the demitasse on her desk. “I can tell you’re busy. If you need anything else, please let me know. I’ll be working on the Pease files.”

“How was your weekend?”

Thank goodness I’m not holding her mug, or I would have dropped the glass from the mischievous lilt in her voice. Her gaze scans me as if she’s searching for something.

Do I tell her about Balthazar? Is that too personal? Or am I obligated to since she’s my boss?

I really have no idea. So I start with honesty and will wing it after that. “Wonderful. How was yours?”

My voice sounds squeaky and nervous.

“Horrific. Reid booked our honeymoon but won’t tell me where we’re going. How do I pack for a two hundred-thousand-dollar destination when I don’t know what it is!”

I genuinely have no idea how to respond. That’s the craziest problem I’ve ever heard of. “Maybe ask if it’s warm or cold? Then you’ll at least have some idea for a starting point.”

Still frustrated, she nods her head. “That’s a good idea. Then hopefully I can break him if I inundate him with enough questions.”

Her relationship with her fiancé seems very different than mine with Balthazar.

Balthazar.

Shoot! I promised myself I wouldn't think about him. I smile at her. "I hope it works."

She sighs so hard, her bangs billow. "Me too. I swear Seraphina, don't marry a man who thinks surprises are fun."

Every surprise from Balthazar has been marvelous so I don't know why she says that. I don't argue though. I like my boss and want to keep on her good side. I laugh agreeably. "Okay."

The grin that makes me feel like she knows every single thing Balthazar and I did this weekend, including the embarrassingly private ones, curves her red lips. I can't stop the blush flaming my cheeks, but I keep my smile on my face. "I'll be at my desk if you need anything."

With her head dip, I twist around and walk as casually as I can out of her office despite wanting to run and hide. I know they're friends but surely he wouldn't tell her things about me.

About us.

About what we did.

In my bed.

Oh god.

Back at my workspace, I take a few deep breaths. I have to calm down. I haven't known Balthazar for long, but I really feel like I can trust him. He never mentioned London once this weekend, so I doubt he's even spoken to her.

I smile at his email, reply thank you and have a good day, and then open the proposed contract to proofread the final draft before London reviews the document with the client.

I cross reference with the hard copy of the real estate listing he gave her and highlight a few inconsistencies in the description to see if she needs them to be changed. All the lessee and lessor details are correct.

The front doors slide open and my attention whips to the entry. London doesn't have any appointments until nine and FedEx delivers closer to lunch time. Three men stride in. Two of them haul in an eight-foot-tall Christmas tree between them and the other carries enormous red bags in each hand.

"Seraphina Snow?"

My pulse races as the guy with the sacks approaches. "Yes, that's me."

"Delivery from Mr. Wiseman. Where would you like it?"

I stumble over my feet and my words as I jump up and rush around the

counter. The lobby is elegant and sleek. No plants, no knickknacks, no magazines. My boss is never going to go for this. “Um. I don’t think I can accept it. I’m really sorry. For your trouble and bringing it all the way here and...”

They stare at me like I’m an idiot. Because I sound like one.

My chest stings with the thought of hurting Balthazar’s feelings after he’s so sweet to send me something I love. But I know London will hate it.

“What in the hell?”

Speaking of. Her throaty voice bellows from her doorway like the boss that she is. We all watch as she marches toward us.

Tall and elegant she could be a model on a runway, and the men gawk at her unsurprisingly. Impressive with her confidence and grace, she holds us all captive and silent.

The man holding the base clears his throat. “Delivery from Mr. Wiseman to Seraphina Snow. He told us not to let you refuse us, ma’am.”

Fear wobbles in his voice. I’m not sure if he’s scared of Balthazar or her or both. I cringe, expecting her to explode. She’s always been kind to me, but I’ve seen her easily crush men who disrespect or underestimate her.

Her exacting gaze examines him, then the tree, and then swings to me. Despite my loss of any sensible explanation, I open my mouth, but she flips up her palm.

The wicked smirk returns before she throws back her head and laughs. Deep and husky, like she’s never seen anything as hilarious as this in her life. “Ms. Fine?”

She shakes her hand at me, stopping any more words. I obey, and she lifts her head, nodding to the guys. “Put it anywhere she wants.”

With her order, she glides away, still chuckling to herself.

No one moves until the door closes behind her. Then their attention reverts to me. I point to the corner to my left. “Right there please.”

“You got it Miss Snow.”

Too stunned to move, I watch as one man unpacks a stand and then the other two maneuver the trunk into the black basin before twisting the metal screws into the wood and locking the vessel in place.

One guy points to the other sack. “There are lights inside. We’ll be right back with the rest.”

All three men hustle back to the parking lot returning with six more bags, a broom, dustpan, and jugs of water. They work quickly and silently,

sweeping up the fallen needles and wrapping an exquisite silver skirt embroidered with snowflakes in glistening metallic thread around the bottom.

I have never seen anything more wonderful. I stare at the decorations, and the guys stare at me.

A tip. They're expecting a tip. Shoot!

I grab my purse. I only have ten dollars that is supposed to be for the bus this week, but I'll have to figure out something later. It's not enough but it's all I've got.

"Oh no miss. It's taken care of."

Of course, it is. Balthazar is so generous. "Okay then, thank you very much. It's just beautiful."

With head nods and *you're welcomes*, they back out and are gone. I'm left alone with my tree.

The most perfect Christmas tree I've ever had in my entire life.

I have no idea how to thank Balthazar for his generosity. But somehow, I have to. I need him to know how much this means to me.



Balthazar

London: *What the fuck? You're ridiculous.*

My friend's chastisement cracks me up. I use her text as confirmation of delivery.

Me: *Fuck you. Your scheme worked so stop bitching.*

London: *Have no doubt. I'm gloating my ass off over here.*

As predicted. I wouldn't expect anything less from her.

Now I wait for Seraphina to message me. I'm sure my gift has her twisted in knots that I look forward to unraveling.

"We did it."

Melchior's voice in my doorway forces me to look up from my phone, ruining my anticipation of her message. "I'm going to need a little more detail to know what the fuck you're talking about."

He grips the top of the frame and tips forward, always needing to be in motion due to his excessive energy.

“Clarabella got thirty-seven million daily views last month and sixty-four million this month so far with seventeen days left until December. The show’s officially a hit, and we’ve already got all the merch in stores now.”

Perfect. My media expert’s calculation that the pre-school cartoon exploding on YouTube would take off was accurate, and now we’re in perfect position to cash in on her correct prediction. Apparel, plush, figurines, and pretend play have already hit the stores. “Tell Carmen to get me revised production numbers going into next season. They need to pull the trigger on the partnerships with Mega Block and Play Doh too.”

M’s arms drop to his side, and he gives me the look that he’d rather do anything in the world than relay messages and analyze data. Too fucking bad.

Despite how much he just wants to fuck people up there are other things I need him to do. No sense wasting the brains he actually has just because he likes physical more than cerebral.

“What are you so happy about?”

See? Right there. He catches shit because I haven’t said or done anything to make him think I’m different than normal, but he still can tell. “Nothing. I’ve got stuff to do and don’t want to waste time arguing with you. Just do what I say and be gone with yourself.”

Instead of leaving, he strides in and plops down as defiant as ever.

“You fucking someone?”

“Aren’t I always?”

“Nope. I mean someone special.”

His goofy tone forces me to look at him. The smirk on his stupid face needs to be punched off but I can’t waste my time when my phone pings.

***Seraphina:** No one has ever made me feel as special as you do. Thank you for this incredible gift. I’m just blown away.*

“It’s her, isn’t it?”

He’s practically giddy in his smugness. The fuck?

Less than forty-eight hours ago, he ended a man with kicks and punches. Now he’s up in my business like a teenage girl. As always, I ignore him.

***Me:** You’re welcome angel. I’m glad you like it.*

***Seraphina:** I absolutely love it.*

***Me:** Good. I'll get one for your apartment too. No arguments. I'm doing it.*

No response.

That's okay and expected. She has to get used to my generosity.

***Seraphina:** I'll accept but on one condition.*

***Me:** What?*

***Seraphina:** You have to help me decorate it.*

***Me:** Done.*

***Seraphina:** Yay! I really have to get back to work but I'll talk to you later.*

***Me:** Yes you will.*

With a maniacal laugh, M dives across my desk attempting to rip the cell out of my hand. I clock him hard in his jaw. Not enough to break the bone but enough he slides off the side. "Stupid motherfucker."

His tolerance for pain is bizarrely high so instead of moaning from the hit and subsequent fall, he lies on the floor laughing like a moron. Glad he thinks his annoyance is hysterical.

I've got too much to do to indulge in this idiot's games. I circle around my desk and kick him in the ribs for messing up my desk. That just makes him howl louder. "Get this cleaned up, or I really will beat your ass."

He doesn't answer either. Not a surprise. He'll get one of the assistants who drool over his dangerous thug image to do his literal dirty work and then fuck them afterward as a reward.

The thought pleases me that while he's slumming it, I have Seraphina. No one will ever take her away from me.



CHAPTER 14

Seraphina

I'm supposed to let Bree know how today went. Since I never let her know how the weekend went, I'm really in trouble. She's going to be upset at me, and I hate that I've disappointed her.

After talking to Balthazar about her concerns and experiencing how sweet and generous he is to me, I know I'm right.

But when I practice the explanation to her, the reasoning sounds disingenuous. Like he's fooled me into trusting him, trusting in something I shouldn't.

How can I prove to her that I believe in him?

I love my friend and like my...boss.

Ugh! That sounds so incredibly horrible.

I toss my phone onto the bed next to me.

The bed he bought for me.

The bed that will make her think we're having sex.

The bed that makes me think about us having sex.

My lady bits ache from the thought.

Nope.

Quit it.

It's way too soon for that.

Then why do I keep letting him do everything he wants to me and not stop him. Even worse than not stopping him, I actually enjoy what he does to me. I crave more, and that seems wrong yet feels so good.

I think a genuine relationship should be easy. At least, that's what I've seen.

Not in a creepy way but being with Balthazar feels to me like how I felt around Gabriel and Quinn. She and my brother were perfect together.

Bree and Alex are too.

I rarely see any tension between them. They laugh and tease each other in a good-natured way. They partner too. Like he cooks, and she does the dishes. They talk about decisions together. They support each other.

When she had to work a ton of hours to complete a big project at work, he did all the cleaning so when she was finally home, they could relax together.

They appeared to be in full agreement too when I turned eighteen and they took me in since I had no place to go. They never made me feel like a burden or in the way. The opposite—they welcomed me and acted like they were really glad I lived with them.

So far, that's how Balthazar and I are too. I make our tea. He makes sure I'm safe. He goes to the places I want and comes to me when he's lonely.

At least that's what I think when he showed up in the middle of the night. He doesn't want to be alone either. I like that I can help him back.

A knock from the front door echoes through my small apartment. I jump off the mattress. My chest squeezes. Balthazar would just come right in so it must be Bree early for dinner. How am I going to explain all of this to her?

I force one foot in front of the other and peek in the peephole.

Casey.

I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed.

I know I need to speak with him about our relationship, so I might as well get the discussion over with. When I open the door, he doesn't look pleased. I try to ignore his exasperation and offer a friendly smile. "Hi."

"Hey."

Instead of waiting for me to invite him in, he brushes past me with a beeline straight to the living room.

"What's this? You got a new couch?"

"Yes."

Not a lie, even if I don't expand on the why. Or the who.

He frowns and shakes his head. "You didn't text me back."

"I'm sorry. I had a lot going on this weekend."

He huffs and rolls his eyes. "Let me guess. With your dick boss."

In all the time I've known him, Casey's never acted like this, never talked

like this. I understand that he's upset but this seems more than irritation about a lack of response.

I try to keep my own frustration in check and my voice calm. "He's not a dick. He's a nice guy."

"Ha! Nice guy?" His finger jabs into his chest so hard I imagine he'll leave a mark. "*I'm* the nice guy. But like always, I'm fucked over and stuck in the friend zone while the asshole gets the girl who's too stupid to realize what she's got right in front of her."

Well, right now, he doesn't seem nice at all. "I'm really sorry. I'm not saying this to be mean, but I didn't feel a connection between us even before I met Balthazar. I just don't—"

"For two fucking years, I've been your study group partner, hung out with Alex and Bree, went to ballgames, decorated with all your Christmas shit. Everything you wanted. All for nothing."

The confession stings. I can't believe our entire relationship has been a lie. "I thought you were my friend. I thought you hung out with me and did those things because we were friends."

"Yeah, and that's all it got me. Be the nice guy and finish last just like they say."

"Friendship isn't finishing last."

"It is when I should be your boyfriend. I should be the one fucking you."

A darkness takes over his expression that causes me to shudder. For the first time ever, I'm afraid of Casey. Maybe Balthazar is right. He can't be trusted. "I think you should go."

As if he doesn't hear me, he stalks to me, crowding so close I stumble backward.

"What is it about him? Is it because he's forceful? Is that what you want? I can give you that too."

He hounds me, following me step for step, and cornering me until I have no place to go but the bedroom. The space is so tight with the huge new bed, my thighs hit the side and I'm trapped.

Nausea swirls in my stomach from the evil in his eyes as he pushes me back onto the mattress so hard my feet fly up. He leans over me with his fists on each side of my head and his face hovering over mine.

"Is this what you want? You like it rough? You want me to fuck you hard like the tease whore that you are?"

My eyes burn from his mean words. Never in a million years would I

have expected him to call me such disgusting names. “I’m not a tease whore.”

A cruel sneer twists his lips. “Then give me what you owe me.”

His fingertips dig into my skin as he grasps my jaw and forces his lips against mine. I try to yank my head to the side, but he crushes the bone tighter with his punishing grip.

He’s hurting me.

He’s going to hurt me worse.

I fight for my life, shoving and kicking with everything I’ve got. Fistfuls of his jacket are ripped from my hands as he grabs my arms and yanks them over my head, pinning them to the mattress. His gaze spans my body and back up to my face as he grinds his dick between my legs. Proof of what he intends to do.

I bend my knees and try to drive the bottom of my foot into his balls.

“Bitch!”

The smack across my face stuns me from the shock and the sting. No one’s hit me since Melissa and Craig, but I know from them how much things can escalate after a slap. I refuse to let Casey do that to me too.

With my hand now free, I claw at his face and eyes, just like they taught us in the self-defense class I took at school for my gym credit.

Except he’s so much stronger than me and easily bats my arm out of the way. He squares up to punch me when suddenly he’s flying backward. Wide eyes meet mine before he’s dragged through the doorway and tossed into the living room.

Balthazar.

He twists around, and I can’t see anything beyond Balthazar’s broad back. Until Casey’s lying on the carpet. He doesn’t move.

But Balthazar does.

He spins toward me, his face blazing with fury as he descends on me. Scooping me up, he holds me so tight I think we’re both shaking.

I clench my eyes closed, shutting out Casey and his attack. I cling to Balthazar, breathing in his scent, feeling his strength, hearing his powerful breaths.

I know I am safe.

I am safe.

I am safe.

Our hearts pound against each other. His chest heaves as he pants and

strokes my hair.

“Angel.”

The feral tone of his voice should terrify me. He sounds like he’s losing control, barely hanging on to his temper. So I grasp him tighter, not letting him go for both of our sakes. “Please hold me. Don’t leave me.”

“Never.”

The guttural timbre vibrates in his thick chest, and I nod my appreciation against his jacket. I have no idea how long we stay this way until my first rational thought hits me. My feet aren’t touching the floor. Balthazar has engulfed me so entirely I’m dangling in the air.

I wrap my legs around his waist, and he moans into my hair with his approval.

“Are you okay?”

I don’t know if I am or not. Here, like this, with him, feels like no one can ever harm me. But Casey’s groans and thrashing on the floor remind me I won’t walk away from this unscathed.

Footsteps that I know can’t be Casey’s clatter from the hallway.

“Oh my god. What happened?”

Anxiety pulses in Bree’s question, and I make myself slide down Balthazar’s body and face my friend. He allows only a few inches between us as I side-step him to see her before he drags me back to him, wrapping his arms around my chest and waist, comforting me with his backward embrace.

Alex races forward and drops to one knee by Casey, trying to determine what’s wrong with him since no blood or injuries are visible except from my scratches on his cheek.

Balthazar snarls behind me. “He attacked her.”

Both of my friends’ gazes whip to me. Three simple words yet tears flood my eyes from the enormity of what happened. What would have happened if Balthazar didn’t save me.

Bree gasps and her arms instantly open beckoning me to her. Surprisingly, Balthazar releases me, and I stagger to her, feeling weak and shaky now that the adrenaline has dissipated. Her grip feels almost as soothing as Balthazar’s.

“I can’t believe this.”

Alex stares up at Balthazar, questioning him, me, everything.

The way Balthazar steels his expression at my brother’s best friend confirms he doesn’t appreciate the skepticism. “Believe it.”

Balthazar steps toward them, and Alex is smart enough to get out of the way. He's big but Balthazar is way bigger. Like Casey's nothing but a ragdoll, Balthazar grabs him by the jacket and flips him onto his shoulder.

We all watch in silence as Balthazar carries him out of the apartment and down the metal steps until the footsteps fade to nothing.

"Are you okay?"

Her fear pushes me over the edge because I know the apprehension stems from more than Casey's assault. "No. Please don't be mad at Balthazar. I know you said not to go out with him but if it wasn't for him..."

A sob wells up in my throat from the thought of what Casey planned to do. I can't go on.

She strokes my back. "It's okay. Don't cry. He was here when you needed him. That's all that matters now."

She's right. Balthazar always gives me what I need. So even if she doesn't understand or agree, I can't give him up. I will fight for him just like he fights for me.



CHAPTER 15

Balthazar

Motherfucker moans and mumbles shit as he dangles over my shoulder. He'll be quiet soon enough.

Luck's on my side as I approach the dumpster behind Seraphina's building with the lid already propped up. A few plastic bags smatter across the bottom so there's plenty of room for more trash.

I shove the piece of shit over the edge and enjoy watching his head smack hard against the rusted metal. That shuts him up. At least for a little while. When he comes to inside my dungeon, he'll have plenty to cry about.

I text Albert that I have a pickup for Melchior and shove my phone back in my pocket. I would have loved to waste this asshole in her apartment but that would have been too easy on him and too terrifying for her.

Now I'll get the pleasure of drawing out the most painful punishment he never could have imagined in his sad, pathetic life.

The thought of his torture calms me, and I smooth my suit jacket and straighten my tie. I need my best game face on for her friends. Ironic how I square off against the deadliest opponents in the world, and these two ordinary people are my biggest concern.

They stand between me and my girl.

I hustle back around to the entrance and up the stairs, grabbing the evergreen I left in the hallway after opening her door and seeing that bastard pinning her down. Rage spikes through my veins from the image I won't ever be able to burn from my mind.

Hauling the tree inside, I find her cuddled on the sofa with Bree while Alex paces near the window.

Seraphina glances from the blue spruce to me with shiny eyes. Her tears fucking destroy me.

“What’s this?”

“I brought over your tree to decorate. You deserve better than that old fake one.”

Joy explodes through her grief, and she scrambles off the couch and launches herself at me. Of course I welcome her like oxygen in a choke hold. She trembles against me, and all I want to do is figure out a way to make her stop.

“Thank you!”

Her whisper possesses more emotion than if she screamed. I nuzzle her sweet neck. “You’re welcome, angel.”

Both her friends scrutinize me. Alex nods, seemingly in tentative approval. He understands I handled the bullshit that a man needs to handle. The rest is unimportant.

On the flip side, his girlfriend isn’t quite as understanding.

Bree frowns, her eyes narrow with suspicion. Garnering her endorsement will be more of a challenge. I assume she’s been dicked over before so she’s protective. I’m fine with that because I feel the same way about the woman we all care about.

Alex motions toward the door. “Where’s Casey?”

“I put him where garbage belongs.”

Bree stands up and glances from him to me. “I think we should call the police. This is assault and we should report it.”

Not sure if she means what the bastard did to Seraphina or what I did to him. Maybe both. Doesn’t matter. I’ll dole out justice my own way but won’t stop her from doing what she thinks she needs to do. “Sure, go ahead.”

Seraphina’s head twists as she lifts up from my chest. “No, that’s not necessary. He’s gone and that’s all I care about.”

He’s never coming back either. I cup her warm face. “It’s whatever you want. That’s all *I* care about.”

Her sad smile fills my palms. She wants to be my good girl despite her trauma. I tip closer to her. “I just want you to be okay, so we’ll do whatever that takes.”

Bree still wants to argue and jerks her gaze to Alex. “What do you

think?”

The boyfriend blows out a long sigh. “Let me go talk to him and then we can decide, I guess.”

Their reasons for hesitation differ from mine. They want to believe this is all a misunderstanding, give him a second chance to explain or redeem himself. I call foul and meet Alex’s gaze.

Since he’s the one teetering, I’ll get him on my side first. That will help sway his girl. “If you saw what I saw, he’d be dead to you. If some bastard was holding Bree down and his arm pulled back to punch her, would you listen to anything he has to say?”

His body goes rigid, and the anger a man should feel over the mistreatment of his woman explodes in his eyes as he looks at Bree. She senses the protectiveness in him too from the blush simmering on her cheeks.

My words affect Seraphina just as much, and she begins shaking harder. Damn it.

Alex storms past us. “I’ll be back.”

Uncertain what he’s going to do, I don’t stop him. I don’t care.

At the end of the day, Casey’s destruction will be from me.

Bree chases after him, a deep frown lining her face. They can work out their own consciences. Mine’s clear. He dies.

I drag Seraphina to me and clutch her tight. “Don’t worry angel. I won’t ever let anything like that happen to you again. I will keep you safe.”

“I feel safe with you.”

That’s all I need to know. I will get her through this. “You are.”

“I know.”

“Do you need anything?”

“Will you stay with me for a while?”

I can’t help but smile from her simple request. As if I’m going anywhere. I kiss the top of her head. “I don’t want to be any place else.”

I step back and take off my coat. Her grin is small yet genuine as she tugs my tie. So innocent she doesn’t intend any message other than happiness rather than the flirting that motion usually means. “Let’s have some tea.”

She lights up as much as she can with her distress, and I clasp her small hand, leading her into the kitchen. At the table, I gesture to the chair closest to the oven. “Sit. I’ll get it.”

Always obedient, she drops to the seat and watches me wide-eyed as I twist the knob to heat the kettle and grab the mugs and bags. I select a

cranberry flavor from a burgundy and gold tin.

While we wait, I snatch the sack with our candles sitting on the passthrough and bring out the remaining one she left for me. “Let’s light this one now, and I’ll get some more.”

“I’d like that.”

Surprisingly she doesn’t protest about me spending the money to purchase them. Proof she’s still very shaken by what happened. Otherwise, she’d feel guilty and argue. “Me too.”

After I blow out the match, I study her gorgeous face. A mark in the shape of a handprint blossoms on her cheek. Deep red splotches trail along her jaw line. I gingerly run my thumb over the skin starting to swell, and she flinches. Fury like I’ve never experienced engulfs me. “He hit you.”

A slight nod accompanies her small sob. “Yes, and he squeezed my face when I wouldn’t let him kiss me.”

Tears plunge down as her voice wobbles. I absorb her agony so I can in turn unleash the pain a million times worse on him. I crouch down in front of her so she can see the absolute certainty in my expression. “He will pay for what he’s done to you.”

My assertion makes her cry harder, and I clutch her delicate hands in mine until she lets out a shuddered breath and the tears subside. Exhausted, she slumps against her chair. All cried out, she needs now to rest and recover.

Loathe to let her go, I hold her until the kettle shrieks, and I fill our cups. While the tea steeps, I rummage through her fridge for milk and the cabinet for the sugar.

The creak of the propped open front door squeaks behind me and I abandon my efforts, spinning around and grabbing Seraphina to shove her behind me. She’s been through enough and doesn’t need any more strain.

Alex catches on quick as he enters, and his palm whips up while his other arm tugs Bree closer. Thank fuck.

I draw my girl back out and kiss her forehead. She sinks into me, confirming she knows I’ll always protect her. “It’s just your friends.”

“Not Casey?”

“Never again.”

Peace overcomes her from my assertion and her little body softens. “Thank you.”

“Well…” Alex scans us but his frown remains. “He’s gone. I guess he came to enough to take off.”

Not hardly. I'm sure Albert's already hauled him out and on his way to the torture chamber with him. The thought makes me smile.

Alex takes my grin as approval and nods. "Yeah but I still think she should file a police report."

Without waiting for further discussion, Bree yanks her phone from her jacket pocket and starts dialing.

I guess we're going to deal with the cops.



CHAPTER 16

Balthazar

Finally, we're alone.

It's been a long ass night, and my girl's exhausted. Drained from rehashing the assault with the beat cop and then the detective, Seraphina had too much shit to deal with tonight. With Bree hovering and silently emoting her disapproval of me, I'm not sure how much more pressure my angel can withstand.

That ends now.

I stride to her after shutting the door behind her friends, who didn't depart without hugs and comforting on the repeat. "Come on. Let's get some rest."

Red-rimmed eyes meet mine. "The way that police officer kept looking at you, I was afraid they were going to arrest you for hurting Casey."

What she saw was the younger cop's own fear. Guy dropped his pen three times while taking notes. They both know I'm one of the most powerful and dangerous men in the world who happens to live in their city. Yet they were smart enough to keep their mouths shut. "Never going to happen. Casey's the only one who'll pay for hurting you."

With her slight nod, I think we're past the issue and ready to sleep. Until she busts out crying. Shit.

"I'm really sorry. I know it was super expensive and so generous of you to get it for me, but I can't...I just can't..."

The tears are devastating me. "Can't what?"

"Sleep in that bed."

Motherfucker. I can't either. Not where another man hurt my angel. "It'll be gone in the morning, replaced with a new one."

She sags into me with relief. As much as I want to scoop her up and take her home with me, I know she's not ready for anything more than calming down in her own place. "We'll sleep on the sofa."

Not a question on my part, and obviously neither on hers with her slight nod. Thank fuck.

I guide her to the bedroom, leaving her in the doorway as far away from the disgusting bed as possible. "Where are your pajamas?"

"Middle drawer on the left."

A red pair with green edges sits on top of the neat pile inside. Made of thick cotton they seem warm, so I grab the long sleeve shirt and pants. Then I lead her to the bathroom. "Get ready for bed, and I'll wait for you."

"Okay."

As she passes by, she pauses to give me a tight hug for too brief of a second. Before I fully register her embrace, she's gone, at the vanity digging for her toothbrush.

My phone pings from the kitchen counter. As much as I don't want to, I give her privacy and check my message.

M's already gone to town on Casey. Now they're pumping nutrients and drugs into him via an I.V., so the bastard survives until I get my turn. Although I don't know when that will be because I refuse to leave Seraphina until she's strong enough to be alone. I shake my head from the next message.

My brother's bored since his punching bag is unconscious and heading to the underground fights he loves. Another reminder of how grateful I am to have my angel.

I grab blankets from the hallway closet and pile them on the sofa. Once she's finished, I'll tuck her in and watch over her until morning. Like I should have been all along. One fucking disastrous meeting distracted me from continuously viewing the cameras as required. Now I've let her down.

The bathroom door whines open, and I spin toward her. Despite the motherfucking bruises, she's breathtaking in her sweet innocence.

I stare at her, taking her all in. Messy bun of crazy long hair, smooth bare face, surprisingly sexy in her body-hugging PJs despite only her hands and face visible.

"Your turn."

Even her voice entices my cock. I shove all of my desire for her deep down and motion for her to come to me. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll join you.”

Still traumatized, she nods and rushes into the living room, as obedient as ever. I force myself to let her go and take care of my own business.

When I return to the living room, she’s curled in the middle under a huge quilt and pats the cushion next to her. Sleeping together isn’t what I intended, but when my girl asks, I give. I motion for her to rise. “Up angel.”

She frowns yet submits, quickly jumping to her feet. I drop on the couch and turn with my shoulder against the back. I tap the space in between my parted legs and her doubt disappears.

She eagerly climbs in, and I scooch down so I’m lying flat with my head on the pillow at the arm rest and she’s snuggled into my chest.

Her little arms wrap around my torso, and I cover us with her blanket. Heavenly peace for damn sure.

“You’re so big and strong. It makes me feel safe.”

“You are safe.”

Her wiggle of happiness tempts my dick, already straining from being in her vicinity. I tighten my hold to lock her down, and she melts into me completely spent.

“I’m tired but not sleepy if that makes sense.”

I stroke down her back, forcing myself not to cup her ass when I reach the bottom. “It does.”

We lay in silence, yet I know she’s not asleep. I don’t push, accepting her rare lack of chatter. Well aware she’s processing her grief.

“When Gabriel and I were little, we’d sleep on the sofa together.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Our room in the trailer was freezing because it didn’t have any heat. So in the winter we’d sneak into the living room and pile up the blankets from the basket in there. He’d sleep sitting up so in case our foster parents woke up, he could grab me and hurry back to our room.”

“You weren’t allowed in the living room?”

Her head shakes across my chest. “No. We were allowed in the kitchen during mealtimes and the bathroom when we needed to use it. But the rest of the time we had to stay in our room. I guess that’s why we both had such good grades. We didn’t have anything else to do but read and study.”

Her laugh doesn’t sound bitter the way it should. She continues to amaze

me.

“Thank goodness for the school library. I think I read every single book they had. One time I brought home so many the strap on my old backpack finally broke.”

The humor seeps away, and my body tightens from the despair in her tone.

“Melissa was going to spank me, but Gabriel wouldn’t let her and said it wasn’t my fault. She was so furious she told Craig when he got home from work, and he punched Gabe in the stomach.”

There seems to be more. As if her brother being worked over wasn’t enough to make her voice quiver. “Then what happened?”

“He made me promise never to tell anyone, but I guess since he’s gone, it’s okay now.”

I lift up and press my lips to the top of her head. “You can trust me angel.”

“I know.”

Thank fuck she knows. A huge sigh blows against my skin.

“Craig didn’t like it that Gabriel was old enough to stand up to Melissa. He kept punching him and saying *you’re not a big man like you think you are*. The next day Gabriel was in such bad shape at school that they called an ambulance for him. He lied and told everyone he got hit too hard in football practice because if Craig got in trouble Melissa probably would have beat me.”

God damn it. “That’s fucked up.”

“I kept hoping somehow the doctor would figure out the truth, but he didn’t. I wanted someone to know what was happening to us and help us. No one ever did. He came home from the hospital three days later and nothing changed.”

Unbelievable. How could they all have been so blind? “I don’t understand how they could’ve missed it.”

No answer. We both stew in our thoughts for a while. She quiets down while I make my plans for revenge. Her foster parents will suffer at my hand too. They’re going to learn the pain and indignity of gut punches and ass whippings.

“I guess that’s why Casey shocked me. I was used to it with them, but he always seemed nice.”

A slight smile graces her face when she looks up at me. “Now that I’m

with you, I really know what nice is.”

“You are with me, and I’m not letting you go.”

The worry that always flickers in her expression vanishes, and she burrows back in, content with my claim on her.

Although I’m not nice or good or anything she deserves, it’s too late to accept anything but us together.



CHAPTER 17

Seraphina

I stand up from my desk when the front doors slide open and a girl with super cute fuzzy pink gloves and scarf heads toward me with a white bag in one hand and a bottle of my favorite flavored water in the other.

“Delivery for Snow.”

“That’s me. Thank you very much.”

With a quick nod, she sets my food and drink on the counter. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks!”

She’s already jogging out as I respond. Lunch rush keeps her busy, I’m sure.

I peek inside the huge sack.

Sushi.

My heart flutters from Balthazar’s sweetness. When I had the rolls for the first-time last night and enjoyed them, he sent me more today.

My smile is huge as I slip my phone from my backpack.

***Me:** Thank you! I love the sushi.*

***Balthazar:** You’re welcome. Are you having a good day?*

***Me:** Yes, because I know you’re thinking about me and I’m lucky to have such an amazing boyfriend.*

***Balthazar:** Fuck angel you’re making my cock hard.*

I look down the hall to make sure London isn’t nearby. I doubt she could

see my screen, but I'd die if she did. Relieved no one is around, I reply back kind of racy.

Me: *I*

Shoot! I can't do it.

Balthazar: *What? Are you okay? Something wrong?*

Before I can answer, my phone rings. Guilt pulses through me. I've scared him. "Hi."

"Is everything all right?"

The strain in his voice shames me. "Yes, I'm fine. I promise."

He swears low and long into my ear, which is surprisingly sensual to know how feral he became over my safety. "I'm sorry I frightened you. I was going to type something and then changed my mind but accidentally hit *send* because I was nervous."

"Why are you nervous angel?"

The guttural sound reminds me I'm inadvertently tempting a giant man who has been very patient with me. Yet I can't help myself.

I check one more time to make sure my boss is in her office. With the coast clear, I press my lips to the speaker. "I wanted to say that I'd like to..."

"What?"

His groan gives me courage. "I'd like to feel that...the hardness...of your..."

Oh god. So embarrassing. I'm messing this up so bad. I'm at work and pretending to talk sexy when really I have no idea what I'm doing.

"My cock? You want to feel how fucking hard you make my cock when you send me sweet messages."

"Yes."

I whisper but I know he hears me from the rumble in his throat. "Say it. Tell me what you want to do."

I want to close my eyes and shut out the world but that's dangerous as I sit at my desk. I take a deep breath. "I want to feel how hard I make you."

"Jesus Christ."

The rippling clink of his zipper lifts goose bumps on my skin. He's touching himself because of me. The thought encourages me, so I keep going. "I want to touch your cock."

The word feels awkward on my tongue. I've never said it out loud before.

"Tonight." He sounds like he's straining to talk. "Tonight you're going to

with your hand. You're going to jack me off, and I'm going to fuck that sweet, sweet mouth of yours."

I want that so bad. "Yes."

"You're going to be my good girl and get on your knees for me."

My nipples tighten and my pussy aches. I've never said that word before either but there's no other way to describe what Balthazar does to me.

"I'm going to come down that delicate throat and you're going to swallow every drop so I know my come is in your belly until it can be in your perfect little cunt."

I should hang up. I'm in a place of business with throbbing breasts and wet panties and flushed face.

But I don't.

I can't help myself. He's making me lose control too. "I'll kneel for you and be your good girl. I'll do anything you want me to do Balthazar."

"Fuck!"

His roar startles me, and my body clenches as he groans.

"I just came in my hand again for you."

The realization simultaneously pleases and excites me. "Again?"

"Yeah, I can't stop myself. Until you're ready to take me it's what I've got to do so I don't lose my mind."

Am I ready for him?

Yes?

No?

Luckily, he doesn't ask. I know he's waiting for me.

The realization hits me hard—he's who I've been waiting for too. Unintentionally saving myself for him.

Before I thought I was a nerd to be a twenty-two-year-old virgin. Now I understand that concentrating on my education and career kept me focused until I found the right man for me.

Balthazar.

My heart flutters in my chest. "I can't wait for tonight."

"Me neither. I'll pick you up at five."

"Okay, thank you. See you then."

I'm not sure how I remain so calm after what just happened and what I know is going to happen later. Maybe that's more proof he's the one. I no longer feel as embarrassed or awkward.

That's how I know he's a good guy. He never rushes me or acts impatient

when I get scared about Casey. Who seems to have disappeared for good. The police never located him, letting Balthazar know that his roommate reported him missing.

I open the container and use my chopsticks the way Balthazar taught me. I struggle at first, dropping the piece twice but the third time I make it to my mouth. Just as delicious as I remember.

The door to London's office opens, and I chew faster. Averse to having a mouth full of food when she approaches, I brush away crumbs and sit up straighter, swallowing just as she reaches my desk.

The smirk that always pops on her face with regards to Balthazar twists her lips, and she shakes her head.

"He sent lunch again. That's every day this week."

My goofy Balthazar grin emerges too. "I know. He spoils me."

"I can tell." She laughs, husky and exuberant. "I've known him for a long time, and I've never seen him act this way. He's completely lost it for you."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. The Christmas tree, bringing you and picking you up every day, the way he's taking care of Casey, it's totally obvious."

I involuntarily touch my face from the unexpected reminder of my attack. The swelling is mostly gone, but I'm still a little tender along my jawline. "What do you mean taking care of Casey?"

For the first time ever, she looks worried. She furiously shakes her head and waves away whatever troubles her. Almost instantly, her normal expression returns.

"I meant taking care of *you* because of what happened. He's gone into even more crazy protective mode over you. It's good to see. You guys are perfect for each other.

The truth is apparent. I guess we're not hiding anything from her. "I really like him too."

Her face lights up, and I'm thrilled I've pleased her with my confession. I would never do anything to make her upset at me or risk my job.

"I know and I'm glad."

She nods, and I believe her. Our relationship doesn't seem to bother her or make her question my focus on my job.

"When you finish eating, send me the Baxter contract to finalize."

"Yes, of course. I'll be right there."

Once she turns and strides to her office, I stuff in another bite. While I

genuinely appreciate how generous and loving he is to me, I need to concentrate on this project and stop thinking about Balthazar.



Balthazar

Despite my revolting surroundings, I can't stop thinking about Seraphina.

I tuck my still half-hard dick in my pants and stride around streaks of blood and puddles of vomit to the sink to wash my hands. Casey mumbles something unintelligible as I pass by him. Listening to Seraphina on speaker phone seems to bother him.

“What’s that fucker? You jealous that sweet angel is all mine?”

All I receive is a gurgle in response. Hard to enunciate clearly with a broken jaw, sliced tongue, and missing teeth, I guess.

His remaining eye tracks me as I dry off with a paper towel. “I’m sure you think she would’ve been yours if I hadn’t come along.”

He strains against the chains as I step closer. Instinct to flinch kicks in I assume since we both know he’s not going anywhere anytime soon. Except to hell when I’m finished with him.

The stench of burned flesh and days old shit irritates my nose. I relish the consequences of his torture and speak into what’s left of his ear. “But deep down you know she never wanted you or you would be the one heading to her apartment in a few hours to spend another glorious night in her bed.”

A shrill complaint whines in his throat.

Boring.

I’d rather hear a scream. So, I kick his broken leg and savor the howl I anticipated.

Good.

Once he finally shuts up, I smile in satisfaction. “Think about that while I’m gone. She’ll be on her knees for me, sucking my cock with that luscious little mouth while you’ll be hanging out here.”

I flip off the lights. “Until next time.”

The wail of a sob accompanies me as I slam the door shut. I find myself

hurrying to the next room. Fucking with them is just as enjoyable as punishing Casey.

Inside, I hit the switch and the illumination makes them jolt. Craig lifts a shaking hand to protect his eyes while Melissa pushes her face against the concrete to shield hers.

Mentally, she hasn't fared as well as her husband. I don't think she's uttered a word in two days. Just rocks and shivers from the intense air conditioning I pump into the room.

I check the thermostat. Forty-eight degrees. Pretty harsh when you're only wearing a tank top and shorts.

I crouch down next to her. "You want a blanket? Maybe a coat?"

With chattering teeth, she tries to say something. Just like Casey, I can't understand a damn thing she says. Too bad. "Okay, I'll take that as a *no* then."

When she emits a sound that I think is crying, I hum Seraphina's favorite Christmas song. This is all for you angel.

I rise and amble toward the cowering idiot. Surprisingly after seven days, he still has some fight to him. He squints up at me.

"What do you want, man?"

Interesting. What *do* I want?

I want to marry my angel.

I want her to carry my babies.

I want her to know she'll always have everything she ever needs.

Oh, and I want to physically and emotionally break you until you die. "Tell me about Seraphina."

Exhausted, his arm flops down to his lap, and he slumps back against the wall. "Who?"

His pinched face proves his confusion. He's not playing with me. "Your foster daughter."

Recognition from my description smooths his face, and I swear hope springs into his expression.

"You know her? You tell her I'm here and she'll want me out. She'll vouch for me. She likes me. I took good care of her. Real good care of her and her brother."

Unaware of the fact I despise liars, he rambles on about the Christmas kid and the football kid. Minimizing them to just those two traits pisses me off.

I grab him by his tee shirt. His wide eyes flick from my fist twisted in the

dingy fabric to my face. “You know what, Craig. The Christmas kid doesn’t like you. And no you didn’t take *real good care* of her and her brother. You were a piece of shit who abused children so now the same thing is going to happen to you.”

He struggles but is too weak to do anything about my grip on him. Peace floods me from his fear. “You thought sitting in the dark freezing was bad but by this time next week you’ll be thinking this is paradise.”

His head twists side to side. “No man you got it all wrong. I didn’t do anything to those kids. It wasn’t me. It was her.”

He motions toward his catatonic wife. “She’s the one who hit them and did shit to them. It’s all her.”

The hole he digs just gets deeper and deeper. “Is she the one who put Gabriel in the hospital with a ruptured spleen?”

Realization that I know the truth and he’s fully and completely fucked, stiffens his body. I release the material tangled in my fingers and pat his icy head. I’m chilly now too.

Time to go and warm up with my girl. I kill the lights in here too and head upstairs. I’ll grab her a chocolate treat on my way out although the candy won’t ever taste as sweet as my angel.



CHAPTER 18

Balthazar

Seraphina clenches her rich cocoa eyes closed, shutting me out. With my fingers tangled in her long hair, I tug the strands, easily returning her to submission. “What’s wrong, angel?”

As she gazes up at me, I tip closer and block out everything else but her caged against the wall. All I see is her plump swollen lips, feel her warm breath, smell her sugary scent almost as sweet as she is.

“I don’t want you to think I’m a pervert.”

My cock pulses in my jeans from her admission. She’s so far from anything resembling a pervert but damn if I want to do filthy things to her to show her how much of one *I* can be. “I won’t. Just say it.”

She swallows hard. “I came home early from study group one time and accidentally heard Alex and Bree in their bedroom...”

The flush on her face radiates heat potent enough I can feel the warmth on mine. I nod, encouraging her to continue.

“The sounds he made. I want you to make those sounds.”

“You do?”

“I want to be the one to make you make those sounds.”

Even better. “I want that too.”

“But I don’t know how.”

Despair wobbles in her whisper that is easy to eliminate. “I’ll show you.”

My offer makes her smile. The smile that can destroy a man with the level of faith and trust and belief she has in me. I kiss her gently. “I’m proud

of you for being honest with me. You don't have to be shy."

As expected, she remains eternally shy, blushing and flicking her gaze to my chin. No worries. She's perfect and doesn't have to change for me.

I clasp her hands and walk us backward to the chair next to the Christmas tree so she remains in my sights. Once my thighs hit the cushion, I kiss the top of her head. "Kneel for me."

Docile as always, she drops to her knees and looks up waiting for my next order. I caress her cheek and rest my fingertips under her chin. "Good girl. You're going to take my cock so well."

Eager and devout, she bobs her head fervently. Wide eyes watch intently, taking in every aspect of me unbuckling my belt and sliding down my zipper. Pink lips part with a huge gasp when I release my dick from my boxer briefs, shoving them down low enough to free my balls too. "Open for me."

She frowns for a second before drawing in a massive breath and offering her tongue. "That's it. Let me fuck that succulent mouth of yours."

I guide in the tip, and she startles, blinking rapidly and jutting backward to escape the intrusion. I cup the back of her head, holding her immobile. "You can do this. I know you can."

My encouragement bolsters her, and she nods, presenting her tongue again. "There you go. That's it."

The head passes her teeth before she sputters but doesn't pull away. "Relax angel. Just relax."

Her shoulders drop from being hunched by her ears, and she clamps my cock like a rod in her mouth.

Once she's used to the sensation, I drive deeper before drawing out again. She gulps trying to get air as I thrust again and again until I hit her tonsils, and she involuntarily swallows. "Fuck that feels so good."

Praise works like a charm, and she slobbers trying to lick and suck as I hold tight for her benefit. She works so hard without any rhythm or skill, and I love her for it.

I love her.

Smiling down at her, I realize after only two weeks I really have fallen in love with her. The thought hits me hard. This is what love looks like, feels like.

Her challenging herself to overcome her lack of experience, to abandon her insecurity and trust me enough to be completely vulnerable.

Me worried more about her pleasure than my own, ensuring I build her

confidence, so she has zero regrets. All this time I never thought change was possible for a selfish asshole like me. But here we are.

“Look at you so fucking gorgeous on your knees for me. Nothing is as beautiful as you are with my dick in your mouth. You please me in ways you can’t imagine.”

The approval unleashes the beast in her. I don’t have to thrust—she comes at me skimming back and forth with her own awkward pace. I let her have at it, slowly edging me to the brink with her relentless efforts.

The furrow of her brow, the intensity of her suction, the moan in her throat overwhelms me more than any proficiency. “You’re perfect Seraphina. So god damn perfect I’m getting ready to come down your throat.”

I clutch the sides of her head and plunge without restraint into that wet, supple mouth that’s so eager to please me. I’m grunting and swearing until I lose my own tempo and my balls draw up to my spine only to explode.

Streams gush so violently they flood around my cock and leak from her mouth. But like the champ she is, she drinks all she can.

I finally collapse onto the chair, and my dick pops from her mouth on the descent. Zealous for more, she follows me down still trying to work on me. I chuckle from her earnestness, and stroke over her wild strands, soothing her because of what she doesn’t understand. “I’m empty, angel. I can’t give you anymore right now.”

“Oh.”

She falls back on her heels and looks up at me for reassurance. Guarded and exposed, she searches for validation that I’m more than happy to give her. “That was incredible.”

“Really?”

I wrap a curly wisp around my finger and tug. “Did I make the sounds you wanted to hear?”

“Yes.”

“Well I made them because of you.”

With the confirmation, she scrambles from the floor and onto my lap. Her arms coil tight around my neck, and she peppers my face with innocent kisses. I laugh again. “I should be the one thanking you.”

She lays her forehead to mine. “I just wanted to do a good job. I wanted you to be proud of me. I know you’ve been with other women who—”

Despite my exhaustion, I grasp her face to stop the words and hopefully the thoughts. “I’m not comparing you to anyone else, and you’re not going to

either.”

The severity doesn't seem to frighten her. She nods and softens, collapsing against my chest after I release her. She snuggles in, and I hold her until my dick recovers, hardening under her ass.

“Is tonight the night?”

If she has to ask, then it's not. “No, not yet. You're not ready but I'm going to get you ready. Stand for me.”

She's on her feet in an instant. With her jade sweater dress, black tights, and simple mary janes, she's as innocent as can be. I have to take this slow. “Turn off all the lights except the tree.”

While she hurries to the living room and then the kitchen, I grab the blanket strewn over the back of her couch and spread the fabric across the carpet. Upon her return, I position her in front of me. “Strip for me.”

A shudder rocks her body, and with trembling hands she grabs the thick cotton hem and yanks her dress over her head. Left in an emerald bra and her opaque stockings, she's still too covered.

I snap the clasp between her small breasts. Despite her warm skin under my palms, she shivers as I drag the straps down her arms, letting the bra fall to the floor.

She doesn't say a word as I kneel down this time on one knee and grasp her calf, lifting her foot to tug off her shoe. I repeat the process on the other side.

Her breath comes as pants now. Despite her nervousness, I know she's excited. Tiny pink nipples stand at attention and her musky arousal wafts to my nose as I breach her panties and pull down the remaining barrier to her decadent pussy.

The bright lights of our tree cast a rainbow of colors across her skin. I trail my fingertip from blue to red to orange. Tracing from the rapid pulse in her neck, to the curve of her breast, to the beauty mark on her hip bone, to the neatly trimmed hair above her cunt. “Look how magnificent you are. My Christmas present comes early this year.”

No hardship to stare at her all night like this but I know my girl needs encouragement beyond my words. Delicate hands curl around my shoulders, seeking the connection.

In response, I nudge apart her lower lips, opening them for me slightly to find the treasure hiding inside like a pearl. When I thumb the petals, her grip tightens, and she groans. “This is mine, isn't it angel? This is all mine not just

for Christmas but for always, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's yours."

"Good girl."

Her hips jerk forward of their own accord, and I respond in kind, working her nub while slipping my other finger in her slit. Already drenched for me, her walls flex and squeeze me until I hit her resistance.

The tip of my cock weeps from the gift of this girl in my life. It's no secret I don't deserve her. Also, that I'm keeping her. "This is mine too, isn't it? This virgin pussy that can't get enough of me finger fucking it is mine too?"

She nods while she rides my hand. "Say it. Tell me what's mine."

I'm not sure if her moan is from desire or frustration. Probably both. Her eyes clench shut, and I stop my efforts on her clit to give her ass a spank.

Shock forces her gaze back to me. Pleasure forces her cunt to cream on my fingers. "I know what you need angel. Now tell me what I want to hear."

The dominance in my voice elicits a rumbling noise from her graceful throat. Our eyes lock as she licks her lips.

"My pussy is yours Balthazar."

"Then give it to me."

I body check her onto the blanket, cupping the back of her head and shifting my weight to the side lest I hurt her fragile form. She opens instantly—her lips, her legs, her heart. I take them all, settling between her thighs and attacking her mouth.

I taste myself on her tongue. Normally, I would be disgusted. But mixed with her sweet flavor, knowing she sucked a cock—*my* cock—for the first time ever and my come's down her throat and in her belly, I can't get enough. I plunge deep, owning her mouth until she's breathless and clawing at my shirt.

Nose to nose, I smile down at her. "Do you want me naked too?"

"Yes!"

Fierce in her proclamation, she fumbles with my tie, inspiring ideas of how to use the silk restraint later. I loosen the knot and slide one end from underneath my collar. As soon as the black material clears my neck, she attacks the buttons.

I chuckle yet allow her to work. Respectful she slips each one through the slot in the fabric rather than ripping them off like I would. The bravado ends when she reaches my stomach. Willowy fingers grip the waistband, and she

lifts her gaze to mine. A little encouragement is all she needs. “Go ahead. I’m yours too.”

The bashful grin I love graces her pink face, and she slowly pushes down the edge. “Feel me. See how hard you make me.”

Pressure from her hand on my cock starts light until she gives a slight squeeze. I moan in appreciation. My dick’s rebounded quickly, needing more from her. I take over, shoving off the remainder of my clothes.

We’re both completely naked. The utter perfection of it overwhelms me.

A man who is never overwhelmed.

A man who is never weak.

A man who is never needy.

Greedy, yes. All the time for money, power, control.

Needy, no.

Only for this angel.

Her hand reaches for me. I capture her slight wrist, holding her arm in the air while ensuring I don’t crush her bones so small and fine in my thick fingers. “Just let me look.”

My voice is hoarse, full of a desperation I fully feel and fully hate just as much. Goose bumps explode on her skin as I take her in.

She’s beautiful, transcending the definition of the word to a description I can’t explain adequately.

“Balthazar?”

My scrutiny scares her.

My silence.

My intensity.

All of them terrify her almost as much as they do me.

I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss the sleek palm. She smiles and squirms, grateful all is well again.

I press her forearm to the blanket and slide down her lithe body, smooth and supple. Almost as if she’s built expressly for my hands.

I cradle her hips like a basin and drink from her pussy with an insatiable thirst. Unable to quench the need with the addictive flavor of her wetness generated from my touch.

The scent of her simple soap and her own pure femininity fills my nose—her unique fragrance generated from my teeth and tongue and lips from her cunt to her clit. The taste and smell and feel are all mine.

She is all mine.

Growling into her quivering pink lips, I feast like a monster needing her to come as hard and completely and overpoweringly as I did. Her whimpers drive me deeper inside her, my tongue flat and wide as I slowly work to get my fill.

She chases me too, her pelvis rocking to welcome my plunge as far as I can go. Her fingernails dig into my scalp as she writhes, panting and trembling.

I hear my name, breathless and strangled and emotional. She cries out from me and for me.

Waves and waves of spasms hit her while she creams on my tongue and down my chin. I smile into the release. Not from my pleasure but from hers. My angel came on my face knowing on some level how much I love her.

I push up onto my elbow and palm my dick, forcing myself not to shove inside of her. Jacking a few times until her eyes blink open and her heady gaze drifts from my face to my cock in my hand.

When she licks her lips, I know I'm lost. I bring the head to her drenched pussy and trace the edges. "Only the tip tonight. I want to show you how good it's going to feel. How incredible we're going to be together."

Her hips lift in response, and I have to be careful.

So very, very careful.

I circle her clit before trailing lower, flicking a few times between her glistening folds. I stop low and press against her forbidden hole. When she gasps from interest rather than revulsion, I grunt like a beast knowing how amazing exploring everything with her is going to be.

I return to her cunt, allowing myself to breach her lips with just the crown. Short, controlled thrusts are mind-blowing yet maddeningly torturous. "Look angel. Watch what it looks like when I fuck you."

She does watch. Even in the dim light I see her pupils dilate, flaring with a primal desire matching mine.

My hips rock into her, barely hanging on to control. When she reaches down to touch me where I'm inside her forming an *us*, I know I'm going to come. Her first.

Dangerously close to forcing me deeper, she clutches me like a lifeline. Her head falls back, unable to see our connection any longer. Thank fuck.

I thumb her clit and she explodes, creaming on the first few inches of my cock. I pump myself—still without fucking her like I need to—until I come too. White streams spray on her and in her.

I scrape the rivulets from her skin with my fingers and shove them inside her. Even if I can't take her tonight, she's mine to fill. Crooking my finger coated with my seed, I find the spot that makes her cry out. A tiny release that shudders through her before her legs collapse.

With her sprawled beneath me, I know she's spent. I don't want her to get cold and drag the heavy blanket over us, tucking the edges under her side to ensure she's warm. Exhausted, she snuggles in. Hopefully with her this relaxed, my question about meeting my father won't freak her out.



CHAPTER 19

Seraphina

As we sit at their kitchen table for our customary Monday night dinner, a look passes between Bree and Alex which makes me suspect they know something I don't. She hands me the raspberry-lemon vinegaretté for my salad while I wait for her to let me in on the secret.

I'm not sure if I should be excited or worried.

She keeps her attention on her dinner as she pierces her fish. "Megan is having people over on Thursday, and she said you're welcome to come too. You really ought to go over there."

The secondhand invitation feels awkward. I think if Megan wanted me at her party, she would have asked me directly. I know Bree feels guilty about going to her grandmother's house for the long weekend and doesn't want me to spend the holiday by myself.

Fortunately, I'm not.

Unfortunately, she won't like who I'm spending the day with.

I feign a casualness I don't feel and slowly drizzle dressing over the tomatoes, cucumbers, and avocado slices. "Actually, I already have plans. Balthazar invited me for Thanksgiving, and I said yes."

Instead of putting the bite of salmon into her mouth, Bree sets the fork back on her plate. I hate the disappointment on her face. Her distrust of him remains strong despite how much I try to prove to her otherwise.

Alex gives her a terse headshake, sending a wordless message, before turning to me. "I'm glad you're not going to be alone. I hope you have fun."

I know he's sincere regarding both points. Family is important, and as much as I sincerely appreciate how they've made me a part of theirs, I hope they believe me when I say I'm not upset about their trip. They really need to spend time visiting her aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Plus, Alex has softened toward Balthazar over the past few weeks seeing how good he is to me about Casey and everything else.

Bree sighs. She seems to appreciate the fact that Balthazar is just as concerned about me as they are regarding the attack. But so far, his attentiveness isn't enough for her to completely trust him.

"If we weren't leaving, you'd be with us."

I'm not sure if that's true. I would definitely spend part of the day with them, but I'd celebrate with Balthazar too. I feel so caught in the middle.

Nevertheless, Balthazar deserves for me to stand up for him the way he stands up for me. "I would've loved to spend Thanksgiving with all of you at the same time. But if you didn't want to do that, I would have spent the afternoon with you and the evening with him."

My friend's eyes widen, and she jolts backward. I guess my candor surprises her. Balthazar makes me feel brave.

"You really like him, don't you?"

I can't help but grin. "Yes, very much."

She sinks down into her chair as if all the fight has left her. "I want to like him too. I really do. But I'm just not sure."

Alex covers her hand with his, calming the anxiety persisting in his girlfriend. He knows how difficult it is for her to accept my decision.

I smile at both of them now—him for his support and her for her love. We're slowly making progress. "I know and I appreciate you looking out for me but I'm fine. He's good to me, I swear."

Still cautious, she squints at me, tilting her head in inquisition. "And he never interferes with your job?"

I shake my head. "No, he doesn't even come into the building except to drop me off and pick me up."

"He's taking you to work? That seems kind of controlling, doesn't it?"

The improvement I was making teeters on the edge of a cliff I'm scared I won't be able to climb back up if I fall off. I turn to Alex, seeking his assistance again.

She mimics me, with her gaze boring into her boyfriend to rally him to her point of view.

He squeezes her fingers. “First you thought he was harassing her and now you think he’s trying to control her. But look at her. She’s here with us. She seems happy and healthy. I think you just need to let it be.”

Grateful for his rationality, I pile on with more verification. “It’s sweet actually. He doesn’t want me to ride the bus alone or spend the money on a pass.”

A hum buzzes in her throat as she’s pondering my defense. More evidence is needed to convince her. “He has lunch delivered to me every day. And, he had a Christmas tree sent to the office too because he knows how much I love them.”

Her expression softens, and my heart flutters that I’m actually swaying her opinion of him. Uncertain if I should keep going or stop, I hold my tongue. Sometimes less is more. I hope anyway.

“He hasn’t tried anything, has he?”

Uncertain what she means by *tried*, but I’m guessing she means sex. Alex must think the same thing because he picks up his glass of water that’s still three-fourths of the way full and goes into the kitchen.

Bree’s like my sister but some things should remain private. “Everything we’ve done is because I wanted to, but no we haven’t slept together yet.”

She slowly nods her head. “That’s good. Don’t rush into anything.”

Her finger jabs in my direction. “Don’t let *him* rush you into anything. I mean there’s nothing wrong with waiting until you’re married.”

The sound of a strangled cough barks from the other room, and I laugh a little. Funny how she advises one thing for me that she didn’t follow for herself. “I know there’s not. But, I also trust myself to know when the time is right.”

I’m fudging on that knowledge. The thought of making love to Balthazar stirs emotions I didn’t know existed until I met him. Until he touched me.

But even if I don’t trust myself, I trust him. I just hope I can persuade her to trust both of us.

With a huff, she stabs at her food again. “Well if he thinks he gets you for Christmas, he’s sadly mistaken! You’re spending the day with us!”

Alex’s eye catches mine above her bent head. He’s trying to keep from laughing too. It feels good to be this loved. I am very fortunate to have them fighting over me. Not everyone is this lucky.



Balthazar

The housekeeper's head continues to bob as she scribbles down notes from my request. If she's shocked by my interest in our menu for Thursday, she doesn't show her surprise. Hums of agreement vibrate in her mouth, yet she doesn't utter a word.

That's why she's worked for our family so long. She keeps to herself and out of our business, both legal and otherwise. Dad trusts her and so do I.

Finally, she finishes her list and looks up. "Will Miss Snow be joining us for any other meals this weekend?"

Fuck, I hope so. "I'm not sure but go ahead and plan for it."

The hint of a smile flits over her lips but she instantly subdues the pleased expression and nods. "Very good."

I'm not sure what difference it makes. Seraphina isn't picky from what I can tell, and my mom always ate what my dad and brother and I did. Albeit smaller servings and more sides of salad and fruit than us.

Must be a woman thing that Mary understands. Good. She can handle the food, and I'll handle everything else with my girl.

Including my dumb ass brother who just waltzed in. Luckily, he celebrates Thanksgiving in the ring rather than at home, so I won't have to deal with his shit while Seraphina is here.

Melchior beelines straight to the refrigerator and grabs out two bottles of his favorite beer.

More confirmation of why he's a fuck up. He spends hours a day in the gym, practicing six different versions of martial arts, while also double-fisting booze at ten in the morning. Complete contradictions just like him.

After a long swallow emptying half the golden liquid in the first container, he acknowledges me. "What're you doing?"

"Leaving."

His laughter as well as his footsteps follow behind me as I stride down the hallway toward my Dad's office. The last thing I want to do is engage in

any conversation with him about Seraphina.

“Might as well tell me or Mary will.”

I know better. The woman definitely likes me more than him. I don't cause her any trouble unlike this slob. “No. She won't.”

“Stop being a dick and just tell me. It's about your new girlfriend, isn't it?”

The term *girlfriend* sounds childish at my age, but I still like the label anyway. Until even better when she's my fiancée and then my wife.

For now, I won't give anything away especially to him. “Your jealousy is pathetic. You might need to talk to someone about that.”

His grating howl bounces off the walls. He thinks he's gotten to me.

“Well, maybe when I meet your girl, she'll help me by more than just talking to me.”

I pause but don't turn around. Not only do I want to avoid showing him he affected me, I also have to maintain my control. Now that I'm the boss, I can't let stupid petty things or people bother me with their nonsense.

He grunts at me. Well aware he wants to fight, I ignore his taunt.

For now.

Later he won't be so lucky. “Meet me in the gym at four.”

I can kick his ass before I spend the rest of the evening with my angel.

“Okay. Can I fuck around with our guests until then?”

Sometimes he does just enough to get back on my good side. This is definitely one of those times.

I don't have another meeting until eleven, so I nod. “I'll meet you there.”

He whoops from my participation. There's nothing he loves more than an audience to his brutality. Sick, sick bastard.

Creepy whistling until the door to the garage slams shut. He'll drive like a maniac to the dungeon.

At my father's office I wait outside the thick, black door. Soundproof to protect my mother from the distasteful aspects of our business. The bittersweet sensation burns my chest whenever an unexpected reminder of her pops into my head.

When the lock clicks open, I shove down the emotion and force my game face on for my Dad. He mopes enough for the both of us. I don't want to add to his melancholy.

I nod in deference to him before sitting in one of the chairs opposite his desk. Surprisingly, he looks cheerful in an annoyingly smug sort of way.

Not ones for pleasantries, he jumps in. “I’ve never seen you so interested in what we have for Thanksgiving dinner.”

Anyone else, I would respond *fuck you*. However, my father deserves respect. Besides, I’ll let him enjoy teasing me since him goading me has improved his mood. “I’ve never had a girl like Seraphina.”

My candor shocks him. Good. I like surprising him.

He leans back in his seat. “Tell me about her.”

Doubt sounds in his voice. I get his disillusionment. The girls I’ve fucked in the past never meant enough to me to bring home. He doesn’t want to be disappointed that this one isn’t either.

Now it’s my turn to be smug. “Don’t you already know from London?”

Genuine laughter rips through the room, and I chuckle too in spite of myself. It’s refreshing to see him this way—the way he used to be. Seraphina already has a positive impact on him, and he hasn’t even met her yet.

“Yeah, but I want to hear it from you.”

I’m happy to oblige his request. “She had a shitty childhood but somehow she’s still sweet and cheerful.”

“What do you mean *shitty*?”

All the humor disappears, and he taps his fingertip on the chair arm. A sign of impatience as well as irritation, demanding an answer.

“She and her brother ended up in foster care when she was four. Assholes abused them until she finally aged out of the system.”

His gaze bores into me. “You’ve taken care of that, I assume.”

His voice is hard, implying if I haven’t, I’d better be quick about ensuring they pay for their crimes. “M’s using them for practice on the daily.”

The fury in his body softens a bit. Unfortunately, I have to tell him the rest, which will upset him too. “Her brother died from a brain tumor.”

Cancer’s insidious not only to the patient. We both feel that to our cores.

“Now she has some good friends that look out for her, but—”

“You’ve taken over that too.”

Possessiveness I’ve only ever experienced for Seraphina surges inside me. “Yep. She wants for nothing and is under my protection.”

“And she’s not bitter and fucked up from what they did to her?”

I shake my head. My cock thickens in my pants from the thought of my amazing girl. “Surprisingly not. She’s pure sugar. Always smiling and laughing. Loves Christmas too. I took her on a sleigh ride at a holiday event at the park, and you’d think she won a million bucks or something she was so

excited.”

“That is surprising.”

“The only thing I notice is she’s desperate for affection. Any opportunity to hug or cuddle she grabs it. When I give her attention, she eats it up. It’s crazy but that’s all she really seems to want.”

Now the smirk returns. “I’m sure you’ve taken care of that too, I assume.”

“Of course.”

I slide out my phone and tap the image London sent me when she was busting my balls, bitching at me to go get Seraphina from the football game. Thank fuck I didn’t let my stubbornness get in the way of listening to my friend.

I twist around the screen so he can see my angel. She’s trying hard to look professional in her employee photo, but her innocent nature shines through. With her big brown eyes and bright smile, all I see is her sweetness.

He inspects the picture with a head bob. Grateful he approves, I shove the cell back in my inner coat pocket. “She’s stunning, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she’s gorgeous.”

An expression flits across his face that I know from past experience means revenge. “Find out what happened to her birth parents. If they’re still alive, I want them to pay too for her ending up in foster care in the first place.”

His idea simultaneously pleases and irritates me. He’s as vengeful as I am. But why the fuck didn’t I think of that myself? “Done.”

“Keep me updated.”

The adamancy confirms he’s already protective of her too. If I don’t proactively let him know the status, he’ll be pissed. That’s a very good sign. “Will do.”

He beckons to me. “Let me see her one more time.”

No reason to argue, I grab my phone and give him another look. She really is beautiful.

“You better thank London.”

Final proof he was in on the set up all along. I hop up laughing and show myself out. Just like Seraphina, I’m too happy to be pissed about them colluding against me.

After hustling through the house, I head to my vehicle parked in front. As I climb inside the thought hits me I’ll soon have to switch to an SUV once

Seraphina gives me children. Car seats and all that goes with babies.

The thought makes me smile, and I hum all the way to the chocolate factory. Per usual, I park in the back and use the rear entrance to bypass the candy making and head straight to the torture chambers.

M already has Casey's door propped open. The asshole hangs upside down with tight straps around his calves since only stumps remain of his feet.

My brother bounces on his soles with a psychotic smile plastered on his face. Sometimes I really do worry about him.

“What do you want first, brother? What do you want first?”

Ignoring his annoying chatter, I study Casey as he slowly spins one direction and then the other. Despite his silence, he's conscious. I can tell from the tears that trail down his forehead and dribble on the floor. “How about his kidneys?”

The suggestion makes Casey groan.

Bad move.

Melchior gets off on sounds of suffering. He quickly gets into position and smashes his heel into Casey's lower back.

Both of them grunt. We have to wait for Casey to stop rotating from the force before my brother can kick him again. M huffs, bored already, and starts looking around.

I check my buzzing phone while he searches through our equipment. He hustles over to grab a chain and attaches one end to the sink drainpipe and the other to Casey's wrist. Our guest now hovers taut at a downward angle.

The revised restraint pleases Melchior, and he goes to town on the bastard's guts. Unfortunately, I don't get to watch the show any longer. Silver lining is I get to my girl that much sooner. “Don't wear yourself out on him. Craig and Melissa are due for a visit too.”

Droplets of sweat fly in my direction when he whips his head toward me.

“Really?”

“Yep. Have all the fun you want.”

He yelps in excitement before returning to Casey, switching sides so the punishment is even.

Normally we don't hit women. However, a woman who abuses kids gets what she deserves. If she dishes it out, then she gets it back. I have zero guilt.

Once I close the door behind me to mute the wailing, I call my Dad back. He answers immediately, which is never a good sign.

“London said she's a people pleaser. We need to make sure no one's

manipulating her.”

Luckily, his urgency stems from concern over my girl rather than a problem with the business. “Her friend is overprotective especially about me. She worries Seraphina could be taken advantage of.”

I keep the conversation going as I jog up the stairs and outside to my car.

“Is it going to be an issue?”

“Nope, I’m charming the friend too.”

His scoff blows through the speaker. I chuckle and rise to the challenge. “I’m going to love proving you wrong.”

“We’ll see son.”

He’s laughing now too. Good. He deserves a good ribbing as well as a good holiday. Which I know Seraphina will make for him.



CHAPTER 20

Balthazar

Seraphina squints at the tiny screen and shakes her head.

“That’s so weird.”

She’s adorable from the intensity of her confusion. With my thumb, I rub the little lines between her narrowed eyes soothing her stress. “What’s wrong angel?”

“They still haven’t deducted my electric bill or my rent from my checking account. When I asked Mr. Fetters about it, he said it was paid so I don’t know why I can’t see it.”

For this conversation, she needs to be on my lap. I scoop her up from her cushion, almost causing her to drop the crappy computer.

No worries. I’ll buy her another better one.

She shrieks with astonishment as I haul her onto my thighs. She shoves the laptop to the safety of the coffee table before turning to face me.

Her luscious mouth gapes as wide as her eyes. “What are you doing?”

“You were too far away.”

My admission makes her giggle. “I was sitting right next to you.”

When she attempts to sound stern, I get even harder for her. My cock bulges under her ass, and she squirms, well aware of my constant need for her. “Not close enough.”

Before I launch into my reasoning, I enjoy her trapped in my clutches. I stroke down her long hair, flipping the shiny strands behind her shoulder. She bites her pink lip when I thumb over her cheek and down her neck to where

her pulse races.

My big hand circles her slender throat. Fingertips almost touch my thumb she's so petite. A slight moan under my palm distracts me in the best way possible. I'd rather fuck than talk anyway.

"I guess I'll just go the bank tomorrow to see what's going on."

Nope, because that steals time from me doing this to her. "I paid them. I'm here every night so it's only fair since I'm practically living with you."

I caress lower, enjoying her heart sprinting under my hand. Next, I'm really going to enjoy the softness of her ripe tits.

"You paid them?"

There's my favorite squeak. "Yep, and I don't want any arguments about it. I did it and it's done."

"Thank you."

Her gratitude sounds more humiliated than thankful. When she shifts, attempting to stand, I drag her right back. Her body is as stiff as my dick but not in the same happy way. I growl in her ear. "I'm not letting you go."

"I'm confused. I just need a minute to think."

"About what? You're mine, and I take care of you. End of story."

She ponders a little longer, her mouth working despite any sound until she swallows.

"Then why don't you ever take me to your house?"

Ah, now I get her concern. She thinks I'm hiding something from her. Ironic since I'm more open with her than I've ever been with anyone in my entire life.

"I mean I really like you being here, and I really, really appreciate you helping me with my bills even though you don't have to. But I just wonder if there's a reason you don't want me to see where you live."

I trail back up to her chin, tipping her head so I get her gorgeous face and curious eyes in my sights. "Do you remember the first night I came here I told you it felt like a different world with you here?"

She nods quietly.

"Because your apartment feels like a home, with personal touches that make it you. My penthouse is just a place to sleep, store my shit, grab a shower. It's not the same."

This time I let her move so she can twist to see me completely. "Really?"

"Really." I cup her warm cheeks. "And when we get married, I want our house to feel like this."

A shudder vibrates through her. “Married?”

“That’s the end game. Wedding, kids, all of it with you.”

No agreement or denial. Just her sweet, simple smile that makes her perfect face glow.

I have to be inside her.

Now.

I cradle her to me as I stand and carry her to the bedroom. She’s so light I easily balance her in one arm allowing me to shove away the blankets to lay her on the mattress. The angelic expression holds me hostage for a second. I’ve never owned anything as precious as her before.

When she reaches for me, I about lose my shit. Her desire for me fucks me up. I reach behind my head to yank off my shirt desperate to be skin to skin with her. “All of it off. Now.”

Ever obedient, she unties the wrap of her dress while I shed my jeans and boxer briefs.

Too damn slow, she slips her arms through the long red sleeves. I take matters into my own hands and grasp the waistband of her tights and panties, dragging them down her legs.

Fuck. Me.

She’s beautiful.

Her creamy pearl skin glimmers against the red flannel sheets.

Her mesmerizing brown eyes lock with mine.

Her slender legs open, beckoning me to the place I belong.

The invitation can’t be denied, and I slide up her magnificent body, hovering over her, balanced on my forearms. I skim my lips over hers, sharing the same air. “Do you love me angel?”

Crimson bursts on her cheeks, and she sucks in a deep breath. The shock of my question stiffens her body, and she looks away. I grasp her chin and guide her face back to me, kissing her gently. “I already know the answer, but I want to hear you say it.”

My tongue trailing on her bottom lip elicits the response I want. She opens for me, and I sweep in tasting her genuine goodness. My cock waits at her entrance, leaking and throbbing for admission.

The deeper I plunge, the more frantic she becomes. Narrow thighs squeeze my hips and elegant fingers dig into my back. Finally, she breaks away seeking oxygen. I push my forehead against hers and thrust to put the head of my dick in her opening. “I need to hear you say it before I make you

fully mine.”

Little hands grasp my cheeks. She pants against my mouth as she stares into my eyes with her own pupils dilated from the intensity.

“I love you Balthazar.”

“Good girl.” I push inside so my words help her tolerate the pain of me breaking through her innocence. “I love you too, Seraphina.”

I thrust slowly, opening her up to me. So damn tight. In her agony, she presses down into the mattress.

“What’s our house going to be like angel?”

“W-what?”

“Tell me where we’re going to raise our children. That’s what this is for. It hurts now but that’s what we’re working towards.”

Her head bobs furiously. She understands.

“A big, fenced yard. With a swing set.”

“Yes, definitely.” I plunge deeper, dying when she cries out. “What else?”

“F-flowers. Lots of flowers around the house and down the sidewalk. By the mailbox and the...”

I’ve hit her cervix, and I’m only halfway in. I feel like I’m ripping her apart and her suffering kills me. I hold still, and she stops fighting my intrusion. We stay immobile.

“What else will our family have?”

My question causes her eyes to pop open. I swear I see genuine love in her gaze.

“Our family will have a dog that’s sweet and protective.”

I smile down at her. “I like it.”

“We’ll have a Christmas tree up all year long and decorate it by the season. The kids will help me make hearts for Valentines and egg ornaments for Easter.”

The description makes me pump involuntarily. “I love that angel. You’re going to be such an incredible mom.”

For the first time since I broke through her resistance, she grins at me. “I’m going to be a mom.”

In and out my cock slides through the slick red proof of her virginity. “Yeah, I’m going to make you a mother. I’m going to fuck my babies into you again and again.”

Her fingernails claw into my shoulders. She’s in pain but getting through

the hardship because she wants what I'm telling her.

"You're going to be a good father. I know you are."

The sweet assertion pushes me over the edge. No hardship—I let myself fall because I want to end her torment and fill her up for the first time, hoping tonight is the night I get her pregnant.

Damn.

How am I a month in with this girl and already see our future? The thought ignites the bomb from my brain to my balls and I explode inside her. Gushing hot and hard into her pussy with all restraint abandoned.

She grips me tighter, hanging on for the detonation. I apologize on the repeat for hurting her until I collapse, shifting my weight to the side and sliding my hand under her hip to keep her pressed tight to me.

Well aware she's aching, I stay buried in her pussy to preserve my come deep inside her for as long as possible. Besides just keeping us physically connected, I want to keep her close so she knows how special this—she—is to me since she always doubts. "You did so well angel. I know it hurts but let me hold you a little while longer."

"Okay."

"Good girl." I kiss her forehead. "I promise it gets better."

"I would hope so. Otherwise, I don't know why people like it so much."

My laughter shakes us both, and she emits a soft giggle too. Thank fuck. She's sore but her sweet nature remains intact. "I'll make sure you do too. I promise."

When she looks up at me, I know she believes me. No one has ever trusted me as much as she does. "I meant everything else I said too."

She absorbs my words, slowly nodding and grinning.

"Me too."

"Good because I'm holding you to it."



CHAPTER 21

Seraphina

When Balthazar pulls into the parking garage of a sleek skyscraper that I thought was just an office building, I realize there's so much about business I don't know. The thought makes me feel even more nervous. Why I'm jittery in the first place I can't explain.

I said I want to see where he lives, and he's taking me without protest or hesitation. Yet for some reason butterflies flit in my belly.

He glances over at me before bringing our entwined hands to his mouth. His lips push hard against my fingers as if he's trying to mark my skin with his kiss.

"Don't expect much angel. It's only a place to shower and crash."

Uncertain how to respond, I just nod. "Okay."

I know his apartment will be fancy. He's obviously very rich.

Maybe that's why I'm anxious. I don't want him to think I'm greedy for his money or checking for the presence of another woman in his life since I realize that's what he thought earlier this week, when I asked him about his home.

I wasn't doubting him.

I was doubting myself.

We circle in the dim light until we reach the fourth and final level. A sign signifying *Penthouse* hangs on the wall in front of a huge parking space. Balthazar glides in with room for at least two more vehicles on each side.

A sophisticated black luxury car sits on the far edge of his area. With

tinted windows and shiny chrome, the sedan probably costs more than a lot of people's houses. I guess the Maserati is his too.

Once we park, I wait for him to come around to my side the way he likes. I'm rewarded with another kiss before he guides me to the single elevator rather than the bank on the opposite wall. He presses his palm to the small screen and the doors instantly slide open.

"This is my private elevator. No one else can access it. Once we get upstairs, I'll add your print."

Various emotions spin in my chest. I'm pleased he trusts me enough. Beyond trust, I'm thrilled he wants me to come here.

Inside, I'm drawn to the window framing the city at dusk. Gold from the fading sun filters through the gaps between the hulking buildings around us until we reach the top floor. Higher than all the other towers, our view provides a spectacular glimpse of the remaining pink and orange hues in the sky.

I spin back to the front from the *ping* signaling our arrival. The doors open right into his home. No wonder he has such security measures in place.

His hand squeezes mine before we enter a foyer with a white marble floor. A heavy but plain black table sits along one side. Otherwise, the area is bare.

Our footsteps echo in the empty space. Normally, the sound of his expensive leather shoes fill me with anticipation. I love his strength and determination. Here, the hollowness of the noise mimics the apartment.

No wonder he prefers my house.

The living room has big gray sofas facing a TV hung above a fireplace. The kitchen has fancy silver appliances and seemingly endless white cabinets. The dining room has an enormous brown table with ten high back chairs.

Not a single personal item such as a photo, artwork, or candle can be found anywhere in the entire house.

When he looks down at me and chuckles, I'm not sure what to think.

"I told you it was sparse."

"You weren't kidding."

He throws back his head and laughs his hearty laugh that I know means I've pleased him. I warm all over and turn to face him, curling my free arm around his waist, giving him the biggest hug I can. "Thank you for bringing me here. Now I feel like I understand you better."

He strokes down my hair and kisses the top of my head.

“That’s not good. I’ll scare you off.”

The tone doesn’t sound playful, and my stomach drops. I never want him to think that I don’t like him anymore. I jerk my head up to find him scowling at me. “That’s not possible, I swear. I just meant I want to take care of you too and make where you live feel like a home.”

His grip tightens on me in the good way and his eyes darken. “To make that happen, you’re moving in with me.”

A declaration not a question. For him anyway.

Am I ready to move in with him?

He practically lives with me as he describes our relationship. Even though his stuff isn’t in my apartment except for some clothing and a few toiletries. After I told him I like watching him shave, he showers there every morning so I can sit on the vanity next to him and chat.

The way that feels makes me want to scream yes. Instead, I just smile.

My hesitation elicits a growl in his chest, and suddenly I’m hoisted up face to face with him and my legs wrapped around his waist.

“What will it take to convince you?”

“I don’t need convincing. I just don’t want to rush into anything.”

“It’s not rushing if it’s what we both want.”

The disappointment on his face breaks my heart more than I thought possible. I hate that I upset him.

He’s right—I do want him, but I don’t think he understands why I’m so cautious. Why the thought of fully giving in to loving him worries me. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but Bree is still kind of suspicious of you.”

His laugh shakes us both. “I know angel.”

Since he’s laughing, I guess he’s not shocked. But I am. “You know?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty obvious. She doesn’t trust me. She thinks I come on too strong and that I’m going to dick you over somehow.”

Okay, then. He’s more intuitive than I realized, and I’m not as good at hiding things as I thought.

“I’m not pissed because I know she loves you. Just like I do.”

When he says things like that to me, I just melt.

“Damn angel. That smile of yours is going to be the death of me.”

I lift up and give him a kiss. A little one because I know what too many will lead to, and I have something I want to ask him first. “Can I have your father’s phone number please?”

He frowns at me. “You want to call my Dad?”

“Yes, if it’s okay. Since we’re eating at his house, I want to thank him for having me over on Thanksgiving and offer to bring something.”

A sexy smile lights up his already handsome face before he shakes his head. “You don’t have to do that.”

“But I want to. I want him to like me. We already have Bree questioning us. I don’t want your Dad to be the same way.”

Huge arms slide around me, and he nuzzles my neck, attempting to distract me, I’m sure. Although I can’t be swayed from doing the right thing.

“He’s going to adore you, but if it makes you feel better, we’ll call him.”

I love that he says *we’ll*. Talking to him together will be a lot easier.

I hold on tight as he carries me to the couch. Always careful with me, he drops down to the cushion slowly, cradling the back of my head.

Another temptation with me straddling him. I swear I hear him growl as he strokes down my shoulders. I know I feel his desire underneath me.

He draws his phone out of his suit breast pocket and taps the screen a few times. We’re on speaker phone with only one ring before his father picks up.

“Balthazar.”

He winks at me. “I’ve got Seraphina with me. She wants to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

My pulse pounds from his gruff tone. I meet Balthazar’s eyes. His steady gaze and quick nod reassure me. I take a deep breath. “Hi Mr. Wiseman. I just wanted to say thank you for hosting me for Thanksgiving and see if there is anything you’d like me to bring. I’m happy to contribute to our meal.”

Nothing. I don’t hear a thing. Not a word. Not a sniff. Not a sound.

Maybe I’ve angered him? I was just trying to be polite. I read that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’re invited to someone’s home, especially who you’ve never met before. I’ve really messed up. “I’m sorry if I offended you.”

Zero confidence resonances in my tone regardless of how much I try. Instead, I sound wobbly and tearful. I guess since I am. How humiliating.

Balthazar snarls and his mouth snaps open. He’s ready to tear into one of us. Which makes things even worse. Before he speaks, we hear a throat clearing through the speaker.

“No need to apologize. I just... We’re glad to have you, and you don’t have to bring anything. It’s all taken care of.”

At least he's not mad. I don't think. "Okay, thank you. See you on Thursday!"

"Yes."

Then he's gone. Balthazar tosses the cell next to us and engulfs me with a huge hug I desperately need. I cling tight to him. At least Balthazar isn't upset with me. I don't think I could handle his disappointment.

"Don't sweat it angel. We just surprised him."

"I hope so. I really want him to like me."

"He does because he knows I do."

I smile into his shoulder. "I like you too."

"Enough to move in with me?"

Since I'm not ready for that level of commitment yet, I distract him the only way I know how—with my lips on his throat. His groan rumbles in my ear as he stands. His mouth finds mine as we race down the hall. I guess he's going to show me his bedroom.



CHAPTER 22

Gaspar

The tiny thing Balthazar escorts into my office reminds me of an angel with her dainty features and ethereal smile. The photo he showed me has nothing on her in real life. She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. That's saying a lot because my wife was incredibly gorgeous too but in a different way.

This girl radiates a dazzling energy I'm absorbing just by being in the same room with her. I felt her vibrancy through the phone when she called with her sweet offer. Now here in front of me, she makes me want to jump to my feet after wanting to sit for so long. Too damn long.

My oldest son brings her directly to me, and when I stand, the size difference between us is almost comical.

"Dad, this is Seraphina."

With a deep breath, she holds out her small hand and glances up at me with the most wholesome expression I've ever experienced. "It's nice to meet you in person Mr. Wiseman."

Powerless to resist, I engulf her fingers with mine, needing to feel as much of her velvety skin as possible. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me.

She's Balthazar's girlfriend—the only woman he's ever brought home, and I'm fucked in the head ruining the introduction with a sensation I can't describe. "You too Seraphina."

"Thank you for inviting me to celebrate Thanksgiving with you. I

appreciate you including me in your feast.”

Her prepared little speech is adorable, and I wink at her. “He’s told you how much we like to eat.”

A cheerful laugh, light and sweet as honey jolts my body back to finally feeling alive again. Heat radiates through me including my cock, which needs to stand the fuck down.

I should release her.

Instead, I play with fire and caress over her shoulder with my free hand.

She trembles under my palm, and I hate that I’ve scared her. “Don’t be afraid, little one. I’ll never hurt you.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Coffee-colored eyes widen, and she bites her plump lower lip. “I...I’m... I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I just said that.”

Fuck if I know either. But the endearment thrills me to my tingling balls and hardening dick. “It’s all right. I like it. Always call me that.”

“Okay.”

The submissive nature so obvious in her makes me want to protect her as well as see what else she’ll submit to.

Fuck.

I drop my hands to my sides. She steps back bumping into my son who seems just as dumbfounded watching us without a word.

If he’s furious, he doesn’t show his rage. Which is crazy because if she was mine, I’d kill any man who touched her.

Mine.

Shit!

I nod my approval which makes her light up. I spin back to my desk and scrub my hands down my face. What have I just done?

Balthazar clears his throat. “I’m going to show her the rest of the house.”

I don’t turn around. I can’t. I’ve got to get my shit together. “You do that, son. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Once the door shuts, I drop back into my chair. Yet I’m too agitated to sit still and jump up again.

This renewed momentum triggers a restlessness I’m not used to. I pace to the bar and pour a double, drowning the whiskey in one long swallow. Warmth burns down my throat into my chest. Except the fire from the booze can’t touch the inferno inside me generated from Seraphina.

What is it about this girl that impacts me?

Her innocence?

Her sweetness?

Her sunshine?

Doesn't matter. She belongs to my son. I'll eat and make my excuses to get the hell out of there. Away from her.

The thought kills me.

But I'm an asshole and deserve to suffer for what I'm feeling.

I fix another drink and grab the remote to bring up the cameras. Somehow, I have to be imagining my connection to Seraphina.

Wrong.

When I catch sight of them in Balthazar's childhood bedroom, my pulse sprints through my veins. She glows, spinning around to check out his trophies and old video games, before racing to the balcony. The way she looks up at him when he opens the door for her confirms how docile she truly is.

He scoops her up and carries her to the bed with her giggling and squirming. I cut the feed. I can't watch something so intimate. Especially since I want that too with her and hate myself for craving something I can't have.

After Balthazar updated me about her parents, I knew I was protective of her just because of the trauma she's experienced. No child should suffer like she has from having a father addicted to painkillers after a work accident and a mother who wound up in prison because of his crimes.

With a life sentence and no chance of parole, she ended things herself rather than suffer without her children. The woman probably thought they were better off. What a fucking ironic joke.

Now my feelings of concern have exploded to an obsessive level I can't comprehend. Or act upon.

I gulp down my alcohol and stride to the den. The housekeeper sets out dishes at the wet bar. She pauses in her work and nods to me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wiseman. Dinner will be ready in about an hour."

"Thank you, Mary."

Her head bobs again, and she departs to the kitchen.

Damn it.

How the fuck am I going to withstand this temptation for that fucking long?



Balthazar

What in the fuck was that?

Seraphina seems just as affected by my father's intense reaction to her. Silent and skittish, she clings to my arm during our tour. A bit of her normal exuberant personality returns when I take her to my bedroom as a kid. She spins around slowly, taking in my old board games and sports equipment.

“You have a balcony!”

“Yeah, that's how I snuck out.”

Her bubbly laughter eases some of my tension from her uncertainty. I chase after her when she runs to the French doors and peeks through the glass. We can do better than that. I flip the deadbolt and push down the knob.

When she looks up at me, confirming it's okay for her to step outside, I cup her pink face and kiss her with gentle intentions until she moans against my lips.

All I can think about is bending her over the railing and fucking her to the point of screaming my name across the yard and into the woods.

I scoop her up and carry her to the bed, tossing her in the middle of the mattress. Strands of coiled hair billow around her cherub face as she bounces, watching me intently. I climb between her legs and balance my weight on my forearms.

The sparkle has returned to her eyes as she giggles up at me. “Did you do this as a teenager too?”

“Nope. I've never had a girl in here before.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

The squeak in her question verifies she's pleased to know how special she is. “You're the only one. The only one there'll ever be.”

With uncontained joy, she lifts up to kiss me. I love when she's brave and makes the first move.

After a few soft pecks, she falls back against the pillow, studying me with an intensity I'm not used to from her. My angel has something on her mind.

“What are you thinking about?”

The frown smooths away. “It’s funny because I was nervous about coming today to meet your father but somehow I’m not anymore. I feel really calm and relaxed.”

Thank fuck. “Good because we’ll be spending lots of time here.”

My confirmation earns me another kiss.

“That makes me so happy.” Her eyes flick open to meet mine. “*You* make me so happy.”

Funny how I’ve never considered anything *happy* before while she finds happiness in everything.

Including me.

Crazy. “Besides happy, are you hungry too?”

She giggles. Caught in my grasp, my cock pulsing against her pussy, her little hands on my cheeks, she laughs without any restraint or reservation.

“Yes!”

“Then let’s get you fed.”

Her arms coil around my neck, giving me a tight hug. I’ve never laid in bed with a woman and only hugged, but here we are. Once she releases me, I climb off and hold out my hand assisting her up.

The apprehension from before is gone and she wraps herself around me as we head downstairs.



CHAPTER 23

Gaspar

The housekeeper returns, carrying two trays of hors d'oeuvres that she places on the coffee table. So now I have to sit here eating snacks and drinking booze with our guest as if this is just a simple meal.

Heavy steps punctuated by softer ones sound behind me.

“When does your father put up his Christmas decorations?”

Balthazar chuckles from the charming question. No one’s put up a tree or wreaths or stockings in years. Christmas is all about the money for us.

Until now.

I spin around to her smiling face. “Tomorrow. I was hoping you would do the honors.”

A slender finger taps her chest. “Me?”

“Of course, little one. Who better than a woman named after a Christmas angel?”

She glances up at my son, seeking approval. His quizzical expression as he looks from her, to me, and back again matches my own perplexed mind.

He slowly nods to her as if trying to process my offer himself. “I have to work tomorrow, so if you want to come over then you should. I don’t want you to spend the day alone since Alex and Bree are with her family.”

Black Friday is one of our busiest days of the year. And, more importantly, our most profitable. That used to be my focus.

Since Balthazar has taken over, he manages the frenzy now. Best decision I ever made for the business and for me. Now I get to spend the day with her.

More demonstrative than anyone I've ever known, she hugs my son and then scurries over to me, wrapping her arms tight around my torso. Balthazar is right—she's starved for affection. Both of us can feed her hunger.

“Wow! Thank you. This is going to be so much fun!”

A sugary scent engulfs me, and I stroke down her curly hair. “You're welcome.”

Balthazar's eyes darken watching us. I expect him to explode over his woman's body sheathed against mine. Instead, I see something I don't expect in his expression—confusion.

Later, we'll have a long talk about this treasure who's swept into our lives. Until then, we'll enjoy a quiet dinner with her as the core of our enjoyment. “Let's sit. Mary has appetizers for us.”

Following my command, she releases me yet waits for direction. Never presumes anything, which I'm going to enjoy when I pleasure her.

I glide my hand to the small of her back and usher her to the sofa. Balthazar drops down next to her, and I sit across from her. My long legs put my feet by hers, and I press the side of my boot to her little slippers. Not close enough but I can't push. With either of them.

Our housekeeper returns, carrying our whiskeys, and smiles at Seraphina.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, please. If it's no trouble.”

“No miss. No trouble at all.”

The angel's body softens with Mary's confident grin and assured response. Very obvious Seraphina desires peace and approval, even from our employees.

With a shy glance toward me, her gaze drifts to my shoulder. “You have a beautiful home. I bet it was filled with so much laughter and fun when Balthazar and his brother were growing up.”

On the surface her comment seems benign, yet I sense the deeper meaning.

From what my son tells me she still suffers from the loss of her brother, the lack of a real family, the abuse of her foster parents. Their residency in our dungeon is a gift she'll never know about that we give her just the same.

I chuckle for her benefit. “For the most part yes. Two boys raised the exact same way but so different from each other. Melchior is always the wild one, stirring up trouble with his boredom. Balthazar is always the intense one, focused on his goals.”

“Yeah, my brother’s life mission is to aggravate the hell out of me.”

Proud of my son, I still take the opportunity to tease him. “He just wanted you to have some fun. But you’ve been resistant about that...” I wink at Seraphina. “...until now.”

She jams her little fists on her hips and whips her head toward Balthazar. “You told me in your room that you used your balcony to sneak out!”

He taps his finger on her plump pink lips. “Shhh, angel. Dad doesn’t know about that. He thinks I was always the good one.”

After she realizes he’s joking with her, she giggles bubbly and joyous. Once again enticing me. I roll my eyes at him.

“I never thought that.”

When she laughs harder and reaches over to pat my leg, I almost come unglued. I want to haul her onto my lap and never let her go.

Balthazar shifts in his seat as uncomfortable as I am. I know he wants to strip her and fuck her too.

My cock is swelling in my pants for my little one. “But you’re the only girl he’s ever brought home, and I definitely think that’s a good thing.”

A raging blush blooms on her cheeks, and I get a timid nod before she focuses on her slight hand engulfed by my son’s on her lap.

Mary returns, beelining straight to Seraphina. “Here you are Miss Snow.”

With trembling hands, she accepts the glass. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

The smile on the housekeeper’s face remains as she swivels to me. I can tell she approves of our girl too. “I’ll let you know when dinner is ready, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Seraphina takes a long drink—too long in my opinion. She’s still nervous, and I don’t like her anxiety. Balthazar doesn’t either. He wraps his arm around her, tucking her close, and kisses her temple.

Rather than jealous, I feel relief he’s able to relax her. If he didn’t, I would.

Luckily, it hasn’t come to that since I don’t want to steal her. I just want to share her.

Share.

Something we’ve done a few times before. But not like this. Not with a woman like her.

The past has been fun yet impersonal. Single evenings of filthy sex with all parties agreeable our time together is temporary.

The future... I glance at her whispering up to my son as he seizes the drink from her hand and sets the glass on the table. The future is going to be her as the center of our world.

Convincing both of them will be a challenge. But I'm up for it. Now that's my tunnel vision going forward.

I need her too.

I want her too.

I will have her too.



CHAPTER 24

Seraphina

When my brother picked me up from my foster parents' house—for what I thought would be the last time—I remember the overwhelming sensation of being so ecstatic that I couldn't rationalize the surreal emotions of relief and anticipation to be living with him and leaving the people who were so cruel to us.

Being with Balthazar and his dad feels the same way. Together, sitting here in this cozy room with the wine and the food and the roaring fire, they give me a sense of home and comfort that makes me unable to stop smiling.

Gaspar probably thinks I'm drunk or nuts or both. He watches me a lot. Every time I glance in his direction, he's looking at me. With searing green eyes that don't miss a thing, he seems as if he can see right to my soul.

He looks so much like Balthazar. They're both big men with broad chests and thick legs, obviously powerful and strong. Although Gaspar's hair is white rather than black like his son's, and he has a slight beard while Balthazar keeps clean shaven.

Their personalities are comparable too, confident and commanding. I feel like I'd be unable to say *no* to anything they ask of me. Which might be weird, for me to want to please the man who Balthazar says is my future father-in-law, but I can't deny the truth.

Gaspar just has that dominant vibe that makes me think no one ever questions or denies him. Maybe that's why I called him *Daddy* when I met him.

I don't think I could be more embarrassed than when the name slipped out. When he said he liked it, peace settled over me with his approval and encouragement. I know I can be a good daughter-in-law for him.

Snuggled in next to Balthazar with Gaspar a few feet across from me, I'm relaxed and content chatting with them about everything and nothing really.

"Miss Snow?"

Hesitation sounds in the housekeeper's tone, and shame springs inside of me. I jump up, embarrassed from lounging around while she works hard. "Yes, ma'am?"

She glances toward Gaspar. "Excuse me sir, but her phone keeps going off from the closet where I stored her coat and bag. I thought it might be something important."

The poor woman is trying to cook dinner for all of us, and my cell is probably annoying her. "I'm so sorry!"

Although I don't want to be rude and leave my hosts, I want to fix the problem I've caused unintentionally. I look to Balthazar for direction of how to proceed.

"Go ahead angel and get your phone. It's okay."

Gaspar nods his agreement too. "We'll wait here for you."

Relief eases some of my guilt, and I follow Mary out of the den. "I'm really sorry it bothered you. I have no idea who it could be."

She moves fast, and I hurry to keep up.

"It's okay. I just wanted you to know in case it's an emergency but hopefully it's not."

I hope not either.

We stop in front of a door tucked in the hallway behind the winding staircase, and she reaches in to grab my things. "It's in my pocket."

She hands me my jacket, smiles, and strides away, giving me privacy. I really like her a lot.

She's kind yet efficient, and I know she runs their household well for them to trust her so much.

The screen shows twelve missed calls from Bree. I tap the most recent one and try to calm my racing heart.

"Why didn't you answer my calls?"

Fear shouts through the speaker. "I couldn't hear my phone where we were sitting. What's wrong?"

"Are you okay?"

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you’re with him and didn’t answer your phone!”

The implication hurts a little. She doesn’t need to fret when I’m with Balthazar. No one protects me better than he does. “I’m fine. We’re in the den eating appetizers with his father. It’s very nice and safe, I promise.”

A huff turns into a sigh. “Okay. I’m sorry. I just wanted to say happy Thanksgiving and make sure you were doing okay without us. I guess I got a little carried away. I worry about you.”

“I know but you don’t have to. I’m fine and having fun.”

“Good.”

Hesitation still streaks her enthusiasm.

“What’s his father like?”

Sexy.

Oh my god. Where did that come from? I curl my free hand around one of the thin black posts in the stair railing. What is the matter with me? “He’s great. He’s made me feel very welcome.”

“Is he controlling like Balthazar?”

Alex’s muffled voice comes through too. I can’t understand what he says but the admonishment is clear.

“Sorry! I shouldn’t have said that. How’s the food?”

“Really good. Their housekeeper is an excellent cook.”

“So I don’t have to worry about you starving.”

Much calmer now, she even laughs. Although I’m feeling troubled from my thoughts surrounding his father. I shake my head. “No, not at all. I will be stuffed for the entire weekend if the dinner is as good as the hors d’oeuvres.”

“Well, we’ll be home on Monday, so you have to come over for supper, like usual. He can’t keep you away from us.”

And, the apprehension returns. She sounds as possessive as Balthazar. “He won’t, I swear. I’ll be there, and I can’t wait to hear all about your trip.”

“Same. I want to hear every detail of your time with him.”

Not every detail or she’ll flip out. But I’m more than happy to share the ones she can tolerate, reducing her concern over our relationship with how good he is to me. How much he spoils me. How well he treats me. “Okay. I love you sis and see you soon.”

“I love you too. Alex sends his love too. And don’t forget about waiting until you’re married!”

Before I can respond to her inappropriate reminder, she clicks off. I can’t

help but laugh. I know I'm falling in love with Balthazar, and he plans to propose, but we're a long way from marriage.



Gaspar

“I’m supposed to be marrying her.”

Balthazar pours us both another whiskey, grumbling at me after my confession that I want to share Seraphina.

Neither of us needs more alcohol but we wordlessly agree we’re guzzling some anyway. He glances at me over his shoulder at the wet bar.

“She’s supposed to be the one.”

Obviously, she is. “I know.”

“Then why are you fucking it up? Is this a mid-life crisis or something?”

“I don’t know what the fuck it is.”

His laugh is bitter and frustrated as he hands me my drink. I nod to him and swallow down the entirety before my gaze hits the doorway to the hallway where, after eavesdropping via the cameras, we figured out our girl has gone to talk to her friend Bree.

I’m sure the young woman called under the guise of wishing her a happy holiday or something similar. But we all know that’s an excuse—she’s just checking on Seraphina.

Which is fine because her absence gives us time to talk albeit not very long. Luckily, we’re men of few words.

I set down my glass carefully and choose my words even more so. “Listen. I’ve only felt this way about one other woman. I know it’s fucked up but that doesn’t change it.”

The glare he gives me would wither any other man.

“I’ve known her a month. You’ve known her a few hours. How the fuck can you think you want her?”

I allow his impudence because of the situation. Only because of the situation. “When did you know?”

“Fuck!” He slams his booze against the counter and squeezes his eyes

shut, huffing out an aggravated breath. “When I met her.”

I knew it. “There’s something about her, son. Something special. I sensed it when you talked to me about her in my office and showed me her picture. Then that phone call. Now, after spending time with her, I just can’t deny it.”

“She’s supposed to be my wife, have your grandkids. That’s the reason you and London set all this up. Now you’re willing to risk fucking it up because you want to fuck her.”

His voice is low and hard. I respond in kind. “Do not disrespect her or me that way. It’s more than that and you know it. I’m not trying to fuck up anything. But I can’t ignore it either.”

I swear he bares his teeth at me, the beast inside of him fighting for what he thinks is only his. “So we share her? We fucking share sweet, innocent Seraphina?”

No reason to pretend now like we have any morals when we never have before. “Yes.”

He shakes his head. “What if she says *no*?”

I don’t provide an answer. One isn’t needed. We both know the truth.

Our girl will do anything we ask of her.

My cock hardens from that thought. Balthazar snarls and grabs a fresh tumbler, ignoring the shards of his shattered one.

“This will never work.”

“Am I interrupting?”

We both spin toward Seraphina’s serene voice from the hallway. Drowsy from turkey and wine and our undivided attention from the past three hours, she smiles first at him and then at me.

Balthazar shakes his head. “No angel. Never.”

He’s right. She’s always welcome. “But he does need to get you home to get some sleep. I’m going to pick you up in the morning and take you to a Christmas tree farm so we can cut down some trees for this place.”

All of her haze evaporates.

“Really?”

“Have you ever been before?”

Tears that I can see from across the room glisten in her eyes as she shakes her head. Too overcome to speak, she curls in her lips. If she cries, I really will lose my shit. I stride to her. “Then I’m happy to give you your first time.”

Once she’s in reach, I drag her to me and swallow her in an embrace.

“Thank you.”

The muffled whisper against my chest releases any remaining doubt regarding our new arrangement. “Thank you *what?*”

She looks up, her chin resting against my shirt. Long hair frames her flushed perfect angelic face.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

I tip down and kiss her forehead. “You’re welcome, little one. I’ll see you at nine.”

I guide her over to Balthazar who accepts her hungrily against his own chest. I meet his gaze above her head. “It’ll work just like that.”

His frustrated silence is better than an argument. I step out of their path and watch as he leads her away. Confident in the fact that I’ll see her again in twelve hours, I find myself smiling too.



CHAPTER 25

Gaspar

My cock strains against my zipper as I park in front of her building. Both of us are excited to be back in her vicinity.

I thought jacking off last night and again this morning would be sufficient in keeping him in check. I thought wrong.

I hustle up the steps and down the hall to her apartment. The fastest I've moved in a long time thanks to my little one.

My fist pounds on her door harder than I planned. I have to stop myself from keying in the code my son gave me and adding my thumb print. She needs to know I have access first, so I don't scare her.

All I see is her blazing smile when she opens up. Another reason I'm thrilled I turned over the business to Balthazar. Otherwise, I'd never get to spend the day with our girl.

"Good morning!"

She vibrates with energy and joy, sweeping back to let me enter. Thank fuck because all I want is to get closer to her. "Good morning. Are you ready to go?"

With a bubbly giggle, she nods. "I hardly slept all night I was so excited. Balthazar kept telling me to settle down and go to sleep."

"Good. I'm glad he takes care of you."

The smile slides off her face in an instant and her eyes widen in horror. "I'm sorry. You probably didn't need to know that."

Adorable. I caress over her blushing cheek. "It's okay. I know what goes

on between a man and woman in bed.”

Her deep breath sure as hell doesn't calm my racing pulse from touching her again. I force my arm down before I go too far. “Do you want to get some breakfast on the way? Have you eaten yet?”

“I had some cereal already, but I can keep you company while you eat. I don't mind.”

Obviously, she doesn't. No woman is as easy going as her. “Then let me add myself to the lock and we'll get going.”

A frown lines her forehead that I hope stems from confusion rather than alarm.

“You want in my apartment?”

I want in your entire life. “Just to keep you safe. I'm as protective of you as Balthazar. We're both going to take care of you.”

Her grin is back as her head bobs. “Oh yes, I'd like that.”

I give her a pointed look, so she knows what I want to hear.

“Daddy.”

The whisper gets to me, and I lean close to give her a quick kiss on her forehead. This time, I'm the one breathing deep, absorbing her sweet scent. Incredible.

Intense eyes watch as I tap the numbers and press my print onto the screen. With a quick flicker of blue lights, I'm all set. “Now I can get to you anytime you need me.”

“That makes me feel very safe. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

I grab her coat draped on the arm of the sofa. The cheap fabric seems flimsy. “Is this the heaviest jacket you've got?”

She rubs the material between her slender fingers. “I picked this one because it has Christmas trees on it, but I can get a different one if you want.”

“I do. We're going to be outside for a while, and I don't want you to get cold.”

Rather than wilting under my dominance, she blossoms from my concern. “Okay, I'll be right back.”

Her little boots scurry to the hallway closet, and she draws out a thick, puffy purple coat.

“My friend gave this to me when she got a new one. It's a little too big but it's really warm.” She slips her arms through the sleeves and looks up to me. “Is it okay?”

Giving her my approval would be easier if I was stripping her down rather than bundling her up. I grab the black tab and glide her zipper. “It’s perfect but we need to get you one that fits.”

A frown mars her exquisite face, and she shakes her head.

“That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

God help me. “But *I* mind.”

The grin returns along with an expression of contentment that I care so much.

“Now I know where Balthazar gets his overprotectiveness from.”

Is that kind of sick? Yes.

Do I care? No.

I don’t give a damn. No one judges me or what’s right for my little one. “Remember what I told you. We’re both going to take care of you from now on.”

Her lips part as if to expand on the conversation. Something flashes on her face I can’t read, and she seems to change her mind. So instead, she slides on her gloves and looks up, waiting for my next direction, which I’m more than happy to give. “Let’s head out.”

I motion for her to go first and hit the light switch and door handle behind her. If she understood this was a date, I’d grab her hand and never let her go. Since we’re easing into the situation, I guide her with my palm on her lower back to my SUV.

When she reaches for the door handle, I wrap my fingers around hers. She vibrates under my touch, confirming she’s impacted too but I don’t call her on the sensation. Our transition requires subtlety. “Doesn’t my son open your door for you?”

Her head bobs with certainty. “Oh yes. Always.”

“Good. Then I’ve taught him well. And I will too.”

Pink that isn’t from the cold tints her face. I resist kissing her and help her climb in. Once she has her seatbelt clicked, I head to my side.

Silent as I buckle up and start the vehicle, she fiddles with the straps on her little white backpack covered in candy canes. Something bothers her and I let her mull over thoughts while I ease into traffic.

“I’m really excited about decorating with you. Thank you for letting me help.”

I glance over at her. She’s beautiful with her bashful smile and flaming cheeks. “So I’m putting you to work and you’re the one telling me *thanks*?”

A cheerful giggle fills the air. “But it’s never work when it’s Christmas.” Only she would think that. “Nothing with you would ever seem like work.”

She squirms from my compliment. The dazzling smile shimmering on her face scorches right to my cock. No one has captured me like she has in a very long time. “It’s about a forty-five-minute drive to the farm, so we’ll stop and get some coffee on the way.”

“Okay, thank you.”

I haven’t even done anything yet, and she’s already thanked me twice. She’s the politest woman I’ve ever met. “Have you thought about what kind of tree you want?”

She turns completely sideways in her seat to face me. I love how attentive and focused she is.

“I want one that smells the strongest. When Balthazar took me to the fair, I bought us some—”

What the fuck? “You spent your money?”

Her body flinches from my harsh tone, and she curls back into herself, turning to face the windshield again. All my hard work to gain her trust ruined by my temper. But she should not be purchasing shit for us.

With her gaze back to her lap, she shuts me out without realizing it. “They were two votives. I wanted to share them.”

Tiny candles probably don’t cost that much. My grip loosens on the steering wheel. My need to look after her is fucking me up.

“Please don’t be mad at Balthazar. It was my idea. I didn’t mean to get him in trouble.”

The anguish in her plea fucks me up more. He loves this girl and would never mistreat her. I need to remember that and not put her on the defense. “He’s not in trouble.”

Soulful eyes meet mine, full of pleading and angst. “Really?”

“I promise. I just...”

Just what? I’m not used to appeasing hurt feelings or explaining myself. I suck in a deep breath. “Don’t spend money on us. We’re the ones who take care of you.”

“But I like taking care of you too.”

Of course, she does, because she has a huge heart that needs to be filled. Which we’re going to do. “I like that as long as it doesn’t cost you any money.”

Another wiggle rolls through her fragile body, which I've figured out is her sign of pleasure. I wonder if she'll shimmy like that when I'm buried balls deep inside her. I sure as hell look forward to finding out.

Her smile remains as we pull into the drive-through of the coffee house. The electronic board lists endless concoctions of drinks. "What would you like?"

"How about a small gingerbread cookie latte?"

Do I really hear her unzipping her wallet? This girl is as stubborn as she is sweet. "I'm buying, little one. Don't argue."

My tone doesn't allow for any. She clutches the fake red leather. "Okay Daddy."

Despite my frustration in failing to prove to her we'll provide for her, my balls pulse from her calling me that. "Now did you say that size because it's all you want or because it's the cheapest?"

No answer except for her tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She doesn't want to lie or earn my ire. I reach over and squeeze her thigh, letting her know her mistake is forgiven. Graceful fingers pat the back of my hand until she yanks her arm away.

I get it. She's confused. For now. She won't be for much longer.

Once we reach the speaker, I order a huge black coffee no frills and her girly drink in a large like she deserves. While we wait our turn up to the window, she yanks out a little note pad and pencil.

"So what size tree were you thinking?"

"I like how organized you are. Now I know why you're so good at your job."

She beams from my praise. The effort to build her up comes so easily. All she needs is genuine encouragement to understand how amazing we think she is.

"Thank you." A flutter of lashes as she blinks in my direction before she turns shy again. "Is that what London said?"

"Yeah, and she's a ballbuster so if she says you're good, then you're good."

"I can tell by the admiration in your voice that you really like her."

If that's not a hint of jealousy I hear, then I'm the lost one. "I do. But in a different way than I like you. She's tough, makes a good boss. You're smart, that makes her an even better boss because you're good with the details."

The breathless wow I hear as she flips the green cover to the clean sheet

below forces me to have to adjust myself. She doesn't notice. Or pretends not to. Either way is fine. We've got plenty of time for her to learn when I need her.

"If it's not too much, how about one in the foyer and one in the den?"

We can do better than that. Especially the more she decorates, the more she'll be at the house. "How about one for every window?"

Her eyes widen as she seems to do a quick calculation of my enormous home.

"That's more than ten trees!"

"Then we better get a lot."

Finally, our turn comes for pick up. We sip our drinks while I navigate the traffic, and she peppers me with questions for her list. All my answers ensure the maximum amount of work and time which equate to maximum amount of *her*.

After forty minutes, I turn into the gravel path. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you'd zip right past the private driveway for employees only. Luckily, since we're inching along, I can stare at her for longer than normal rather than the road.

Her innocent wonder almost breaks my resolve. Huge brown eyes search the farm of rolling fields showcasing the firs, spruces, and scotches as far as you can see. The rows meet in the center where a blazing fire roars and a table loaded with cookies and hot chocolate waits for us.

Tinsel, the caretaker's golden retriever, barks and wags his tail as I park near the small cabin used as the shop. Eager to get to the dog, Seraphina slips out of the vehicle without waiting for me to escort her down.

I hold my reprimand for later when I'm in a punishing mood with her. With the glowing smile on her striking face, I only chuckle as I join her in corralling the lovable beast.

The overgrown puppy jumps again, pawing at her shoulders and licking her face. Dainty fingers ruffle his furry ears while she giggles and tells him how cute he is. The affection encourages him, and he bounds back into her after dropping to his feet, almost slamming her to the ground.

My admonishment to the canine makes his tail droop and her face fall. Once again, I forget her soft heart. But she has to know I'll never let anything hurt her. "He's going to knock you over if he doesn't settle down."

She gives me an understanding nod, but her expression remains mournful. Nicholas strides forward. "It's good to see you Mr. Wiseman."

I accept his outstretched hand. “You too. This is Seraphina.”

Her relationship to me is none of his concern, except that she’s important. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be out here spending the day with her.

Smart enough not to ask last night when I told him I was bringing a guest or this morning now that I’m here with a girl young enough to be my daughter, he remains impassive. All he knows is she’s my guest and should be treated like a queen.

“Pleasure to meet you Seraphina.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

When her little mitten slips between his fingers, I experience a rage I haven’t felt in years. No man is more loyal to me than him, and he’s been nothing but professional since we pulled up. Yet the thought of him touching her infuriates me.

Maybe he can sense my unease because when I go to yank her back, he releases her and points to Joseph astride the tractor.

“He’s ready to take you out sir whenever you’re ready.”

All of the gloom from me rebuking Tinsel evaporates as she studies the wagon hitched behind him.

“We get to ride on that?”

“It’s a long walk, especially for ten trees.”

Her head bobs furiously. I find myself laughing again as I head to the bin with blankets and grab her one. When I turn around, she’s already scrambling up the metal steps to one of the wooden benches. I climb up too and wrap the cover around her body before I sit next to her.

She frowns at me from my efforts. “Thank you. But what about you?”

“Don’t worry. Once I start sawing, I’ll be plenty warm.”

Doubt furrows her brow although I don’t explain further. My word is final with my little one.

Once we’re settled, Joseph carries us out with us bumping and jostling from the ruts in the road.

“I can’t believe no one else is out here. It’s the perfect day.”

“I shut it down for you.”

Her mouth falls open. “You did?”

Before she can bluster on about the closure being unnecessary, I nod. “I don’t like the crowds. Besides, most of our tree money comes from our commercial farms in Oregon, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Opening up here later than normal won’t hurt anything.”

Another reason I brought her in the back road. If she saw the customers being turned away at the main entrance she would have balked from their disappointment. They can get over it. All I care about is making her happy. Making her mine.

“I had no idea you were farmers too.”

“Only Christmas trees. I’m not milking cows or anything like that.”

My joke works, and she giggles from the image. Glad the concern is behind us, I lean on the sideboard, enjoying the cold and quiet air. There’s a peace out here I’ve missed the past thirty years stuck in an office all day and often half the night.

The ding from her phone kills the reverie, and I growl from the interruption to our day. She digs out the cell and smiles after swiping the screen.

“Balthazar wants to know if I’m having fun.”

“Are you?”

The hoarseness of my voice surprises me. If she says anything but yes, I’ll up the ante to make her happy.

An instant nod and gushing smile match her words. “Between the two of you, I’m having more fun than I’ve ever thought possible.”

Perfect. “Then let him know how happy we’re *both* making you.”

Her thumbs fly over the glass sending him the message. That I hope he gets the underlying significance just as much.

We roll to a stop. Seraphina jumps up, eager and enthusiastic. I climb down first and offer my hand. Joseph meets us at the back, handing over a razor-sharp silver saw.

He motions to the back of the tractor. “Unless you’d like a chain saw sir.”

Too dangerous for our girl. Plus, I look forward to the physical effort. “No, this is fine.”

He steps back, holding up work gloves for me that have actually seen years of work. “When you’re ready for me, just let me know.”

We leave him waiting on the road and walk down the first row. She’s adorable scanning the evergreens so intently. “You said you want the most fragrant tree, and these balsams are the best choice.”

She grabs the tip of a branch and brings the limb to her nose. The way her eyes drift shut when she breathes in the pine scent makes me want to give her everything her gentle heart desires. Such a simple gesture that gives her—and me—pleasure. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

Despite the chill, my blood races hot in my veins from her breathlessness. “Then start picking.”

With my command, she returns to her search. Her head falls back to let her see the top of a sixteen-footer. The sun catches on her long hair peeking out from the hood of her oversized shiny coat, and she genuinely looks like an angel shimmering in the rays.

She circles around the expansive base, fluffing through the boughs to ensure no bare spots, I would assume. “What do you think?”

“This one is for the foyer. It’s majestic and everyone will feel Christmasy as soon as they walk in the house.”

The unbridled sincerity in her comment stirs something in me, and I decide to host a party just so she can experience people enjoying her tree. “Then let’s cut it down.”

Dropping to my knees, I explain the process, chopping as close to the ground as possible and using short quick strokes so the saw doesn’t get hung up. “Grab near the top and tug slightly in the direction it’s falling. That helps the blades go through easier and avoids ripping the bark. We want to make sure it re-sprouts.”

As obedient as expected, her red gloves wind between branches and curl around the trunk at her eye level. Her head bobs earnestly as she absorbs everything I’m explaining to her.

Reluctant to lose sight of her magnificent face, I force myself to drop to my stomach and get to work. The exertion feels good, way better than the monotony of the gym and after a few minutes the tree leans into her palm. “You got it up there? It’s coming down in a second.”

“Yes! I’m ready.”

Another chuckle rattles my chest from her solemnity. I’ve laughed more today with his girl than I have in the past year. No one is as serious about their duty as she is.

A crack from the final force snaps in the still air, and she catches the weight with both hands. I should hustle like a gentleman to take the burden from her. But the pure ecstasy in her expression from holding up her first real Christmas tree all by herself slows my steps. We both absorb the perfect moment. Her gorgeous chocolate eyes catch mine, and she grins at me like no one ever has. “Nice job.”

Seemingly impossible, yet her smile glows brighter from my praise. I

help her lay the fir down and grab the newly exposed end. “I’ll haul this one to the wagon and then you can pick out another.”

She tries to help, grabbing onto the wood behind my hand. With our size difference and the bulk of the trunk, she can’t manage anything but sloping forward and bumping into my arm. “I’ve got it little one.”

Disappointment mars her joy but she minds me, releasing the base and standing straight again. I need her excitement back and point to a small scotch pine on the edge of a rebuilding field. Too small for most people, the miniature would be perfect for my idea. “What do you think about that one for my office?”

Her normal jubilant cadence returns, and she bubbles with enthusiasm. “It’s just the right size not to take up too much room but still be festive.”

And, gives reason for her to be in my space that much more. “That’s what I was thinking too. My hands will be full so you’ll have to drag it back.”

The possibility of a job for her petite stature eliminates her earlier frustration, and she practically floats beside me as we make our way to the modest tree.

Of course, I could have Joseph bring them both out for us. Hauling them ourselves gives us more time together without anyone else’s interference.

Once the tree’s on the ground, she launches herself on the trunk, almost as if ensuring I don’t reach for the end myself. My laughter makes her giggle too and she goes all in, keeping up with my long strides as best she can.

As soon as we’re in sight of the wagon, Joseph hops up and hustles toward us. “Need help, miss?”

“No, thank you. I’ve got it.”

His gaze jumps to me, ensuring I approve of her struggling. I dip my head, and he steps back with his palms up. Not sure if he’s acquiescing to me or to her, I focus on her using all of her tiny yet ferocious might to push the pine onto the floorboard.

Triumphant after she shoves the tree far enough it doesn’t dangle over the side, she spins around and grabs for the bigger one. We hoist it up together ignoring my foreman who seems shocked we’re doing all the work.

Who am I to stop her? The determination impresses the hell out of me. Despite how petite she is, Seraphina wants to be an independent woman who’s not afraid of challenges.

Hopefully that includes a relationship with us.

She swipes her hands back and forth against one another, attempting to

brush away the sticky needles. I'll have to get her a new pair of gloves since they'll be ruined by the end of the day from the sap.

"Okay, where to now?"

Her eagerness pleases me too. "Back to the fields."

With my directive, she starts walking, a definite bounce in her step. Although this isn't that physically taxing compared to other laborious jobs, she probably isn't used to manual work since she's in an office all day. I like that she jumps right in and helps with the tasks.

I nod to Joseph and stride toward her, catching up in a few paces with her short legs. I follow her lead, weeding through the rows. Her focus remains on her mission, and she misses a stump half hidden in crumbling leaves, and stumbles in the grass. I grab her before she falls. "You okay little one?"

Scarlet creeps up her cheeks and down her willowy throat. "Yes, thank you."

Embarrassed from tripping, she looks everywhere but at me. I let it go but not her. The falter provides the perfect opportunity to hold her hand as we wind through the inventory.

After I finish each cut, I grab her again. I find her looking at our entwined fingers a few times, but she never balks at my touch.

The hours pass by too quickly, and I'm disappointed when we're on the search for the final balsam. I have to find a way to keep her out here—with me—longer. "Do you want to break for some hot chocolate?"

"Sure!"

Stupid of me to even ask. Already knew the answer.

We make our way to the fire. I'm leading her but I swear she's pulling me along from her anticipation.

She beelines to the urn and flips the lever to fill two cups while I grab her a sugar cookie loaded with red and green sprinkles.

Tinsel seems to have forgotten the shame from my earlier reprimand and bounds to us. Syncopated fur to jeans with Seraphina as she walks to one of the benches, the dog couldn't be a better escort. Amused and carefree, she giggles as she sits, carefully balancing the mugs so they don't spill.

I drop down next to her, accepting a cup she holds out to me, exchanging cocoa for her cookie. As our drinks cool, she breaks off pieces of the treat and feeds them to the pup. He gobbles the bites without tasting them, licking her sticky fingertips in gratitude.

"I'm having the best time. Thank you for bringing me."

“You’re welcome. I am too.”

Not a lie. Sometimes simple pleasures are the best ones, especially with a girl like her who appreciates them as well.

“When your boys were little did you and your wife bring them here?”

The stab of pain in my chest every time I think of Kiersten never seems to lessen. “Yeah, we did. Balthazar was earnest like you, mulling over several options before deciding. Melchior would run around, going along with whatever we chose. Kiersten was happy just to be out of the house. She was a nature lover and sometimes she would just look up, face to the sun, and breathe deep.”

Seraphina’s bittersweet smile confirms she understands the loss. She grabs my hand and squeezes tight. “She sounds amazing. I would’ve loved to have met her.”

“After she passed, people meant well and said she would want me to move on, to be happy. I didn’t see it for a long time. I was depressed more than I care to admit. I realize now that morphed into loneliness, and I didn’t recognize the difference. But now, I’m not lonely anymore.”

I squeeze her hand back. Her mouth opens and closes but she can’t seem to form the words she wants to say. The good person inside of her wants to deny the truth of the meaning behind my admission. I let the implication settle between us while she pets Tinsel.

“My brother worked hard to take care of me the best he could. He was only a kid too, really. I think that’s why I’ve been so focused on school and then my career because I want to make sure that everything he did for me isn’t wasted.”

I like that she wants to deepen the connection between us by sharing her heartbreak too. “I know he would be proud of you.”

Maybe it’s the open air or the mutual grief or just the bond between us but I don’t think either of us expected a conversation this deep in the middle of our hunt. I don’t mind though. I like getting to know her better beyond what London and Balthazar told me.

“He would be happy that I’m having fun today. He always said I missed out on so much. I hated that he felt guilty since none of it was his fault.”

All the money and power in the world, and I couldn’t save Kiersten from that damn disease. I know exactly why he beat himself up. “That’s what you do when you love someone.”

She scooches closer. Her slender leg shoves against my thick thigh as she

leans her head on my arm, not quite able to reach my shoulder. Even without words she comforts me.

“I think so too.”

Absorbing her sweetness, I mimic my late wife and lift my head to the sun. I’m not sure if this is the kind of moving on people meant, but the time is right. The woman is right, even if the scenario is seen as wrong.

I’m ready for her.

I hope she’s ready for us.

“Finish your drink, little one, and then we’ll get our last tree.”

Calm and seemingly comfortable with me again, Seraphina lifts up from my bicep with a soft smile on her stunning face. She takes a last few sips of her cocoa and giggles from my still full mug. I shrug. “I’m not much for hot chocolate.”

“I’m sorry! I should have asked first. I can drink it.”

She takes a huge gulp before I can wrap my fingers around her wrist. “Not necessary.”

“But I don’t want to be wasteful.”

A dollar at most. “It’s fine. Just set it in the bin and we’ll head out.”

The deep frown confirms she disagrees with my decision. But she obeys my mandate and puts the half-full cup in the dirty-dish container for washing. Once she’s by my side again where she belongs, I clutch her hand and lead her back to the field. “Let’s walk this time.”

I feel her soften. She likes the closeness, always starving for affection. I like giving her what she needs. “Which one do we have left?”

She drops my hand to dig in her pocket for her little notebook. I find myself grinning again as she flips the cover and scans down the list. Every item is crossed off but one. “The top of the stairs.”

As soon as she stuffs the pad back inside, I grab her fingers again. I’m not letting her go that easily.

We trudge in comfortable silence until she points to a narrow but full tree. “What about that one? It’s skinny enough to get around easily.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Her gaze jumps to mine. “Can I do it?”

No way this little thing can level a trunk this thick. Also, no way I can deny her. “We’ll do it together.”

“Okay!”

Frantic with excitement, she falls to her knees and holds out her hand.

The perfect height for her mouth on my dick.

I drop next to her and palm her back to put her on her hands as well. Mimicking her, I press my body to hers and turn the blade to the wood. “Grab here and then we’ll saw.”

Silky hair tickles my cheek, and her sugary scent floods my senses as we rock back and forth. Our bodies mold together in a fierce rhythm, and I grab the back of her neck to keep her close. My cock pulses in my jeans from the thought of how easy it would be to flip her on her back and fuck her out here in the wilderness.

A groan escapes my mouth from the image, and I feel her stiffen against me. I break through the bark, but her voice is what cracks.

“No Daddy. I can’t.”



CHAPTER 26

Seraphina

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

I crawl out from under Gaspar and take a few breaths. The ache in my stomach can't compare to even the pain inflicted by Melissa and Craig.

I am a horrible, horrible person.

Last night, I thought I was falling in love with Balthazar. Which was amazing and terrifying and wonderful.

Now, less than one day later, I have the same feelings for his dad.

A man who might be my father-in-law.

A man who is thirty years older than me.

A man who is spending time with his son's girlfriend so she's not alone.

And I ruin everything by having a crush on him.

He stares at me. Dark eyes pierce me with his worry.

"Are you okay, little one?"

When he calls me that I feel like jumping into his arms. All I can do is cry.

And leave.

"I don't feel well."

Scrambling to my feet, I start running toward the campfire. I have to get away from him and my shame. How can I be attracted to two men at the same time? Especially father and son. The thought is too awful to contemplate.

An old stump catches my boot, and I stumble again, only to be caught before I hit the ground. Saved once again by Gaspar, he sheathes me to his

body and tucks his head into my neck.

“Stop. It’s okay.”

It’s not okay.

Nothing is okay.

None of this is okay.

I’m shaking in his embrace and want to sink into his hold. But that’s unbelievably wrong.

He would be so disgusted if he knew the truth. “I’m sorry. I know I’m ruining this amazing day you planned for me. But I need to go home.”

My voice catches from the guilt. He probably has so many other more important things to do, and he takes me out to be nice. Then I wreck everything, acting like a silly schoolgirl infatuated with an older man.

“You’re not ruining anything. If you want to go home, we can go home.”

He’s so sweet. Most men would be beyond furious that I’m acting like a lunatic and unappreciative of everything he’s done for me.

Almost as if he thinks I’m going to run again, he slowly releases me, shifting me to his side and keeping me close as we walk back to his SUV.

Nicholas hops up from his rocker on the porch of the little cottage and starts ramming his hands into his gloves until Gaspar stops him. “We’re heading out.”

If he’s shocked, he hides his surprise well. He simply nods before turning around and going inside the building.

We’re alone again, which I’m not sure is good or bad. I’m afraid my guilt is written all over my face, and I don’t want anyone to see my shame.

But I also don’t know if I can handle Gaspar being so caring to me since he thinks I’m sick.

Silent as he helps me up inside the passenger seat, he doesn’t close the door until my seatbelt is buckled. Once the engine rumbles to life, we bump and bounce over the gravel road until we’re back to the highway.

He grips the steering wheel hard and his gaze bores into the windshield, too disgusted with me to look in my direction.

I’m just as disgusted with myself.

I really have spoiled everything.



Balthazar

Despite the ruckus in the conference room as the team yells out updates, the chime of a message rings through the commotion. I swipe the cell off the table and scan the text.

Dad: *Seraphina's upset. Said she's sick but it's our situation. We're heading to her apartment.*

God damn it. I knew my father would fuck up everything with Seraphina. I jump to my feet and storm to my office. Some of the voices quiet. They're as surprised as I am that I'm leaving in the middle of our kickoff to the season.

Hell, I'm shocked too. But the thought hits me hard. None of that means shit if I lose her.

I tap her name and jam the phone to my ear. One ring and then voice mail. Fuck!

Me: *Are you okay angel? What's going on?*

Nothing.

My secretary stares at me as I jet past her desk. "Is everything all right Mr. Wiseman?"

No. Everything is fucking not all right. "If there's an emergency, have Ezekial call me."

I don't wait for a response. Bypassing my private elevator, I sprint down the steps to the parking lot. I'm in my car and on the street in less than two minutes with twenty more needed to get to her.

I love my Dad, but if he gets in my way of making Seraphina mine, this sharing bullshit ends. I will not lose her because of him.

Despite the commute, I still beat them to her place. I let myself in and feel the emptiness without her here.

Not just the apartment but myself. Incapable of comprehending, I don't understand how she's ingrained herself in my life so quickly and so deeply.

Minutes drag like hours until her door finally opens. My angel looks like she's in shock with a drawn expression and pale skin. My father looks like he's back to his old self again, buzzing with an energy he lost three years ago.

I realize he's not letting this go. Not letting *her* go.

The fight is on to keep either of us from losing her.

Especially when her little palms flip up as I approach her. "Don't deny me, angel."

In submission, she lowers her arms so her hands are at her waist, yet they remain upright in protective mode.

Which fucking kills me that she thinks she needs to protect herself from me.

"I...I just want to lie down." Her arms wrap around herself, creating even more of a barrier. "By myself. I'd like to be by myself please."

A growl rumbles in my father's chest. "No."

And he accuses me of being too impulsive. We need finesse in this situation. "What he means is we can give you some space, but you have to tell us what's wrong first."

No way in a million years am I leaving. Hopefully, the appearance of a compromise will appease her. I force calmness to my tone. "We need to know why you're upset."

She clenches her eyes shut. "It's nothing. I just don't feel well."

Lie. I hate to force her hand, but I have no choice. "Then I'll take you to the doctor."

Her eyes blow wide, and she shakes her head frantically, not wanting to inconvenience anyone. "It's not that kind of sickness."

"Then what kind is it? I promised you I would always take care of you, and I mean it. You need to tell me."

When her body curls into herself and she steps back hitting the wall behind her, I'm afraid she's going to collapse. "Please angel."

"It's too embarrassing. I can't say it...."

Panic engulfs her and she bypasses me, scurrying to the kitchen around the passthrough. Despite every instinct to grab her, I let her go, trying not to spook her.

She slowly takes off her coat and hangs it on a chair. Trembling hands wrap the material around the back and squeeze hard as she stares at the purple fabric.

I keep my voice level. "Try. I'm in no hurry. I'm not going anywhere."

Absolute truth—I'm not leaving. So she can take all the time she needs to explain.

“When I met you, I...I felt the connection immediately. Like nothing I'd ever experienced before with any man.”

The beast inside likes this. A lot.

“I told myself, *take your time and be cautious, but he could be the one.*”

Drawn to her like a magnet, I stride to her, trapping her with my palms on her cheeks. “I am.”

“But...”

The raspy pitch kills me. I can't take her tears. “But what?”

“When I met you.” She glances at my father with so much despair. “I had that same feeling. It's wrong and I'm horrible and I'm so, so sorry. I don't understand it.”

Neither do I. I have no choice but to tell her the truth. “It's okay. You're not horrible. We feel the same way about you.”

Her face pinches. “What?”

Confusion thumps in her voice. Hell, I get it. I feel a similar bewilderment. “The same thing happened to us. Both of us—when we met you—we immediately knew you are who we want.”

My dad can't stay back either. He joins us in the tiny room.

“He's right, little one. I never expected to feel this way either. But I can't deny it. I do.”

The relief I expect in her expression doesn't come. Instead, she attempts to wriggle out of my grasp. She needs some convincing.

“It's disgusting. What kind of woman has a relationship with a man *and* his father?”

“A sweet, beautiful woman who has a heart big enough to love both of us.”

“That sounds nice but it's not. It's...it's...sick.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone!” She grimaces, and I fear she's going to vomit. “I mean what would London think? Or Bree and Alex? Or my brother? Oh my god!”

With all her minute strength, she wrenches away from me and races to the sink, heaving as she loses the battle with her stomach. Dark streams hit the cheap stainless steel. Fuck!

I rub her back as Dad clumsily yanks her hair out of the way.

Furious at him as well as myself, I want to shove him. Instead, I yell at

him. “What the fuck did you give her?”

His rage burns just as hot as he glares at me. “Hot chocolate. She drank it at the tree farm.”

For whatever reason, she starts crying, sobbing and gagging while we’re helpless.

Fucking helpless to soothe the woman we both want. Who needs to be our focus—not arguing with each other.

I circle my hand round and round on her snowman sweatshirt. “I’m sorry angel. We never meant to upset you.”

My father nods. “He’s right. It kills us to hurt you.”

Her belly must be empty because the retching stops, and she sniffs a few times. “What do you need?”

“I want to rinse my mouth.”

“Done.”

I scoop her up and carry her to the bathroom, setting her on her feet in front of the vanity. I can’t let her go and stand behind her while she brushes her teeth and gargles with mouthwash.

Not once does she look at me in the mirror. Her focus remains on her actions until she’s finished. I slide my hand to her chin and lift her head. She squeezes her eyes shut, unwilling to face me.

“I can’t do what you want. I’m sorry.”

Damn. We’re the ones breaking her, and she’s the one apologizing. “It’s too much too fast. I know that.”

She nods. Grateful she’s giving me some hope, I continue. “Can I ask you to do one thing?”

Finally, her bloodshot eyes open from my request. “What?”

“Don’t make up your mind yet. Just think about it. We both care about you. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

I lose her gaze but she’s pondering what I said. Thank fuck she’s not shut down completely.

“Okay, I’ll think about it. But I’d like to be alone for a little bit. I’m exhausted and want to sleep.”

Emotions have taken their toll on her and despite every fiber of my being wanting to say no, I know if we stay here, she’ll be on edge the entire time. She needs a respite from the intensity. “Okay. We’ll go for a little bit. I’ll bring you back dinner.”

“Thank you.”

I kiss the top of her head and after a long embrace, I step back. Of course, my Dad steps in the space between us.

“Get some rest little one. We’ll figure this out. I swear to God, we’ll make you happy if you let us.”

He gently turns her around and kisses her forehead. When she doesn’t respond, he sighs and follows me out to the front door. It’s going to be a long afternoon.



CHAPTER 27

Seraphina

As soon as the front door slams shut, I sag against the vanity. The marble is cold under my palms, and I realize how hot I am despite my chills.

I'm not ill but I feel like it. My body nor my mind can handle their crazy idea.

We cannot be in a relationship all together. That's not how love works. Is it?

I trod to my bedroom and tug off my boots. All I want to do is crawl into bed.

The bed Balthazar bought me.

The bed Balthazar made love to me.

The bed where Balthazar may have put his baby into me.

The thought swirls emotions I can't handle. But there's nowhere else to go.

His sofa.

His kitchen table and chairs.

I have no choice but to climb on the mattress and snuggle in. He's not a liar. All he's done since I've met him is take care of me.

Filling my fridge.

Paying my rent.

Driving me to work.

An endless list of how much he spoils me that I know is a million times more than most boyfriends do for their girlfriends, regardless of how much

they love them.

Gaspar too. Even though I've known him a much shorter time, he's protective of me too. In a single day, with the coffee and my coat and the trip to his farm, he made sure I was full, warm, and having fun while also teaching me about growing the trees.

He's a good man.

They're both good men.

But loving two men is wrong.

I jump up and race to the kitchen, fishing my phone out of my pocket.

Me: I'm sorry but there's nothing to think about. I can't do this with either of you. Please don't hate me.

Instead of sending, I consider the reaction. Once Balthazar receives the message, he'll come here and try to convince me again, so I need to be gone.

I race back to the bedroom and stuff a bag with some clothes and then toiletries from the bathroom. I grab the spare key to Bree and Alex's apartment from the hook in the hallway and my backpack from the living room.

I know I can't hide forever but I don't have to return to work until Tuesday so that will give them time to calm down and accept my answer as final. Hopefully.

I hit send on the text to Balthazar and reach for the knob. A knock from the other side startles me. Both of them would let themselves in.

After what happened with Casey, I'll never open again to someone I'm not sure of. "Who is it?"

"Detective Gary Wilson with the Metro PD. I'm looking for Seraphina Snow."

Police can't be good. I hurry to unlock the door. A man in a black coat and khakis stands next to a uniformed officer. "I'm Seraphina Snow."

"We'd like to talk to you about Melissa and Craig Oxford. Can we come in?"

My foster parents? "I haven't seen them in years."

"Well, no one has seen them in months."

His face remains neutral, but I can tell he's serious from his tone.

"That's weird."

"Casey Jacobs is also missing."

My pulse pounds through my body from the mention of his name. Of the

unexpected reminder of what he did. “I knew that. After he tried to...” I struggle with saying the word. “...after he attacked me, the police told my boyfriend that he disappeared.”

Boyfriend. Now both my stomach and my heart ache from the word that’s no longer true.

“Well Miss Snow the only common denominator between these two missing persons cases seems to be you.”

The pain from losing Balthazar spins to a sharp point in my chest. The detective thinks I have something to do with their disappearance. “I don’t know anything about either one of them.”

“Then you won’t mind accompanying us down to headquarters for a discussion.”

I try not to panic. I’m innocent. I have nothing to fear. But if I say no, they’ll think I have something to hide. “Sure, if that’s what you need.”

He steps out of the way, motioning for me to follow the officer. My cheeks burn with the humiliation of leaving my building in the presence of the police. I can’t imagine what my neighbors must think of me.

With Bree and Alex out of town, and Balthazar and Gaspar out of my life, I’ve never felt more alone.



Balthazar

“Son, I—”

Too fucking mad to care about disrespecting the man I used to idolize, I flip my palm up at my father. “I don’t want to hear it.”

He slams the sides of his fists down on my desk where I’ve been ignoring him for the past hour as I failed at attempting to work and he succeeded in driving me fucking crazy as he paced.

Fuck that.

He wants to fight, we’ll fight.

I shove out of my chair so hard the wheels squeal across the hardwood. “What? What the fuck can you say that will fix this?”

The anger pulsing in his body matches mine, and he snarls at me. “If you give her time, she’ll accept this. She’s the one who freaked out and wanted to leave, remember? I didn’t do a damn thing. So it’s not me, it’s her. She wants us too but is just scared of admitting it to herself.”

Damn it. I wasn’t there but my dad doesn’t lie. If he said he didn’t make a move on her, then he didn’t. She spooked herself.

Because she wants us too.

The jealousy I expect doesn’t explode inside me. If my father says he feels that way about her, he’ll love her the way I do. He won’t be selfish or try to steal her away. We’ll figure out a way that works for all of us.

Once she lets us.

I grab the arm and yank my chair back, dropping to the worn leather. We’ve disarmed and avoided a nuclear meltdown.

For now.

The wick might light again from what I inform him. “I will try to be patient but if she won’t accept *us*, I’m going to fight for her to take just *me*.”

His steps cease but he remains mute. With his back to me, I can’t read his expression. Doesn’t matter. She’s mine. “You and London set this up and I’m following through. She’s perfect for me as a wife and you as a daughter-in-law. I won’t risk losing that.”

Seconds pass without a response. I guess the conversation is over until he sighs.

“If she doesn’t want me, then she has to tell me that herself. If she does, I’ll accept it.”

His answer pisses me off. The burden shouldn’t fall on her for him to back down. Especially since she’s such a soft heart and would never want to hurt his feelings.

Knowing her, she’d probably accept him to avoid any confrontation. I open my mouth to tell him exactly what I think about his edict, when my phone pings.

Angel.

As I read her message, I swear I can hear the anguish in her words. She’s heartbroken and trying not to do the same to us.

Motherfucker.

“She broke up with me.”

Technically, us. But right now I’m pissed as hell and only care about myself since he’s the one who ruined this for Seraphina and me. “I’m going

over there.”

Too busy arguing with him, I wasn't watching her the way I should have been. I promised myself I would never make that same mistake again after motherfucking Casey. But I can't lie. The thought of losing her has me out of my mind and not thinking clearly.

I tap the icon for the cameras and scan her small apartment.

Empty.

My pulse scorches my body.

Where the fuck is she?

Why is a suitcase sitting by her door?

How could I have fucked up this bad again?

I swipe through keystrokes like a mad man to see what happened.

Shock like I've never experienced bolts through me to see her leaving with an officer and what I guess to be a plain clothes detective. What the hell?

Dad's trying to check the screen over my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"She left with the police."

He's a blur of rage and cursing as he hightails his ass to the door while I circle around my desk and race just as fast. I generally don't have an issue with cops since our focus is international rather than local. We rarely cross paths. But when they take my angel I will destroy them and burn down this city to get her back.

This we agree on.

We hustle out in unison. I don't even bother giving my assistant the heads-up regarding my departure. Because it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is Seraphina.

As we ride the elevator down, my father gets our criminal attorney on the phone while I text the image to my best tech guy so he can figure out who the hell the men are that think they can fuck with us and what's ours.

He strides straight to his SUV and is already hitting the gas while I slam my door shut. We need the bigger vehicle because there will be three of us riding back. No fucking question.

I endure the longest fifteen minutes of my damn life while we both talk on the phone. My tech expert confirms the detective is some stupid eager beaver transfer from the south who doesn't know who the fuck we are. There's going to be hell to pay once he finds out.

Dad slams the brakes in a no parking zone in front of the steps, and we

both haul ass exiting the car, blowing past the quizzical faces of the men who actually know who the fuck we are, yet can't figure out why the hell we're here.

We split after blowing through security, ignoring the metal detector alarms and line for pat downs. Dad heads toward the interrogation rooms while I beeline to the chief, who's already heading my way with his palms raised. Thank god he knows his guy fucked up. Ending this bullshit will be that much easier.



CHAPTER 28

Gaspar

While we don't agree on a lot, this divide and conquer attack to rescue our girl unites us without any words needed.

Balthazar charges to the chief while I sprint down the hall. A stern voice booms from the second room, and I ram open the door.

Seraphina slumps forward, so broken and fragile. Red-rimmed eyes meet mine, and I see the relief explode on her face from my arrival. Her delicate body jolts straight up, just like my rage from the asshole bent over the desk too close to her and talking in her gorgeous face.

"Daddy!"

Yes, I am. "Come on little one. We're leaving."

Fear returns in her scrunched expression as she glances down to her left. She struggles to lift her arm a few inches restrained by a pair of handcuffs connecting her wrist to the chair.

"I can't."

Mother. Fucker. "Release her now."

The bastard in a cheap suit shakes his head. "Who the fuck are you?"

I step forward and answer with my fist to his jaw. He slams into the wall and slides down the plaster to the accompaniment of Seraphina's startled scream.

He's conscious but confused. I shove my heel into his chest to keep him subdued. "Give me the key."

With shaking hands, he fumbles in his pocket and holds it out. I give him

a hard kick to the rib cage before I focus on my girl.

Unfortunately, that's all the torture I can administer right now. We'll pick him up later to ensure he understands in the most excruciating way possible how badly he fucked up.

Seraphina trembles until she's free. As soon as the metal ring confining her opens, she launches herself at me. I welcome her just as eagerly, wrapping her legs around my waist as I rise. "You're safe now. It's all over. Nothing's ever going to happen to you again."

I have to get her out of here where she never belonged in the first place. She clings to me as I hustle down the corridor. A wide path clears for us without me having to utter a word. Balthazar continues to berate the fool who allowed this to happen as we exit the building.

Good. A public humiliation will serve as notice to anyone else that we're not to be fucked with. Especially when it comes to our girl.

At my vehicle, I yank open the back driver side door and set Seraphina on the seat. Little fists clutch my shirt, unwilling to separate from me. "Just for a minute so I can check you over."

Her narrow chest still heaves from the trauma, yet she slides her hands from my back to my waist, so we're still connected. The way we should be.

I caress her face, checking for any marks. Her tears infuriate me enough but luckily no bruises or scratches mar her smooth skin.

The rest of her seems fine too except her wrist that still bears the traces of her restraint. I lift her arm and kiss the red skin, needing her to know that bastard will suffer for the damage he caused.

She sniffs, attempting to stop crying. "I...I think I'm o-okay."

"I'm not though. No one hurts you and survives."

My guarantee creates the opposite effect from my intentions. Instead of reassuring her, I terrify her, and she sobs again. "Daddy."

The monster inside me likes her desperate for me and loves that she now understands how this will work going forward. She crumples from my intensity, and I draw her to me again, providing my strength in her terror. I stroke down her silky hair. "I will always take care of you."

Her body softens from my confirmation, and she snuggles in deeper. I hold her until footsteps pound behind me. I glance back to see my son barreling toward us. He needs to check her over too for his own peace of mind.

I pull back and kiss her forehead. "Let Balthazar in."

One last sniffle as she nods and slides over, making room for him. He's in the DBX and on her in a heartbeat. The way it should be.

I slam his door shut and climb in the driver's seat. I've never played chauffeur before, but I don't mind today. Having Seraphina safe and back with us is another reason for us to flex. She's worth the change.

While I speed home, Balthazar grills her about what the detective said and did. Everything she explains enrages me more. Basically, she knows the missing people. That's it. They have zero evidence of any involvement on her part. What fucking idiots.

Unaware, she's the reason they're gone rather than the person responsible. Morons for targeting an innocent young woman incapable of making assholes disappear.

At the house, I expect her to question me bringing her here. Instead, she stays quiet as Balthazar guides her inside to the kitchen. The housekeeper's face falls when she catches sight of our devastated girl. Instead of the cookies I planned for her to bake with her, she has to tend to her chafed wrist and crushed spirit.

Mary engulfs her in a motherly hug. "Oh Miss Snow. Let me get some balm for your arm and then I'll make you some tea."

Seraphina absorbs her affection just like she does ours. Even better, in this moment, with no added stress from the uncertainty of her relationship with us. Between them, it's pure warmth and care.

She settles my little one at the table, puts on the kettle, and grabs a first aid kit from the pantry. Balthazar drops to his haunches in front of Seraphina.

"I have to take care of a few things, and then I'll be back."

Worry scrunches her forehead that he's quick to eliminate with his fingers rubbing away the lines. "Dad will be here."

Her little shoulders drop back down, and the relief settles in—for both of us. She welcomes my presence.

"Okay. I'll miss you."

"I'll make it up to you. I promise."

He kisses her softly and rises, nodding to me. Well aware I've got this. Our girl is taken care of.

Once he passes by, I stride to her. She looks up to me. Her expression's twisted with the feelings she doesn't understand. Unable to resist, I stroke her cheek. "Let Mary fuss over you for a little bit. Then I'll come for you when our lawyer gets here. I'll just be in my office, so she'll let me know if either

of you need anything.”

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll miss you too.”

Shock bursts on the housekeepers face as the realization of our relationship hits her. Yet, as expected, she doesn’t comment. Just pats her chest a few times in her nervous habit. She’ll get used to things too.

“Well...then...um...would you like cinnamon or peppermint Ms. Snow?”

Seraphina gives her a timid smile. “Please call me Seraphina.”

I nod my approval to the older woman when she glances at me again. Seraphina isn’t going anywhere so they might as well be comfortable with each other.

I kiss the top of her head and take off. Balthazar has to shore up some things for the business while I have more personal matters to attend to with the new guest in the dungeon.



Gaspar

The knob doesn’t twist in my hand. Cute that Seraphina thinks locking the door will keep me out. I’m a big man and easily push through with my shoulder to the wood.

The guest room is empty, but I know she hasn’t escaped after the housekeeper put her in here for a nap. Exhausted from the conversation with our attorney to reassure her she has nothing to worry about, Seraphina needs to rest.

Although she won’t be sleeping anytime soon. I have more important things to help her get past this situation.

A clean scent permeates the steamy air. The wholesome soapy smell makes my dick throb harder. She’s going to be fresh and ready for me.

I drop down to the side of the bed and wait. The shower shuts off, and the sounds of her moving around makes me want to break down that door as well to see her luscious wet body.

Patience.

Finally, she steps out, wrapped in a towel that swamps her slim form.

When she catches sight of me, she jolts and squeezes the fabric tight around her plump tits. “What are you doing in here?”

“I’m upset with you.”

The words kill me to say, but she needs to understand her mistake and learn from the error.

Her narrow shoulders bunch up, and agony twists her face. “You are?”

A slight panic in her voice proves how desperate she is for approval.

My approval.

Regardless of how much she denies the fact. “Yes, little one. If you hadn’t pushed us away, you never would’ve ended up in police custody.”

“I’m sorry.”

True remorse shrouds her, and I almost feel bad. Almost. “Come over here and receive your punishment.”

Tears slip down her flushed cheeks. Yet she remains in her spot. I give her one more chance since she doesn’t understand my ways yet. “If I have to tell you a second time, it will be twice as bad.”

The threat is enough to get her feet moving. She hurries to me, stopping when her red-tipped toes brush my boot. I nod my approval, and she gives me a sad smile that disappears instantly when I tug the material from her clenched fingers. “Show Daddy how beautiful you are.”

After a second of hesitation, her grip relaxes, and I groan as the terrycloth falls away. “You’re stunning. Absolutely stunning.”

All my willpower to keep from reaching out and stroking her damp pink skin threatens to crumble with temptation, so easily corrupted from her beauty. Damn.

I force myself to regain control and point to my lap. “Lay down.”

Slow yet obedient, she stares into my eyes as she leans closer, so her thighs touch the side of my leg and bends over.

Perfect.

So unbelievably perfect.

Her sweet pussy on one end and her magnificent breasts on the other, like her torso was made perfectly to fit in the spot.

In no hurry, I lovingly gather her damp hair and push the strands over her opposite shoulder. She trembles against me.

While I enjoy her fear, I also enjoy her pleasure, so I need to calm her down.

I massage over her back with firm strokes, lazily tracing the little bones

and caressing down her spine to cup her ass before rubbing upward some more. “Who takes care of you?”

Overwhelmed with shame, her head falls forward. “You do.”

Not good enough. “Who am I?”

The shivers fade, and I can feel her body warming under my hand.

“Daddy.”

“That’s right.” I circle between her shoulder blades. “I am your Daddy.”

Her squirm I’ve missed returns, and I can tell she’s as impacted as I am.

“Who protects you?”

“You do, Daddy.”

“Who needs you?”

“You do, Daddy.”

Breathless and wiggling, she grinds into me. I don’t even think she realizes that she’s doing it. That she needs me to get her off. Which means she’s ready.

I smack her ass hard.

The scream of shock echoes through the room, and I groan again. “You belong to me.”

Another smack. This squawk is from pain. “You will never try to leave me again.”

Her hands jerk up, trying to cover her cheeks from the penance I dole out. I grab both of her wrists and hold her immobile. With my free hand, I give her one more sharp swat. “You will always be my good little girl.”

She’s crying now. Full on sobs and heaving. I slide my fingers between her pussy lips to find them drenched.

Exactly as I suspected.

She desires discipline just as much as affection.

I tenderly sweep between her folds and circle her clit, comforting her as she releases all the stress and strain from denying the truth of our relationship. Soon she settles down and lets me love on her.

I work her little nub until she’s panting and writhing, seeking more. But she needs one last reminder before I can give her what she wants.

I swipe her cunt again, and with my finger well lubed, I trail to her butt. I press the tip against the rosebud, meeting the resistance I expect along with her cheeks squeezing around my digit. I swallow my chuckle from her useless defiance. “If you ever try to get away from me again, I will take this ass whether you’re ready for it or not.”

Despite her tense body, her pussy thrusts against me. “Yes Daddy.”

Uncertain if she’s agreeing to my promise or my penalty, I reward her either way. I release her trapped wrists and lift her by the shoulders. She stands by me, dazed and greedy with pebbled nipples, dilated pupils, and messy thighs. I need her just as much. “Take me out little one.”

Eager and enthusiastic, she unbuckles my belt and glides down my zipper with shaking fingers. My bulge easily pushes through the gap. She hesitates, not from disobedience but from uncertainty with her eyes searching mine.

I take over, shoving down my boxer briefs so my cock springs out like a jack rabbit. Before she can protest, I grasp her waist and lift her up only to slide her back down onto my dick.

Tight and wet, she envelopes me as if her cunt was made for my cock.

Barely halfway, I hit her cervix, so I have to be very careful with my little one. I keep a firm hold on her, lest she drop too low and hurt herself. “Feel good?”

When she wraps her slender arms around my neck, I get my answer. I raise and lower her a few times, relishing her riding me with my help.

She’s gorgeous, drunk on pleasure. Her eyes slip shut, and I can’t have that. “Look how beautiful you are with your pussy swallowing my cock.”

The authority in my tone forces her to tip her head down. When she reaches between our legs to touch us, I almost lose my mind. That’s sexy as fuck. “We’re perfect together, aren’t we?”

Her head flies back up, meeting my gaze as she nods.

“No more denying it.”

She shakes her head.

“Good girl.”

Her walls squeeze my dick from the approval, and I grit out my request. “I want you to come all over my cock.”

“I want that too.”

Rewarding her, I thumb her clit, stroking the petals while she bobs up and down. A frantic tempo that matches the inferno igniting in my balls and scorching up my spine. I fist her hair and shove my lips to her ear. “You’re mine. You belong to me. I’m never letting you go.”

“Don’t. Please don’t. I need you too.”

Not more than me. Losing the battle, I shove her down as far as she’ll go. “I’m snipped so you don’t have to worry but I’m going to put my seed in you just the same.”

“Oh god!”

Her ecstasy pushes me over, and I blast deep inside her. “That’s right, little one. Take my come. It’s all yours. Only you.”

She creams just as hard, and we both jolt emptying ourselves. She collapses against me, and I palm her ass cheeks to keep my dick and my release inside her while keeping her from hurting herself.

She nuzzles into my neck, peppering my hot skin with grateful kisses. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Your pleasure is my pleasure.”

On a sigh she snuggles in, accepting my commitment to her. Which began when I saw her gorgeous face and will continue until she’s the last thing I see before I close my eyes forever.



CHAPTER 29

Balthazar

Before I chat with Detective Wilson, I decide to visit with our other guests. Melchior's bored with Casey since there isn't much left of him to torture so I send him onto Seraphina's foster parents.

My brother's taken a peculiar liking to them since they provide a built-in audience. While he works over one, the other gets to watch. And see what's coming for them next. Physical and mental terror, which they both deserve.

I shove open Casey's door and flip on the lights. He doesn't flinch. Maybe he's too far gone. I stride up to him, dangling from the ceiling from a wire wrapped around his cock and balls. His body is completely limp. I slap his thigh.

Nothing.

Just cold, slick skin under my palm. No breaths. No pulse.

Well, he lasted longer than I expected. And suffered more than I anticipated. I smile at the thought.

Justice has been served for my angel.

I head to the couple. Blood pools on the floor underneath Melissa as the meat hook threaded between her shoulder blades rips deeper through her skin with each kick from Melchior to her hip. She shrieks with each strike, like a concerto.

Hit, cry, drip.

Hit, cry, drip.

Hit, cry, drip.

Utter perfection.

I nod toward Craig. “Getting a good look? Because you’re next.”

“You don’t have to do this man. I got a house. I got property. It’s yours if you let me go. All yours.”

Interesting. “Don’t you mean “let *us* go”, Craig? You want to save your wife, don’t you?”

Panic bursts on his face, cracking me up. Comical that he thinks my response means I might actually accept his offer.

His head bobs as much as possible with him strapped to the cross Melchior placed strategically for Craig’s viewing pleasure.

“Yeah. Yeah, I meant us. Let *us* go and you can have it.”

Melchior pauses to laugh. He always appreciates delivering an unexpected twist too. I drop to my haunches in front of our lowly visitor. “While I appreciate your willingness to negotiate, I have a little surprise for you. I had the shack you called a house burned to the ground and then sold the land.”

I pat his damp cheek. “You didn’t have much and now you have nothing. But since you’re never getting out of here, it really doesn’t matter.”

Poor baby bursts into tears over the realization of his future. With his fate sealed by hurting Seraphina, all that’s left is ensuring he suffers until his last breath.

Humming her favorite Christmas song, I rise, motion for M to continue, and make my way to the next cell. I’ve taken a bit of a different tact with the detective. He’s in a comfortable room with the only suggestion of his imprisonment being handcuffed to a chair just like my girl.

Unfortunately for him, he won’t be leaving as quickly and easily as Seraphina left his captivity. Instead, his incarceration will be long and torturous, ending with his departure in a body bag.

As soon as I open the door, he’s belligerent, yanking on the metal ring attaching his wrists to the armrests and attempting to stand. Dumbass.

“Do you know what the penalty is for kidnapping a police officer?”

“No, Gary, I don’t. And, to be perfectly honest, I really don’t care either.” I grab the other chair and plop down so we can have a conversation, man to moron. “Since at the end of all this, the crime will be murder of a police officer.”

His entire body jolts. Look at me shocking everyone this evening.

He recovers quickly, shaking his head and attempting to look tough with

a furrowed brow. “You’ll never get away with it. Every member of the department is searching for me as we speak. They’ll find me and you’ll pay ___”

“Nope.” I flip up my palm. “They know I’ve got you, and they aren’t going to do jack shit. It was either you or the Chief. Not a big surprise he gave you up.”

All his bravado sinks away like the coward he is, preying on fragile, innocent women. I lean closer, letting him in on the other secret. “Actually, it was always going to be you regardless of what he said. He would’ve just been extra practice for my brother.”

Panic sets in, and he yanks against the cuffs again. “You can’t do this.”

Lame. Next he’ll try to bribe me, then he’ll start begging. Same old, same old.

Welp, now I’m bored. I push out of my seat and leave him with one last bit of information for him to mull over why he waits. “I’ll give you some credit. You were on the right path but wrong person. Seraphina didn’t kidnap Jacobs or the Oxfords.”

He stills and meets my gaze. “It was you.”

“Yep. They hurt her, so we hurt them.” I point in the direction of their rooms. “They’re your neighbors.”

“But I didn’t hurt her. All I did was ask her some questions.”

Fury ignites inside of me, and I shove my chair out of the way, storming over to him. “You scared her. You touched her. You used her to make yourself look good. But all that time you knew she was innocent, didn’t you?”

His lips remain pinched together, defying me. I will make him answer.

I grab him by the throat and yank him up ensuring his skin is sliced by the metal circling his arms. “You tried to pin this on Seraphina.”

I squeeze his neck, relishing his eyes bulging and skin firing red. Watching someone suffocate from your own hand really is fascinating. Once spittle dribbles out, I drop him.

As entertaining as that was, now it’s annoying to have to wait for his response while he sucks in oxygen and coughs all over the place. Gross.

Finally, his chest stops heaving and his breathing returns to normal. He clears his throat and shakes his head.

“I knew it wasn’t her. I just thought she would lead me to the real perp.”

The raspy tone of his voice must mean I damaged his vocal cords. That’s

too bad. I enjoy hearing the screaming when M works with them. Oh well. “I guess it worked because here I am. Good job, Gary.”

The irony is not lost on him.

His body softens, and I realize he’s accepted his fate. No good deed goes unpunished as they say.

With all his strength gone, he looks up at me. “You’re the one they call the *Santa Claus*, right? You control Christmas?”

No reason to deny the nickname. I nod. “It was my father. Now it’s me. And when my sweet Seraphina gives me a son, he’ll continue the tradition.”

A little bit of fight comes back with the look of disgust he shoots at me. “Does she know you’re a raging psychopath?”

Completely amused, I laugh from his inquiry. Such an oblivious man. I shake my head. “Nope, she thinks I’m on the nice list and that she’s the naughty one because of how much she loves me fucking her.”

My cock hardens into a rod in my pants from the thought, so I’ve got to go. “Melchior will be in soon. I’d enjoy this quiet, pain-free time while it lasts.”

I stride out to his yelling, pleading with me to reconsider as expected. I hurry up the steps to my vehicle. There’s someone else I’d much rather hear beg me.



My father’s always been an early riser, so at five I head to the guest room. Right on cue, her door opens and Dad steps out. All of the worry from yesterday no longer lines his face. He’s quick to head bob me as he silently twists the knob behind him.

“She’s dead to the world.”

“That’s okay. I know how to wake her up.”

He chuckles, and I know we’re in a good place literally and figuratively. This relationship with Seraphina is what we all need even though I didn’t realize it before.

She deserves to be pampered. Not necessarily with just money and gifts, but with an abundance of the love and affection she desperately desires to be happy.

Together, we can spoil her with double the attention.

Once he's passed by, I enter yet pause to take her in. Her wholesome beauty is staggering. With her smooth skin and lax body, she confirms how safe she feels with us to sleep so deeply.

I strip and climb in beside her, tucking her head under my chin and holding her close. Despite my efforts not to disturb her slumber, she jerks awake and grabs my shirt. "It's okay. It's me."

She settles down and breathes deep as if welcoming me and inhaling my scent.

"Balthazar."

Full of raspy contentment, her voice stirs my cock the rest of the way to concrete. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

The squirm of happiness I haven't felt in too damn long ripples from her body to mine. She needs me as much as I need her. I roll her onto her back and stare down at her radiant face.

"Are you going to punish me too?"

Damn, my dad's a dirty bastard. "No angel. I'm going to take you home."

Slender fingers dig into my chest, clutching the fabric with all her might.

"Why?"

The crack in her voice pleases me. Not that I want her to suffer. But because I want her to loathe the thought as much as I do. "Because we're going to pack your stuff and bring you here where you belong."

"What about you?"

Panic squeaks in her tone, and she tightens her grip just the way I do with her.

"I'm moving in too. We'll stay in the north wing. So then you can see my father as much as you want."

Her pulse throbs under my hand. The idea pleases her, yet she still has some reservations. A little coaxing on my part isn't a hardship. "Everything we talked about is still true. We'll get married, and I'll build you your dream house. But right now we'll do this because he needs you as much as I do."

"I don't want to admit it, but I need both of you too."

"No shame in that. You have a huge heart and we're going to be the ones to fill it up."

Absolute truth. My girl's experienced too much pain and too much loss in her life. That ends with us. From here on out she'll only experience what it's

like to be the center of our world.

A bashful smile brightens her apprehensive expression. "I want to fill up your hearts too."

"You already do."

The impact of her joy destroys my intention to let her recover from last night since I'm sure my father wasn't gentle.

I guide the head of my cock to her entrance, finding her already wet. "Good girl. You're ready for me, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Breathless and earnest, she squeezes her thighs to mine. Almost as if she's urging me to take her. So I do.

The need to own her yet also protect her battles fiercely inside me. If I love her the way I say I do, gentle wins out. I push in slowly.

Glistening eyes meet mine, and I pause. Her tears wreck me. "Am I hurting you?"

Tangled hair swishes across the pillowcase. "No. I thought I lost you and I'm so happy I didn't."

My resolve snaps, and I plunge in as far as her small body allows. When she wraps her legs around me, I know heaven truly exists. "Fuck angel you feel so good."

She clings to me with her arms curled around my neck. Soft lips brush over my skin. "I don't care what anyone else says, I want to be with you."

The unexpected outpouring of her feelings awakens the beast, and I drive into her. Her grimace of discomfort can't stop me. Apparently, the pain can't stop her either as she keeps going.

"I want to be your wife and have babies and feel this love all the time. For the rest of our lives."

With each word, I shove harder and deeper. I need to put the first baby into her now.

"Gabriel told me to grab happiness whenever I could, so I am!"

Her grip tightens on my throat, and the possessive growl only for her rumbles in my chest as she chokes me. Maybe it's sick for her to talk about her brother while my cock annihilates her pussy, but at this point I don't give a damn. She wants me, and I'm never letting her renege on her commitment to me and her sibling. "That's right angel. Grab on tight and don't let go."

"I won't! Please don't let go of me either."

Obviously, I have fucked up greatly if she doesn't know that I won't. I

reach down between us and circle her clit in time with my thrusts. “Never happening. I’ll chain you to this fucking bed if I have to so you can’t get away.”

“I...I...won’t...”

I can’t comprehend anymore what she’s trying to say, but understanding doesn’t matter anymore. Her body tells me more than her words—she needs me as much as I need her.

Her cry of my name is all I have to hear. Once she falls over the cliff, I cup my hand on her ass to keep her locked down and pound my proof of ownership into her. Over and over, I hammer into her so I can force my seed as far as possible.

Until she cups my face with her little hands and whispers she loves me. It’s then I understand that she’s the one who owns me and come violently inside her as I roar out my love to her too.



CHAPTER 30

Seraphina

Mary seems really nice, never acting bothered by having to make extra food or commenting when she came into my room to *tidy up* as she called stripping the sheets and carrying away my bath towel.

The shame of her probably knowing I made love to both Gaspar and Balthazar in the same bed made me thank her and excuse myself, scurrying to the kitchen where she made me a huge stack of pancakes when she returned.

I'm doing my best to finish them but with the bacon and fruit bowl she gave me too, I'm stuffed.

When she glances over from cleaning the griddle, she laughs, truly tickled. "Oh honey I'm sorry. I'm used to feeding these men. Just eat what you want and leave the rest."

I relax from her easygoing personality but still feel guilty. "I hate to waste it though."

She shakes her head. "No waste. It'll be a treat for the dogs. We'll keep the secret between us girls."

The description consumes me with joy. I like being her friend, conspiring with her. "I'd like that."

With a nod of approval, she returns to her cleaning. I take one last bite of banana. "Thank you. It was delicious."

"You're welcome. Come see me this afternoon and we'll make those cookies Mr. Wiseman mentioned. Haven't made any in years so I'm looking forward to it."

“Me too!”

As spotless as the house is, I know she keeps busy. I don't want to be in her way so I scootch off my stool and wander to where I think the gym is.

With Balthazar working at his office and Gaspar exercising, I'm not quite sure what to do with myself. Maybe I can keep Daddy company while he lifts weights and then we can decorate the trees we picked out yesterday.

The huge mansion has me second guessing where I'm going since I only had the one tour. Difficult to believe that was only two days ago. Now I live here with men I think I'm falling in love with despite how seemingly impossible that might be.

I stop in front of the last door in the hallway. I think this is where he works out and turn the knob. I'm wrong but not disappointed. Enormous bookshelves line almost every inch of the walls except for a gorgeous stone fireplace and two gigantic leather chairs that face the hearth. As big as Balthazar and Gaspar are, I'm not surprised everything else is oversize too.

The crackling logs heat the room extra toasty, and the smoky scent entices me to breathe deep. I want to pretend like I'm in a movie and jump on the ladder to glide across the wood, running my fingertips over all the books.

Instead, I keep my feet on the floor. I know that it's wrong to horse around in someone else's house.

Stepping closer, I peruse the spines for titles. Lots of classics and I grin when I find *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

One of my favorites! I slowly slide out the red leather book and carefully open the cover. As I read the first line, a grunt sounds behind me and I spin around.

In the far corner, a man sprawls in another massive chair while a guy kneels between his parted legs with his mouth on his... Oh my god! “I'm so sorry!”

I race back toward the door.

“Stop.”

His tone reminds me of the other men in this house. Dominant. Powerful. Authoritative.

I can't move from his command. But this situation is too personal, too intimate so I cover my eyes blocking out the image of these two lovers.

“Put. Your Hand. Down.”

His words pelt like rocks, forceful and deliberate in his deep, raspy voice. I slowly lower my hand and clutch the book tighter to my heaving chest.

I should leave.

Look away at least.

Yet, the demand of his order pins me to my spot.

His head falls back enjoying the pleasure of the other man licking and sucking. I'm fascinated, staring like a dirty pervert. This is what happens to me when I'm in a relationship with two men. How did I become so filthy so fast?

"Do you like what you see, baby girl?"



Melchior

I already know she does. I can smell her arousal from here. If I enjoyed pussy, I'd be all over this responsive creature.

Instead, I take pleasure in the impact she has on Rudolph. The suction on my cock increased exponentially once the innocent girl stumbled in here.

A deep blush explodes on her face, seeping down her throat to the neckline of the tee shirt that's about a hundred sizes too big for her. This must be the woman my brother and father are obsessed with.

I can see why.

She's cute, ingenuous, and the way her eyes are glued to Rudolph sucking me off, a little bit dirty too. "It's okay. You can say yes. We don't mind an audience, do we, baby?"

I run my fingers through his blond strands. He shakes his head as best he can with his mouth stuffed full of my dick and winks at her.

She swallows hard and the book in her slender hands drifts higher as if she's going to try and cover her face again.

"I...I really s-should go."

Adorable the way she stammers and shifts on her feet. Bare toes curl into the rug. She wants to stay but lies to herself because she knows nice girls wouldn't watch. I'll make it easy for her. "You don't leave until I tell you that you can."

Long waves bounce on her shoulders from her head nodding so severely.

Unsurprisingly, she really is an obedient one. “Is this what you do to my brother?”

Rudolph groans around my rod from the mention of Balthazar. He’s had a crush on him since first sight, but my brother has no interest in dick unfortunately for my friend.

She’s slow to nod this time. “I t-try. But I...I don’t really know how yet.”

Very innocent indeed. “Well watch and learn then. Rude is an expert in giving head.”

As expected, she observes his technique like it’s the only thing she needs to know in life. He’s a nice guy and goes all in for her, much to my enjoyment.

I lay back and close my eyes while he takes me to the brink over and over until the point of pain when I finally fall, clutching the sides of his head while unloading into his willing mouth.

After a few seconds I come back to my surroundings and open my eyes. Rudolph wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, satisfied with his efforts and my release. I grin back at him. “Thank you, baby.”

Lithe and energetic, he easily jumps up to standing, and then bends to kiss my cheek. “You’re welcome. Now you’re ready.”

“I am and I’ll take care of you later.”

That promise makes him lick his lips and roll his eyes up in his head with anticipation. Nothing makes him happier than my dick in his ass.

He saunters over to Balthazar’s girl and bows theatrically to her. She stares at him wide eyed while I tuck myself away.

“Did that help?”

“Ye-yes. Thank you.”

I can barely hear her mortified whisper. She’s going to have to loosen up if she’s going to live here with us. But I guess that’s what my brother and father are working on.

I wait for the knob to click shut behind Rude before I rise myself and motion for her to join me in the chairs by the fireplace. I’m sure Rude didn’t spill a drop of my come, but it’s still uncouth to have her sit where I just blew my load.

She glances toward the path he followed, eyeing the door for longer than I like. But her submissive side wins out and she dashes to the seat I point to, full of reluctance to disobey.

Although her ass barely covers a quarter of the cushion. She perches on

the edge ready to bolt. That won't do at all. I need her to relax so I can interrogate her. "I'm Melchior by the way. But I assume you figured that out already."

The burgeoning smile eliminates some of her caution. "I did. I'm Seraphina."

"Nice to meet you Seraphina. I've been curious about you for quite a while."

"You have?"

Her voice squeals with surprise. She seems as shocked as catching me getting a blow job in the library. "Yes, Balthazar's been very secretive about you. Now I understand why."

I leave the insinuation between us to see how she'll respond.

"You do?"

The same squeak of astonishment pops between her lips and I chuckle. "Yeah, because you're a doll and he didn't want me to scare you off."

She clutches the book tight again to her little tits.

"I'm not scared."

The quiver in her tone proves otherwise. "No need to be. You make him happy. I don't want to ruin that."

My approval finally eliminates her anxiety.

"He makes me happy too."

"Good." I wink at her, so she'll know I'm kidding. I don't want to return to her fearing me. "Just like my father."

The raging blush returns yet she's brave enough to agree, nodding without argument.

"I care about him very much."

For no real reason I can ascertain, I believe her. She seems indifferent to our money and power. "He feels the same way about you."

With my confirmation, she squirms against the cushion in her own little happy dance. Charming.

"So is Rude your boyfriend?"

"Let's say more of a friend with benefits. Neither of us wants to be tied down right now, no pun intended."

She giggles from my joke and scoots all the way back. Finally, she's comfortable.

Good. If she's going to be my sister-in-law and stepmother, I want her to like me too. "Dad said you're moving in with us."

“You live here too?”

I’m thrilled that she’s thrilled. “Yeah, I don’t need the hassle of finding a place or taking care of it. Pop lets me mooch off of him, so I do.”

Her laughter floats through the air. She thinks I’m kidding again. Oh well. “It’ll be nice having a girl around. Mary’s one obviously but I get on her nerves, so I try to stay out of her way.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. You don’t seem annoying at all.”

“Just wait.”

Finally, the last barrier between us falls as she sets the book on her lap. I’m glad she trusts me, even though most people don’t and shouldn’t. She’s safe with me, from me. I’ll never let any harm come to her.

“I’m going to make Christmas cookies in a little bit. You can join me if you want.”

Adorable. “Only if you make chocolate chip.”

Too much excitement I guess because she bolts up to her feet. “Of course! I’d love that.”

“Me too.” I point to my zipper. “Let me go clean up and I’ll meet you in there.”

“Okay, thank you. See you in a bit.”

My crotch didn’t make her blush as much as I expected before she rushes to the door. I guess she’s getting used to us. Which is good since I don’t think my brother or father are ever going to let her go.



CHAPTER 31

Seraphina

I'm not sure how it's possible since he hasn't rolled out a single ball of dough, but Melchior has more flour on him than I do. White powder coats his shirt and jeans with a few spots dusting his hair. Now I understand why Mary gets frustrated at him.

He's eaten all the chocolate chips.

He's spilled the red and green sprinkle mix on the floor. Twice.

He's broken three eggs trying to juggle.

All I can do is laugh. Baking here with him is way more fun than alone in my apartment.

After a while the housekeeper threw her hands in the air and said she'd come back later to clean up. That's wrong though.

We made the mess, so we'll be the ones to scrub her kitchen back to the way the spotless room was before his shenanigans.

Now it's just the two of us left with gingerbread, sugar, shortbread, snickerdoodle, and pecan coconut cookies lining parchment paper spread across every available surface. Good thing they have a gigantic kitchen.

I grab the spatula and lift a few of the first ones we've baked to ensure they're cool. If I put them in the tins while they're still hot, they'll stick together. I glance at Melchior, who's scraping a spoon through the mixing bowl to eat the remnants of raw batter. "Do you have any bread?"

"Why?"

The word is garbled from his full mouth, and I can't help but laugh

because he's a grown man who acts like a kid. "Because if you put a slice in with the cookies, they stay fresh longer."

He nods in approval. "Genius."

Once every trace is gone, he ambles to the pantry and grabs a loaf. We work together filling the containers. Well, I create the layers while he keeps popping treats into his mouth and moaning, making me giggle.

"What are you doing tonight?"

His question surprises me. "I don't know. Balthazar and Gaspar haven't said anything yet."

"Good. Then you can come watch me."

Although I'm not attracted to him in that way, the thought of watching him with another man again shoots my pulse up like a fever. I really have turned into a pervert.

"You're blushing."

I tip my head down so he can't see how much. "I know."

He chuckles like he realizes what I'm thinking. Hopefully not. But probably so.

"I've got a fight tonight and I think you'll enjoy it."

Thank goodness. I steer my focus back to non-sexual thoughts. "You're a boxer?"

"Kind of. It's MMA, so anything goes."

Pretending I know what he's talking about, I nod.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Not really."

His laughter warms me. Just like hanging out with a good friend, having fun, and celebrating the season should.

He swipes another gingerbread man before I snap the lid shut.

"It's mixed martial arts. So punching, kicking, whatever it takes to get your opponent down and tapping out."

The description seems so simple for something that is obviously dangerous.

"Okay, now you're frowning. Never play poker. You wear all of your feelings on your face."

"Well I don't like the idea of you getting hurt."

"Aww, you just met me, and you already care about me."

I know he's kind of teasing me, but the sentiment is true. I do like him.

Somehow this family welcomes me without any hesitation like I belong

here, even if our situation is unconventional.

“Don’t worry.” He shoves in a rolled sugar snowflake with blue and silver sprinkles and winks. “The feeling is mutual.”

Joy engulfs me from his confirmation, and I find myself smiling as I work.

“So that’s a *yes*, you’ll come with me.”

“I’d love to.”

He woots like a maniac and pounds the cabinet with his palms as if he’s celebrating something really big. I laugh and go back to filling my canisters, ending up with four stacks of five containers. “I think I got carried away.”

Guilt aches in my chest. I know Gaspar said it was okay, but maybe not this much. The ingredients are expensive, and I didn’t ask how many he wanted. I don’t want him or Balthazar to be upset at me or—

Melchior’s fingers slide under my chin and lift my head, forcing me to look at him.

“Hey. Are you okay?”



Melchior

I know she’s not. All kinds of emotions flash across her face that are the exact opposite of happy. I have to eliminate whatever apprehension engulfs her and bring her back to the joy she experiences with her baking.

“Yes, but I...I made too many.”

Her gaze flits to the results of our afternoon fun, and I hate that she’s agonizing over nothing. “No such thing when it comes to cookies, baby girl.”

“I know but—”

“It’s fine. Do you think I’d let you get in trouble?”

No answer. We don’t know each other well enough for her to realize that I’ll protect her at any cost but shielding her from them is unnecessary. My brother and father don’t give a fuck about anything except making her want to stay here forever. *That* she should know.

“All Balthazar and my dad want is for you to be happy.”

“I am.”

“Good.” I release my grip on her chin and tap her button nose. “Then all is well. You never have to worry.”

Some of the anxiety lining her face smooths. A little more convincing is all it will take for her to fully accept her place in this family.

“I guess I better start cleaning up.”

“I’ll wash, you dry.”

My offer cheers her completely, and she starts stacking cookie sheets. I turn on the hot water and flood the sink with detergent so bubbles foam up instantly. The antic makes her giggle, unlike Mary who would fuss at me.

Just like with the baking, we make a good team. I explain tonight’s event more to her while she wipes off the countertops. “The last time I fought this guy he claimed leg cramp and rolled out of the ring. I technically won but that’s bullshit. No one wants a forfeit. I want it to be real.”

The thought gets me antsy again and I need to move. I grab the spoons and shove them in the slots in the dishwasher for utensils. “I need Rude again.”

“Is that why you and he were... you know? He calms you down?”

Her focus remains super glued to the dishcloth in her hand circling the same spot over and over. Talk of blow jobs embarrasses her obviously. She still has a lot to get used to. “Yeah, it takes the edge off but it’s not as exhausting like fucking is.”

“Oh.”

Her breathless gasp confirms her realization of why I told him I’d take care of him tomorrow. Gratitude and celebration all in one.

She keeps her head down, absorbed in her cleaning until there’s not a dry inch of countertop. I love how cute and shy she is. “I’ve stuffed as much as I can into the dishwasher so now we really have to wash the rest.”

A feminine growl that’s not from Seraphina rumbles behind us and we both spin around. Mary stands in the doorway with fists balled on her hips, shooting daggers into me with her laser eyes.

“No, no, no. They won’t get clean that way.”

Her angry hand motions for me to get the hell out of the way which I gladly do. I hate this shit.

“Shoo. Let me do it.”

I laugh, well aware she’s serious but not mad. If she was really angry, she’d start whipping me with the dish towel. I give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks Mary.”

With a grin she can't fully hide, she jerks away feigning disgust.

“Get on out of here.”

“Gladly.” I point to Seraphina, who gapes at me wide-eyed. “I'll see you tonight.”

I know she'll stay and help, which is good for both of them and great for me.



CHAPTER 32

Gaspar

Seraphina comes into view on the screen from the camera in front of my office. Her small fist knocks on the heavy wood.

“Daddy?”

Fuck, if her sweet voice calling me that doesn’t get me rock hard in an instant. I hit the switch to release the lock and open the door. “Come in little one.”

She glows as she steps inside, almost as sweet as the plate of cookies she carries in her delicate hand.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you. I just wanted to bring—”

“Never. I always want you with me.”

My proclamation makes her hurry, her sweet tits bouncing as she carefully keeps an eye on her treats, so they don’t slide off. I push back from my desk and part my legs wider. “On my lap.”

After setting the saucer on the surface, she hops on my thigh, so her knees touch my other leg. With her beaming face looking up at me in delight, I can’t help but kiss her, tasting the sugar from her earlier baking.

I delve deep, claiming her mouth as well as her mind so that no other thought but me can permeate into her consciousness. Nothing else matters except for her opening to me, giving all of herself to my possession.

Breathless and overcome, she pulls back letting me see her perfect flushed face and swollen pink lips. Soft fingers clutch my jawline, and she drags her fingertips through my slight scruff.

“In your red shirt, you look like those sexy Santa Claus pictures I see on Pinterest.”

The honesty makes me chuckle. “I do?”

Her body squirms with eagerness, shoved to mine as much as she can. “Oh yes. You’re so handsome. What do they call it?” She frowns for a second, thinking hard. “Naughty daddy vibe, I think or something like that.”

Unsure what has gotten into her that she’s so forthright with her feelings, I encourage her. “Is that why you called me *Daddy* when you met me?”

She blushes and nods. “Yes. I just knew you would be loving and protective. But I was scared it was wrong.”

“Does it feel wrong?”

This time she only shakes her head. “It doesn’t feel wrong to me either.”

“I thought I got lucky finding Balthazar. Then I found you too. I don’t know what I did to deserve both of you.”

“It’s me who’s lucky that you let an old man into your heart too.”

I twist her long hair in my fist and yank her head back so I can suck on her neck. The smooth skin tastes delicious on my tongue. “If you weren’t sore from yesterday, I’d bend you over my desk and prove how I feel about you.”

“Well, I...I can...”

When her fingers brush my bulge, I almost come in my pants. Adorable she can’t say the words. “You want to suck my cock?”

“I want to try. I don’t have much experience.”

The confession fades to a whisper. I hate that she’s embarrassed. “Never be ashamed. That’s one of the things that attracts me to you, little one. You’re sweet and innocent. It’s refreshing.”

My approval makes her head fly up. An expression full of hope greets me.

“Really?”

“Yeah, and there’s nothing I want to see more than you on your knees for me with my dick in your mouth.”

Desire darkens her eyes and pebbles her nipples under my tee-shirt she wears as an improvised dress. We really need to get her own clothes, but damn if I don’t want to.

She slowly climbs down to the carpet, tucking the thick material under her legs and reaches for the button at my waist. Determination scrunches her face as she slides down the zipper and releases me from the confines of my

boxer briefs.

Fuck her small hands feel incredible stroking over my leaking head. “See that come? That’s for you. Because of you.”

Her smile blazes an inferno straight to my heart. I fucking love making her happy.

Her eager tongue flicks out lapping the pre-come like a kitten with milk. “That’s right little one. Take what’s yours.”

My praise spurs her on, and she licks farther down the seam of my shaft to my balls. When she gingerly tastes the sensitive skin, my body quakes from the pleasure. “God you’re such a good, good girl.”

“I want to make you happy.”

I fight to bring myself back from the haze she put me into and look down at her. She needs praise more than I need for her to suck me off. I circle her throat which moans in approval under my fingers. “You do, little one. Happier than I’ve ever been.”

She smiles and pushes against the restraint of my palm, eager to get back to pleasing me. When her lips part and she shoves my dick to her tonsils, I have no choice. My fingers tangle in her hair and I guide her back and forth but never letting her go free. “You are incredible. You take my cock like the queen that you are Seraphina.”

Small hands cover mine, attempting to entwine our fingers. Fucking beautiful sight to see us connected. “Daddy loves seeing you suck his dick. This is your dick. Yours alone. All my come is for you.”

Teeth graze my skin, and I’m done.

“I’m about to blow, little one.”

I grab her under her arms, and my cock pops from her mouth. I lift her to standing and spin her around, palming her back to force her face down on my desk. “Open your legs.”

Immediate response to my command and after I shove up the hem of my shirt and rip off her panties, her glorious pink cunt comes into view. I cup her mound using my middle finger to circle her clit. She’s already wet and more cream floods my skin as I work her good.

Moans roll in her slender throat, and she rides my hand. I help her by clutching her hip and establishing a rhythm with her frantic jutting into my palm. “That’s it. Get off from my fingers in your pussy.”

She clenches around my digit, so I slide in another, finding the spot again we discovered last night.

“Yes Daddy. Right there. Right *there*.”

Now who’s the bossy one. I chuckle from her adamancy and back off. When she huffs in frustration, I smack her pert ass.

With a yelp, she stills in response, and I go at her again with the reminder to trust me. “Who takes care of you?”

“You do, Daddy.”

“That’s right.”

She doesn’t know that winding her up will make her orgasm that much better. I take her to the brink again and again until both of us can barely stand the anticipation.

I curl over her back with my lips on her ear while I stroke my cock. “Who owns you?”

“You do, Daddy.”

“Then come for me so I can give you what’s yours.”

I shove the head between her lower lips and when she detonates underneath me, I let go too. Jets of hot, sticky seed that I push inside her swollen pussy, over her pink rosebud, and up her back, marking all that I can so she knows who she belongs to.



CHAPTER 33

Balthazar

Seraphina tucks a wayward strand of hair behind her ear before her gaze drops from me to her dinner plate. “I wasn’t sure if we had any plans for tonight, but Melchior asked me to go with him to watch his fight.”

Zero ambiguity in her tone—she hopes I say yes.

Surprisingly, they’ve become fast friends, which I’m not sure if I approve of or not.

On one hand, if he likes her, he won’t fuck with her. Although since he does, that means he’ll fuck with me even more.

Great.

The torment is worth it though if she’s happy. Which she obviously is ecstatic.

Unable to resist the bashful smile glowing on her gorgeous face, I struggle to deny her request. No way in hell would I allow her to attend alone. “Sure, we can go.”

I put the emphasis on *we*, which excites her enough to burst out of her chair and bounce into my arms with a huge hug. A rich vanilla sugar scent surrounds me, and I inhale all of her sweetness while I cage her in my own embrace.

“Thank you! This is going to be so much fun!”

While I love my innocent girl’s enthusiasm, I’m absolutely certain she has no idea what she’s getting herself into with MMA. “It can also be pretty rough. Blood and all that gore. Are you sure you can handle it?”

She squeezes me tight. "I can handle anything with you."

From most people that comment would sound phony and corny as hell. With her, she means her proclamation with full sincerity.

I caress her back, the miniscule bones a reminder of her fragility. "Because you know I'll always keep you safe."

My own genuine declaration makes her lift from my chest and grasp my face, covering me with soft kisses.

"Yes, I do."

"Good girl."

Her pupils dilate as she sucks in a big breath. My angel is responsive as hell, but I have to control myself since she's already been fucked hard twice in the last twenty-four hours. "But we need to get you some real clothes if I'm going to take you out in public."

She giggles and looks down at the gigantic shirt engulfing her. "I almost forgot."

Thank fuck. That means she's comfortable here and with us. "After you eat, we'll go get your stuff."

Doubt that I hate steals her smile and she attempts to avoid eye contact as she slinks back to her seat. I grab her slight wrist, halting her escape. "Look at me."

Slowly her head lifts yet she speaks not a word. So, I say what needs to be said. "You belong with us. Life is short and you need to do what makes you happy. Then you'll never have any regrets. You won't lie on your deathbed wishing you had followed your heart."

Not trying to sound melodramatic but after seeing my mother wither away with so many things she never got to experience before she passed, I don't want to miss out on a damn thing. Including and especially Seraphina.

A frown flickers on her pink lips before she bites the lower one. "I...I just don't know."

"It's okay because I do, and I promise everything will be all right."

Before she can answer, Dad strides in, full of energy and force, just like he used to be. Instead of heading to his place at the table, he advances on her, and I release her arm so can accept his affection the way she loves.

"Little one."

His deep rumble contrasts with her happy sigh as she snuggles against his chest.

"Hi Daddy."

The continued lack of jealousy watching them together confirms once again how right this is. For all of us.

I nod to him. “I’m taking her to get her stuff and then watch M’s match.”

“Sounds good.” He kisses the top of her head. “Finish your supper, and then we’ll go.”

She squeals with pleasure from the realization he’s in for the event too. All of the earlier misgivings vanish, and she lights up with pleasure, her gaze sweeping back and forth between us.

“We’re all going together. Like a family.”

A fucked-up family but a family just the same. Exactly what she’s always wanted. And what we’re always going to give her.

He guides her to her chair, and she grins as she digs into Mary’s amazing alfredo seafood lasagna. She’s thrilled and neither of us will do anything to ruin her excitement.



Gaspar

Seraphina’s quiet.

Way too quiet for her bubbly personality. I swear I felt her excitement drain away as we drove to her apartment, replaced with an anxiety I could see in the rigidity of her body. The phoniness of her smile. The clumsiness of her hands as she attempts to gather clothes and tuck them into her small suitcase.

I bend down and swipe the red tee she dropped on the dingy carpet. With a heady blush, she keeps her eyes downcast and accepts the shirt quickly, clutching the top to her chest.

“Thank you Daddy.”

Barely able to hear her whisper, I decide it’s time to end her worry. With Balthazar on the phone in the living room with some bullshit with the business, I want to enjoy my time with her. I used to be him and missed too much with the woman I loved. Now it’s too late with Kiersten, and I refuse to waste another gift of finding happiness.

Of finding Seraphina. “You moving in with us is one of the best things to

ever happen to me.”

The weight of my words eases the burden of her worry. Her hunched shoulders drop down and her head flies up, eyes meeting mine.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I amble to her bed and sit on the thick quilt I know my son bought for her to keep our girl warm. “I want you to feel the same way.”

“I do but I...”

No need to rush. She’ll spill if given enough time and encouragement. I keep my gaze pinpointed on her.

Finally, she scurries over and climbs on my lap. I cup the side of her face and kiss her temple. “Good girl.”

When I move my hand to her thigh, her delicate fingers clutch onto me with a ferocity that hardens my dick under her exquisite ass.

“I know this apartment isn’t great but I was able to rent it all by myself. I felt like I was making it, proving that I can take care of myself. Moving in with you makes me kind of feel like I failed.”

“Just because you have less money than me, doesn’t make me think less of you.”

My confession coaxes a wavering grin from her. She’s still not sure. “If we didn’t come into your life, you’d still be living here, making it on your own, probably moving into a bigger, better place as you gained more experience and got promoted, right?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“I *know* so. Didn’t I tell you how proud I am of you? What a good job you do for London? How highly she speaks of you?”

Too overcome to speak, she nods, soaking in my praise. “This is just shelter. All I care about is us being together. We’ll move in here with you if you want us to, but it would be awfully crowded.”

The teasing in my truth makes her giggle. “Living with us is practical not because you’re a failure.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that.” Her arms wrap around my neck, squeezing with all of her tiny might. “Thank you. I can’t wait to move in.”

“Then let’s skip the fight and go home.”

I’m not joking but she thinks I am, laughing and kissing my face the way she does when she shows her gratitude.

“I promised Melchior, so I have to go. But...”

Her meticulous inspection of my suit confuses me despite her seeming

approval.

“...I don’t know what to wear.”

I never paid much attention in the past because I was only there to see my son. But if memory serves me correctly, most of the women had on dresses, like going to a club. Which is totally unacceptable for my innocent girl. “Jeans and a sweater is fine.”

Her head tilts while she frowns. I don’t think she buys what I’m selling her so that her perfect body can be completely covered, but arguing isn’t in her nature. Damn it. If she gets there and feels out of place, I’ll feel like an ass. “Or if you have a dress—a *modest* dress—that should be good.”

Now she’s convinced with my revised suggestion and with a too brief peck on my cheek, she hops off my lap and hurries to her closet.

“I have one from Bree’s cousin’s wedding last winter.”

She carefully glides a garment bag from between pants and shirts crowded into the tight space and yanks down the zipper, revealing a red dress with a high neckline, sheer sleeves, and a billowy skirt. “As long as it’s not too short.”

With an expression full of earnestness, she shakes her head. “It comes to my knee, I promise.”

“Good. Go ahead and put it on.”

She clutches the material to her chest and starts walking as if she’s going to the bathroom. What the fuck? “Here. I want to watch.”

The rasping of my voice surprises me. All I do is think about her changing clothes, and I’m instantly hard and greedy for her.

“Okay, Daddy.”

With a wild blush, she grasps the hem, and slides my tee shirt up her body. Hard, pink nipples point in my direction tempting me to reach out and thumb the hard nubs.

Instead, I make myself to wait for her to kick off her shoes and drag down her leggings. Once she’s finally bare for me, I motion for her to spin around so I can enjoy her luscious body.

She twirls slowly, glancing over her shoulder as her ass, gorgeous with the faint outline of my handprint on her pale skin, comes into view. Without even trying, she’s a temptress.

“I have matching panties too.”

“Put them on.”

It takes every shred of willpower to not climb off this mattress and

pounce on her as she darts to the dresser. She slips out a small bundle from the drawer and steps into a red thong. The lingerie has to be her friend's idea. Seraphina would never pick out something so sexy. "Has anyone ever seen you in those?"

Because if they have, I'll send Melchior to carve out their eyeballs.

Terrified from my hoarse tone, she instantly covers her small breasts with her arm in protective mode and shakes her head furiously. "No. No one."

"Very good."

Her body softens, and she hurries to pull on the dress. Dazzling brown eyes flick to my face and then the floor, where her toes curl into the carpet. I know she craves my approval, which I am more than happy to give her. "You look incredible. Absolutely breathtaking."

She fluffs the skirt and whirls around. "I'm so glad you like it."

I did. Until I saw the cut out in the back. What the fuck? "Come here."

Obedient as ever, she rushes to me. I stand her between my legs and rotate her to face the mirror. Worry etches her expression as she watches me.

"Am I in trouble again?"

The breathless question almost makes me think she wishes she was. My girl likes her punishment. I drag my finger down her bare spine. She trembles under my touch and emits a slight moan. "Yes, because you tempt me too much."

I continue down her ass, fisting the fabric and lifting upward so I feel more of her silky skin as I tug the narrow strip between her cheeks. "If we had time, I'd shove this to the side and sink my cock into your pretty pink pussy. I'd fill you up with my come so you'd feel me with every step you take tonight."

When she arches back into my palm, I know she wishes the same thing. I cup her mound, feeling her own wetness drenching her lips and panties. I swipe through the cream and bring my finger to my mouth, sucking in the tip. "You taste good little one. Be ready for me to feast later."

I release her dress, disappointed as the material ripples down her legs and ruins the view. I clutch her hips and pepper kisses down the same path as earlier until I reach her lower back. I slightly bite, leaving my mark on her otherwise flawless skin. "Mine."

"Yes."

Despite her swaying body and clenched eyes, her tone infuses confidence. Perfect. She knows who she belongs to. "It's time to go. I'll get your suitcase

and then I'll send someone for the rest.”

I grab her bag and her hand, leading her out of the place for the very last time.



CHAPTER 34

Seraphina

I've read in books the cliché about feeling excitement in the air. I never really knew what the phrase meant or experienced the sensation until now. As Balthazar leads us to our seats, the arena pulses with energy. Thumping music, colorful flashing lights, audience members up and out of their seats milling around the ring and on the steps.

Balthazar squeezes my hand tight as he pushes through the crowd. I feel completely safe though with Gaspar close behind me. No one would ever dare to hurt me with these two hulking men.

Protecting me.

Spoiling me.

Loving me.

The thought warms me despite my bare legs. Love this fast may be improbable. Deep down I know it takes a long time to truly develop. However, they both treat me with affection and respect that will blossom into the real thing. I just know it.

Down, down we go on the stairs until we're in the front row, empty for just the three of us. At my seat, I try to shrug off the gigantic winter coat Gaspar bought me. Even though the jacket doesn't match my dress, they insisted I wear it after Balthazar had a meltdown from my naked back just like Daddy. Funny how similar yet different they are.

Balthazar grabs each lapel and tugs them together around my throat, almost squeezing my neck to uncomfortable. A shiver ripples through me

from the intensity of his emerald eyes as he stares down at me.

“No angel. You keep covered what belongs to us.”

As commanded, I let go of the button and he nods. “Good girl.”

While he kisses my forehead, I hear my name screamed from far away.

Melchior.

I smile as he bolts across the ring, jumps from the mat onto the concrete, and races toward us. He leaps up to the riser, leaning over the black bar separating us from the event floor and cups my face, kissing each cheek.

“I’m so glad you’re here baby girl.”

“Me too! Thank you for inviting me.”

Full of chaotic energy, he releases me and pretends to punch his brother in the stomach and then shakes his dad’s hand. Despite being a tough guy, I think he’s pleased they’ve come too. We really are building a family.

I’m part of a family.

I look from Gaspar who asks him about his opponent to Balthazar and back to Melchior. I had my brother and Quinn and have Alex and Bree, whom I all love and am grateful for. But I was the side character in their romance stories.

Now I’m in the middle of a relationship that’s mine. No one knows what the future holds but I could be a wife, maybe even a mother someday. My free hand goes instinctively to my stomach as my heart flutters from the possibility.

Balthazar immediately notices and grabs my shoulder, spinning me toward him. The panic exploding on his face isn’t what I expect.

“What’s wrong?”

Guilt floods me from his worry, and I smile, hoping to reassure him. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

I can’t help but laugh a little. “I’m just so happy to be here with all of you.”

Suddenly, I’m smashed against his chest with his arms like steel around me. “You scared me angel.”

“Sorry.”

My words muffle against his dress shirt, but I think he hears me with his lips on the top of my head.

Melchior tugs on my sleeve. “Give me a kiss for luck.”

Balthazar growls deep in his throat but loosens his grip. I give a quick peck on Melchior’s cheek, and he throws back his head and howls. I laugh

again from his antics and his brother's possessiveness over a man who does not want me except as a friend.

He bolts to the ring again, chatting with a man I assume to be his trainer while a referee attempts to get him and his opponent to the center.

Through the crowd noise, I think they're trash talking a bit, hurling insults as they bounce up and down, drinking water, and receiving last minute instructions.

Uncertain how genuine their disgust is for each other, I assume the slights are used to stir up the audience. Their efforts work as the volume escalates to a roar.

I grab Gaspar's hand wanting to feel more settled, and the effect of his touch is instantaneous as he squeezes my fingers, seemingly happy I reached for him.

The pleasure evaporates when something catches his attention from the ring. I follow his line of sight to find Melchior's enemy pointing at me. I have no idea what he's saying, but none of them like it. Gaspar clutches me to him while Balthazar catapults over the railing with one hand and sprints toward the man.

Melchior gets there first and with one hit to his jaw, the man sprawls on the mat. Balthazar jumps into the brawl yanking the guy up by his throat. Chaos ensues with their teams crowding around them trying to break up the wrong match.

Nausea swirls in my stomach from the rage on Balthazar's face, and I turn to Gaspar. When I look up at him, the same fury darkens his expression. I should never have come here. Balthazar is right—I can't handle this violence.

I cup his cheeks. "Please make them stop. I don't want them to fight. I don't want them to get hurt."

"One, I would never leave you alone. Two, no one disrespects you."

He sounds so resolute, so adamant, I clutch him back just as tight. Despite being distraught over the possibility of Balthazar and Melchior being injured, I feel so cherished by them.

"Look, it's broken up and they're fine."

I spin back, locked down with one of his arms across my chest and the other wrapped around my waist. Grateful he's right, I blow out a deep breath. The unconscious challenger is being carried out and Balthazar heads our way, while Melchior speaks with a man who seems to be in charge.

Balthazar still seems furious with his face pinched and his hands balled into fists. Although his gaze burns into me, he walks instead of runs and uses the steps rather than hurtling over the barrier, which are good signs. “Are you all right?”

“I’m pissed as hell. That motherfucker shouldn’t even be thinking about you let alone trying to bargain for you. Like we’d fucking use you as a prize.”

Gaspar snarls and swears above my head. “He’ll regret that.”

“M and I will make sure Dad.”

They seem to agree to something I don’t understand.

I don’t think I want to understand.

Instead, I reach for his hand. We need to get back to where we were before—enjoying an evening out together as a family.

My plan works, and he softens. Finally, he grins, bringing my fingers to his lips and kissing them. I relax too and smile in return.

Cheers blast around us, and I figure out from the similarity of the set up in the ring, the event is back on with Melchior fighting a different rival. They knock fists and the referee drops his arm.

Melchior is a mad man. He jumps on the guy, dragging him down instantly, and pummels into his side. The man winces from the blows, twisting and trying to shove him off.

Yet, he fails because Melchior’s so relentless. Every time they get pulled apart, he goes right back kicking and striking him until the man finally stays down.

A harsh bell rings through the clamor, and Rudolph slides onto the mat, jumping up and grabbing Melchior in celebration. With Melchior’s legs wrapped around Rudolph’s waist, he pumps his arm in the air until a group rushes them and I lose sight of them in the commotion.

Gaspar dips down to my ear. “What did you think?”

“It was wild and fast and...totally crazy.”

His chuckle blows on my cheek. “Exactly. Just like my son.”

I have to laugh too. He’s absolutely right. “I love that he found his passion.”

Now his lips find my temple. “Just like I have, little one.”

I squeeze his forearm. “Me too Daddy.”

A growl rumbles in his chest, and his hardness presses into my back. Funny how just the thought of him making love to me makes my panties wet again.

The crowd begins to dissipate, with seats around us emptying. I glance up toward the mezzanine where long lines have formed at the bar. But we don't move until Balthazar tugs me toward him.

"Let's go congratulate my brother."

Gaspar releases my body only to grasp my other hand. They keep me sandwiched between them across our aisle, down the last few steps, and past the ring toward a hallway. A security guard nods at Balthazar and removes a rope blocking the area.

"Good evening sir."

Although he doesn't acknowledge him, I can't ignore the man. "Thank you."

"You're welcome miss."

Simultaneously, both Balthazar and Gaspar chuckle. I'm not sure what's humorous but I'm happy they're calm now after what happened earlier with that strange man thinking he could win me. So weird.

We stop in front of a metal door that looks like a ferocious tiger attacked the surface with its claws there's so many scratches. Balthazar grips the back of my neck and drags me to him so his cheek brushes mine.

"I need to talk business with Dad for a minute. Go on in. Melchior is inside. It's safe."

Trusting all three of them, I don't have any doubt. I kiss him, then Gaspar before entering what I learn is a locker room. Clothes and towels are strewn across the three benches. I head to the plastic chairs on the opposite side.

The room is quiet except for the sound of the shower. I don't want to startle him when he comes out, so I yell toward the bathroom area but keep my eyes averted. "Hi Melchior. It's me, Seraphina."

"Baby girl!"

My heart flutters in my chest from how happy he sounds. Along with my romance, I have a new friend too. "No rush. I'll wait for you."

"It'll be a while. Rude's in here with me."

His deep laugh floats through the steamy air along with a slap of skin. I hear a groan and then a grunt from two very different masculine voices.

My entire body tingles from the thought of them doing what they're doing. Wrong and sick to wish I could watch them, but I do anyway.

I force myself to push the idea out of my head and busy myself cleaning up the mess. I fold the towels into two neat stacks and then make a pile of shirts, shorts and socks, setting the bundle next to a jacket and pair of running

shoes.

“Fuck baby. You’re milking my cock so hard I’m about to come in your ass already.”

Oh my goodness. I race to the sink and wash my hands, trying to drown out the filthy talk turning me on.

The reflection in the mirror of the shower curtain billowing catches my eye. I should turn away. Instead, I look, catching glimpses of Melchior thrusting into Rudolph.

Powerful legs spread wide with his big hands on Rude’s hips. He drives deep and slow, drawing out and then slamming back in. Over and over all the while Rude keeps up with the onslaught with his palms smashed against the tile.

As if he knows I’m being a dirty pervert, Melchior glances at me. Hooded eyes meet mine and a wicked grin twists his lips. He fists the white shower curtain and yanks the hooks across the rod, giving me a full view of both of them.

The image steals my breath.

Both men are incredibly beautiful.

Lean and sculpted, with water sluicing over their hard bodies, they move in tandem enjoying an intimacy that I think is more than just friends.

Rudolph seems to sense my voyeurism and twists his gaze toward me. The same mischievous smile spreads on his face, and he winks as if he’s pleased for an audience.

The thrusts speed up. Melchior pounds into him with a frenzy until his eyes clench shut and he throws his head back roaring out swear words like Balthazar does.

When he reaches around Rudolph’s hip and grabs his cock, I find myself leaning closer to watch. They jack him together, until Rudolph jolts and comes all over their hands, entwined even after he collapses back into Melchior.

I knew it! They care about each other more than they want to admit.

I also know I am a disgusting person. I spin around and run back to my chair with their laughter echoing behind me.

“Don’t worry baby girl. It’s our secret. I won’t tell them you like to watch.”

Despite his teasing tone, I believe him. He won’t tell his brother or his father. Which doesn’t make me feel a whole lot better. I shouldn’t be this sex

crazed. What is happening to me?



Melchior

I don't know what is happening to me, but I fucking like it.

Seraphina has this naughty/nice thing going for her that's irresistible.

Rude and I had the best sex ever and not just because of my win. That girl devouring us with her eyes drove us both over the edge.

Plus she makes my brother and father happy too, giving me more shit to fuck with them about. All around a win.

I toss my towel onto the counter and stride into locker room to get dressed. Seraphina diverts her gaze, fiddling with a button on the huge coat drowning her and concealing the gorgeous red dress underneath. Probably my brother or my father's idea if I had to guess. Jealous possessive bastards.

"You've seen me naked twice now. You don't have to hide your eyes."

Her nervous laughter cracks me up.

"I know, but you deserve privacy."

I toss my head in the direction of Rude who's still drying off in front of the mirror. "De we look like we care about privacy."

"No I guess not."

Her attention remains on the jacket until I yank on my boxer briefs and jeans. Then her head flies up and I get to see her magnificent face with her radiant smile. I'm happy to see her too. "What did you think?"

"It was crazy but I loved it."

"Kind of like all of us."

A slight frown steals her smile until the realization of my meaning comes through.

"Exactly. We're unique but that doesn't make it wrong."

The confidence in her tone wanes at the end. I'm thrilled to confirm what she doubts. "Not wrong at all."

Rude ambles up behind me and his big hands wrap around my shoulders, giving me a massage the way I adore. "Absolutely nothing wrong at all."

My eyes drift shut as he kneads the muscles, and I give myself to his ministrations.

“Hi Rude.”

“Hi baby girl. Anytime you want to watch, you let me know. Your boy here fucks like a mad man when you’re around.”

No answer. I’m not surprised. She has to work out in her own head that she’s a dirty girl.

The squeak of the door ends my reverie, and I bolt in front of Seraphina not relaxing until my brother and father waltz in. Thank fuck.

I nod to Balthazar as I return to Rude for more bodywork. “Announce yourself first next time. I almost had to kick your ass to protect our girl.”

As expected, he ignores my admonishment and beelines straight to her. Dad comes our way, shaking Rude’s hand and telling me good job.

“I know.”

He rolls his eyes from my arrogance and smug smirk. But he’s not annoyed. He’s happy.

For the first time in years, he’s genuinely happy. Which I’m glad to see even if I never tell him.

Dad keeps one eye on Seraphina while he chats with Rude, getting pissed all over again when they discuss that idiot threatening to claim her as winnings. Stupid fucker.

All he wins is a permanent stay in our dungeon. Which is now full, thanks to Seraphina, keeping me supplied with practice dummies for a very long time.

The light in a room full of darkness, she has no idea how much she’s transformed our lives. Everyone of us gravitates to her like she’s our sun, spinning around in her orbit, vying to get the closest.

Even though I’m not fucking her, I still want my spot. I angle my head toward her. “So you’re coming back for the next fight, right baby girl?”

Her stunning smile, lit up all for me, launches me to first place more than any victory ever could.

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

When she tries to step closer, probably to engulf me in one of her famous hugs, Balthazar locks her down with his arms wrapped around her like an octopus.

All I do is laugh at his possessiveness. She’ll be in my life just as much as his so he’s going to have to learn to deal with his jealousy.



CHAPTER 35

Seraphina

When I try to tug my hand out of Gaspar's, he squeezes me tighter. I laugh from his obstinacy. "I have to go. They're waiting for me."

"I'm never letting you go, little one."

His gruff tone ignites the fire always simmering under the surface when I'm with him. "I just meant for dinner. It's only a few hours and then Balthazar will bring me back."

Cyber Monday has kept Balthazar busy since the middle of the night. He left our bed at midnight, and I never saw him again all day. Since the law office doesn't re-open from the holiday until tomorrow, Gaspar kept me busy today decorating the Christmas trees we cut down from the farm, but I still missed him so much.

Balthazar promised to pick me up at nine, and I know he will be prompt, so I need to get inside before Bree comes out looking for me.

"Your friend cares about you, but we do too. Don't let anything she says make you doubt that."

Oh, now I get what's wrong. He thinks Bree will convince me to leave Balthazar and thus him. "She won't. Nothing will change."

A scowl still lines his face. I gently rub my fingertips across his forehead and down his cheeks to his scruff that I love. He presses into my touch as if he can't get enough of my affection either. "Balthazar will bring me home, where I belong."

Desire flashes in his face. "I want you in my bed tonight."

There's no way I can refuse. "Okay Daddy."

My words wake the beast, and he attacks me, fisting my hair and clutching my chin. He tilts my head back, forcing my mouth open and plunges deep.

I can't breathe, and he doesn't care.

He owns my heart, my head, even my oxygen, devouring me in the darkness of my friend's porch. I give myself to him, tasting the fiery desire he has for me matching my own for him.

This relationship is more than sex but right now it's all I can think about.

I moan around his tongue, trying to find a way to tell him how much I need him too, but he draws back, panting into my lips.

"I value you too much to fuck you on a doorstep, little one."

Unexpected tears spring in my eyes from the sincerity of his hoarse admission. In the haze of lust, I could have easily given in to temptation.

For him to rein in his desire out of respect for me, overwhelms my emotions. I nod and wrap my arms around him, thanking him without words so he doesn't know I'm about ready to cry.

When he strokes over my head and down my braid, I know he's soothing me just as much as himself. He inhales deeply and then kisses my forehead.

"I don't want to let you go."

"I don't want you too either." I grab onto his jacket, drawing up my courage. I've talked dirty over the phone but never in person. But Gaspar makes me feel brave. "Tonight, when I'm in your bed, I want your hands all over me."

His thick fingers sink into my hair, gripping the strands to the point of pain and hauling me up to my tiptoes.

"My hands and my tongue and my cock will be everywhere on you, have no doubt."

"I don't."

"Good." He growls and lowers me to my feet. "Now I have to get in my vehicle before your friend sees how hard you've made me."

I can't help but look. His bulge is enormous in his pants, and I wish I didn't cause him such pain. "Okay, I'll see you in a few hours."

Swear words rip through the chilly air as he strides to his enormous luxury SUV, slamming the door after he climbs in. My heart flutters that he doesn't drive away, ensuring I make it inside safe before he leaves.

I blow kisses to him and then tap on the door before twisting the knob.

“Hey, knock, knock. I’m here.”

“In the kitchen!”

Bree sounds thrilled to see me, and I realize I’m just as ecstatic. I’ve missed my friends. I follow the enticing scent of garlic interlaced with rosemary.

Three flutes of champagne line the counter next to the stove where she’s whipping homemade mashed potatoes. Even though she hates them, she makes them for Alex when she’s in a good mood since they’re his favorite.

I grab the stack of plates and start setting the table. “It smells amazing in here. What are we celebrating?”

When she glances at me over her shoulder, I swear she glows happier than I’ve ever seen her. I want to run over and hug her but restrain myself since she’s got her hands full with a hot pan.

She nods toward the door leading out to their small deck. “We were going to tell you together but since he’s outside grilling the steaks, I’ll tell you.”

I laugh. “Grilling in December?”

Her giggle accompanies mine. “I know, I know. But he wanted to.”

After settling the pot on the burner, she spins around and points to her ring finger that is now decorated with a square diamond.

“We’re getting married!”

Oh my god! I scream too and jump into her arms. “I can’t believe it. Congratulations!”

“Thank you!”

We squeeze each other tight. “How did it all happen?”

She releases me, and I grab her wrist, so I can study the sparkling rock. “It’s really, really beautiful.”

“Thank you. He did good, didn’t he?”

I’m so proud of Alex. My brother would be proud of his best friend too. “Yes!”

“Anyway, Alex was going to propose at Christmas and called my parents for permission.”

“So sweet!”

“I know! Anyway, when my grandmother found out she wanted to give us money for a downpayment on a house since she knows we’ve been saving up. But with the tax implications and end of the year and all that, we have to be married so she can give us as much as possible. So she’s giving us thirty-four thousand dollars now and again after the first of the year!”

I can't help but shriek again. "Oh my gosh! That's so much money!"

"It's incredible. It doubles what we already have so our mortgage payment is going to be much more affordable."

"Wow! What a gift."

"But that means we have to host the wedding in the next two weeks. We're going to keep it simple and small, but I still want you to be my maid of honor."

Instead of shouting this time, I tear up. How can I not bawl when my almost sister is getting married and wants me to stand up right beside her?

"Yes, of course. I would love it. I'm honored. I'm so happy. I'm..."

I stop babbling and embrace her again.

A squeak sounds behind her from the patio door, and I open my eyes. Her fiancé pulses with just as much joy, and I reach for him too. "Group hug."

"Only for a second then we have to eat. I don't want it going cold."

Bree playfully bops him on the head. "We're having a moment."

"But it's filet mignon!"

Both of us laugh at his fake whine. Alex usually isn't so playful, so I know how excited he is.

We have a wedding to plan, so we do have to get busy. But first we eat because I'm starving too.



Balthazar

Melissa has decided to stop eating.

I guess starvation is her way of escaping from the inhospitable and unpleasant accommodations she's become accustomed to. Well, that's too damn bad.

I crouch down in front of her. "How long did Seraphina live with you?"

No answer. The bitch turns her face to the floor. Not that I don't enjoy her smashed to the concrete, but I demand a response. I shove my fingers around her chin. "How long?"

She flinches from me screaming at her.

“E...eleven years.”

I release her slimy, swollen skin. “That’s right since she escaped for two years until her brother passed away.”

Something incoherent blubbers from her mouth that sounds like she’s defending herself. Nothing angers me more than someone who hurt my angel and then tries to deny how much they tormented her. “Guess what? You get to be our guest for the same amount of time. So eleven... Hell. You know what? Let’s make that thirteen years just for shits and giggles.”

I point to the physician waiting patiently by the door for my command. “This is Dr. Halston. She likes to make the guilty pay for their crimes too. She’s going to set you up with a feeding tube so that you’ll be with us for at least the next decade. Maybe longer. Seems fair, right? After what you did to Seraphina.”

Her gnarled hand grabs at my foot, and I kick her off. Can’t have blood on my shoe when I pick up my girl.

Melissa begs for me to leave her alone, which makes me laugh. I nod to Doc H, who smiles with an evil glint flashing in her eager expression. She has her own issues that she enjoys working out on the guests in our dungeon. “Remember no anesthesia or pain killers. Make it hurt as much as possible.”

The woman eyes her prey with anticipation. “Oh, I plan to.”

“Excellent.”

I let her get to work and hustle upstairs to my car. I don’t want to be late picking up Seraphina. The same worry plaguing Dad troubles me. Tonight is the first time she’s seen her friends since she accepted that she is ours.

If Bree casts doubt in her mind about us moving in together, I’ll have to fight like hell to overcome any reluctance to make us permanent.

I easily navigate the roads this late in the evening since most people are back to their regular schedules of work and school. Proven by the full parking lot at her friends’ apartment, which forces me to park by the office with the only empty spots.

In the bright moonlight, the silhouette of a woman can be seen on their porch. If that’s Seraphina, I’m going to lose my shit. She had better not be out here all alone. I charge in her direction. “Angel?”

My girl bolts to me, grinning and laughing before launching herself at me.

Just as eager, I welcome her sheathed to my body with her legs wrapped around my waist and her arms curled around my neck. “What the fuck are

you doing out here alone and in the dark?”

Her face falls, killing me that I hurt her with my harsh tone.

“I was watching for you out the window and when I saw your car, I came outside. I missed you.”

Now she probably regrets being excited to see me since I’m such an asshole. “Look at me.”

When she lifts her head, all I see is her frown and downcast eyes that won’t meet mine. “I missed you too, but I don’t want you to put yourself in danger. You are never to be outside by yourself.”

“I...I thought it was okay since it’s a safe neighborhood.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re too precious to take any risks.”

Now I earn her gaze. “You always want to protect me.”

Not a question. “Yes.”

The realization slams into me like a bus. I’ve been way too careless with her security. Tomorrow I will assign a bodyguard to her anytime my father, brother, or I am not with her. The decision relaxes me, and I finally can adore her the way she deserves. “Let me get you home so I can take care of you.”

“Okay but please walk slow so we can enjoy the snow.”

Absolutely stunning as she tilts back and sticks out her tongue, catching the flakes falling a lot heavier than when I first got here. I approve her request and meander back to the passenger side. My reward is a multitude of kisses all over my face until she finally plants one my lips.

“I’m falling in love with you Balthazar Wiseman.”

My cock, already rock hard, pulses in the cradle of her hips from her whisper. “I’m already in love with you Seraphina Snow.”

Her pupils dilate and her thighs squeeze my torso, her pussy seeking friction of its own accord. “Then please take me home and never let me go.”

“Done.”

I tuck her inside my vehicle, and as soon as I’m in the driver’s seat, she reaches for me. Funny how I was concerned she’d be full of doubt when I came for her and she’s the exact opposite. I entwine our fingers, start the car, and head for the house. “Did you have fun?”

She turns to face me as much as her seatbelt allows the way I relish. “Yes! They got engaged and Bree asked me to be her maid of honor.”

Hopefully, her excitement of marriage is contagious since she’ll be wearing my ring soon. “I’m happy for them.”

“Me too.”

Her other hand wraps around my bicep in her eagerness to tell me all the details, and I realize I need to hire a driver too so I can touch her as much as she wants to touch me.

“They have to host the wedding before the end of the year because of taxes or something for money her grandmother is gifting them for a down payment on the house they’re saving up for. So I told her I would do everything I can to help her.”

“That’s fast.”

“I know but I think we have most of what she wants figured out.”

A growl vibrates in my throat when her hands slide from my body to her little bag. She giggles as if I’m kidding and slides out a little notebook and pen. Official and efficient, she flips the cover and taps on a list covering the paper.

“She wants a simple dress. I’m going to wear emerald green. The flowers are white. They’re going to have a dessert reception, and our friend who owns a bakery is going to bake the cake, cupcakes, and cookies. The only issue is the location. So many places are already booked for the holidays.”

The worry in her voice can easily be eliminated. “How about we host it at our house?”

“Our...house?” The reminder of our relationship makes her blush. “Really?”

Her stunned delight is adorable. “Of course. It’s your home too and your friends are welcome anytime. When do you want to host it?”

“The Saturday after next?”

“Done.”

“Oh my gosh!” She grabs onto me again, finally, and peppers kisses on my cheek. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome.”

“I have to call Bree and let her know.”

I nod approval and she grabs her phone. I’m a fucking genius. Now the friends will think I’m a hero and hopefully never try to convince her otherwise.



CHAPTER 36

Seraphina

I feel so fancy.

I look fancy too.

My reflection in the wall of mirrors behind the round platform glistens from the flute of champagne in my hand. This is so much fun. I'm not the only one who loves being here to help Bree pick out her wedding dress.

Bree's mom and grandmother chat in giddy tones while they watch for my friend to come out from behind the curtain while Alex's mother looks at a shelf lined with sparkly belts. I think she's too excited to sit still.

With the help of the bridal shop assistant, Bree steps from the dressing room, and my heart explodes from her smile.

She's gorgeous, glowing with so much anticipation. I want to jump up and hug her but remain seated so as not to wrinkle the silky material or spill my drink.

The other women don't hold back, rushing to her. I understand. If my own mom were here, maybe she'd be the same way. I don't remember her anymore, so I don't know.

The sensation is strange. I miss the idea of her but not her as a person. I don't even know what she looked like, since Gabriel and I never had any photos or anything. He's all I remember of my family.

Maybe that's why I fit in with Balthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior. I've been surrounded more by men than women with my brother, Alex, and their football buddies. Quinn and especially Bree have been the only females in

my life who love me.

Our eyes meet in the reflection through the chaos, and she offers me a hesitant smile. “Do you like it?”

I nod. “I love it. You look absolutely breathtaking.”

The woman guides her to climb onto the small podium, which allows us to fully see the appliques on the back and the glistening train. “But more importantly—what do you think?”

“I love it too.”

She turns slowly to see the gown from all angles.

“I was worried I’d have to settle since I have to buy one off the rack. But it’s perfect. It’s exactly what I wanted.”

I had the same fear since her choices would be limited without time to order one to ship here. But she’s thrilled and I’m relieved. Everything really is coming together.

While the stylist navigates the frenzy with the mothers and grandmother all asking questions and making suggestions, I wander through the bridesmaid section.

We planned on green but there aren’t any on either rack. I find a cranberry dress with a smooth silk top, lacy flare skirt, and velvet belt with a side-bow. The style is minimal but fun.

I slip the hanger off the bar and drape the material over my arm, returning to my seat. Perfect timing because the assistant is pinning a sparkly tiara to Bree’s hair.

She said she didn’t want one, but the veil looks amazing. The picture is complete, and I get sappy with emotion. “Now you really look like a bride.”

Her own laughter and tears mingle with the other ladies while she nods. I could stare at her forever, but the appointment comes to an end and Bree returns to the dressing room. Her mom turns her focus to me, running her fingers over the dress in my lap.

“That’s adorable. Is it your bridesmaid dress?”

I hold up my find for her to see the design better. “What do you think? Bree and I talked about green, but they didn’t have any. I thought this one is pretty.”

“I think so too. You should try it on.”

I’m glad her mother approves. With everything so quick, I want her to be as involved as possible and like what we planned out.

Once Bree comes out in her regular clothes but still floating with joy, I

switch places with her. They wait on the bench sipping champagne, and I slip behind the curtain.

A flutter quivers through my stomach from the thought of me trying on a wedding gown too someday. The way Balthazar talks that day will be sooner rather than later.

The bridesmaids dress slides on easily, fitting just right. I hope Bree likes it too.

I step out and twirl around to show her how playful the style is. She laughs and hops up, giving me the three-sixty.

“You look beautiful. The color is great with your skin and hair.”

Feeling silly, I spin one more time. “Sold!”

“Only to me, angel.”

I almost tumble hearing Balthazar’s voice. Bree jumps too.

He looks so handsome in his expensive suit and sexy smile. I bolt to him, and he catches me in his arms, squeezing me tight and nuzzling my neck.

Just like always, I can’t get enough of him and breathe deep, letting his cologne and his strength settle me. “What are you doing here?”

“I missed you.”

A chorus of ooh’s and ah’s echoes behind us, reminding me we have an audience. My face warms, and I attempt to release Balthazar and turn around. Instead, he tucks me into his side, making me feel loved and safe.

I remember my manners and introduce him to everyone. I blush even harder when Bree’s grandmother tells him he’s quite the looker, which I believe is a compliment the way everyone laughs and agrees.

Except Bree. Her smile is lukewarm. She’s still skeptical. Hopefully seeing me happy will help her come around and stop doubting him.

Needing to return the focus back to her and the wedding since this is her special time, I tell them I need to change before they kick us out because the shop is getting ready to close.

Balthazar growls when I climb out of his embrace and tips down to my ear. “Hurry or I’ll follow you in there knowing your naked only a few feet from me. I’d love to fuck you in front of these mirrors and watch you come from every angle.”

His threat is low enough only I can hear, I think. I hope.

I do hurry ignoring my throbbing pussy and aching nipples. I’d die if he came for me with Bree’s family here.



Balthazar

I don't give a damn what anyone thinks of me. But Seraphina does so I restrain myself from following her into the dressing room and fucking her like my bride.

Instead, I grin and tolerate the questions the ladies pepper me with regarding my relationship with Seraphina. Radiating charm, of course, I win their approval with the truth—Seraphina is an angel and I'm a lucky bastard to have a girl like her.

The ploy works except on Bree. She continues to give me a suspicious scowl. No worries. I'm in this for the long haul and will win her over.

Seraphina exits the dressing room and practically floats to me. I can't help but meet her halfway. The need to touch her overrides everything else.

I escort her to the counter and slide out my card, holding up the plastic so the clerk understands my meaning. "Everything they've selected."

She nods and starts tapping keys on the register. "Yes sir."

Bree's head whips in my direction. "You don't have to do that."

I give her my best smile. "It's our present to you. From Seraphina and me."

Both my girl and her friend gasp, since I'm shocking them simultaneously.

Alex's mother eyes me with appreciation. "Aren't you hosting the reception too?"

My hand slides from Seraphina's waist to her stomach where I hope my baby grows. "We are. It's our pleasure."

I want to make very clear that our generosity is just that—*ours*. Apparent to everyone that we're a couple, united in our relationship as well as intentions even if we're not yet on paper.

The woman turns to the others. "Wow! That's so wonderful. Even though it's last minute, everything is going to be just perfect."

They murmur the way ladies do while the bridal excitement overcomes

them. I only hear Seraphina though when she gazes up at me full of her own admiration.

“Thank you for all of this. I don’t know what to say.”

“You’re welcome.” I kiss her forehead. “It’s just the beginning.”

While I sign the screen, she doles out hugs and humble *your welcomes* from their boisterous gratitude over our gifts. One more step in the journey to convince her friend and make her accept me for Seraphina’s sake.

Grateful to have her alone again, I ensure she’s bundled up tight and escort her to my vehicle.

Her furry boots stop a few feet from the passenger side. “It’s not your sports car?”

“No. With the snow, I want to make sure I keep you safe. The sedan has better traction.”

My concern earns me a huge hug. “You’re so good to me.”

Wait until she sees what’s next. “Because I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Only pure honesty reverberates in her voice against my chest. We really are filling up her tenuous heart.

As always, she allows me to maneuver her as I want, and I tuck her into the seat and drag her seatbelt across her body. I kiss her as I click the buckle. When she draws in a shaky breath, I realize she senses the enormity of our evening together too.

She instantly reaches for me when I climb in, and I achieve the reward of both her hands curling around mine after I hit the ignition and shift. Just the way I want—her desperate for me and my touch.

We take off just as her mouth opens.

“You’re so amazing. I don’t know how I’ll pay you back but thank you for buying our dresses.”

I chuckle from her naiveté. “My money is your money. There’s no *paying back*.”

A small frown steals her smile. “But it was so much.”

Honestly, I didn’t even look since the amount is trivial to me. “Are you happy?”

“Yes!”

All earnest and cute, she nods furiously.

“Do you think Bree’s happy?”

“Yes.”

“Then money well spent.”

The grimace remains. She knows better than to argue even though she wants to.

She slumps against her seat, all of her normal bubbly demeanor missing. I understand her guilt, but this extended silence concerns me. Not a word is spoken between us as I drive us home.

I park in front of the house, yet she fails to notice. All she seems to see is our hands entwined together. She stares at our coupled fingers, lost in her thoughts.

The worry frowning her forehead hurts me. She seemed to have a good time shopping with her friend so I’m not sure what changed between then and now. “What’s wrong, angel?”

“Do you think I have emotional problems?”

What the fuck? “No way in hell. Why would you ask me that?”

She bristles from my furious tone. I feel bad for upsetting her. But damn. I absolutely do not understand why she would think something as crazy as that.

“Being with Bree’s mom and grandma and Alex’s mom, made me think about my own mother. I don’t remember her. I know some things about her that my brother told me, but I have no memories of her on my own.”

“You were really little when she left. You can’t expect to remember.”

“I know. But shouldn’t I miss her? Shouldn’t I miss my mom?”

Her vulnerability terrifies me when I never thought I could be terrified. The fears seem to be a slippery slope to her questioning me, questioning us. “You can’t miss what you didn’t have.”

“I read this book once about the psychological effects of a girl not having a mother. It talked about unhealthy relationships and behaviors. Maybe that’s me.”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this fragile. Despite my fear, I breathe deep and keep my voice calm. “I’m not a doctor but you’re the most loving person I know. You’re easy to love too. Look at Bree and Alex and all your other friends. I mean fuck my dad and brother and I fucking fight over you all the time.”

Her eyes sink shut, and she sighs. “Maybe that’s why I’m in a relationship like this because I’m broken or something.”

God damn it. I shove open my door and fly to hers. I yank her out of the car and lock her ass down with my hands on both sides of her head, forcing

her to look at me. “You’re not anything but perfect. There’s nothing wrong with you. Even if there is, I don’t give a damn.”

She opens her mouth to argue. Too late. “If you think anything you say or do is going to get you away from me, you are mistaken. This is it. You and me together no matter what.”

A budding smile adorns her lips. “No matter what.”

Only a whisper but still agreement. I say it loud. “You are mine.”

The grin finally beams at full wattage. “I am yours.”

Hopefully, she no longer has any doubt. If she ever does, I’ll work my ass off so she’ll believe me.



CHAPTER 37

Balthazar

All week Seraphina's seemed fine. Busy with preparations for Bree's wedding in a few days, she never once faltered. Yet I can't get our conversation out of my head. How can someone so amazing ever think she's damaged.

Tonight, hopefully once and for all, I will convince her.

When I pull into the lot of the park hosting the city's official holiday celebration, she goes completely silent in the good way.

She strains forward to try and see all the way to the top of the seventy-foot Christmas tree. I lift my arm and kiss both of her hands wrapped around mine. "Let's go check it out in person."

My suggestion rouses her, and she jumps out of the car before I make it around to her side. The wonder pulsing in her expression keeps me from reprimanding her about not letting me take care of her.

Tiny as she is, nothing will stand in her way. She grabs my hand, tugging me along down the path strewn with white lights in the bushes and flickering candles in glass jars lining the sidewalk.

When we reach the clearing, she stops. Not just because of the festive display.

A plaid blanket spreads across the dormant grass surrounded by warmers. A tray holds mugs of cocoa and a plate of cookies. A small choir circles the same outstanding singer from the festival last month.

As soon as the woman catches sight of us, she motions to the chorus

surrounding her and they open with *We Three Kings*, Seraphina's favorite song.

Seraphina's gaze lasers on our little feast of her favorite goodies, then the musical group, and then to me. Too astonished for words, she gapes at me. "It's all for you angel."

I guide her to the cozy space and assist her in carefully lowering down. Being a big man who never sits on the ground, I have to manipulate myself too, accompanied by her giggles, to the cover.

Definitely flexing for love but she's worth the effort. Full of her own emotions, she scrambles to settle between my legs, her back to my chest. She needs to cuddle, and I always have to give her what she needs.

"This is absolutely incredible. I've never had anyone do anything this wonderful for me before."

The crack in her voice wrecks me. I can't have her cry when I propose. I engulf her with a reverse hug. "The rest of your life will always be this wonderful as my wife."

I yank off her mitten and glide the ring from my pocket onto her trembling finger. I'm moving too fast and the words I planned to say evaporate because I can't wait any longer.

This time she surprises me. I expect her to spin around and attack me with kisses. Instead, she stays completely still.

"You want to marry me?"

"More than anything I've ever wanted."

Her shaking hand remains suspended in the air as she stares at the gigantic diamond. I realize I need to slow down and convince her brain what her heart already knows. "Christmas is your favorite time of year. I wanted to make the season that much more special for you with our engagement. But I can't lie angel. There's no way in hell I could wait until next year."

The truth releases some of her tension, and she sinks back into me with a giggle. Thank fuck. I confess the rest. "When we go to your friends' wedding. London's fundraiser, M's fights, everywhere—I want everyone to know you're mine."

"That's important to you?"

I can't believe she has to ask. "Fuck yes it's important to me. My rock on your finger signifies you belong to me. The world will know you're mine—my fiancée."

The squirm of happiness I've been waiting for finally wiggles in her

body. “I like that.”

“Then I’ll put another ring on to show you’re my wife. Then babies in your belly that I want everyone to see so they know I’m inside you.”

Finally, she looks back at me. I’ve never seen her more beautiful than in this moment.

“Will you wear my ring too? I want everyone to know you’re my husband.”

My cock hardens into stone from her request. The thought never crossed my mind before, but I love the idea. “Yeah, angel. I’ll wear your ring and never take it off.”

Like a top, she twirls around and pounces, straddling and kissing me with a fervor I’ve never experienced from her.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! I will marry you!”

Funny since I didn’t ask but that’s okay. I’ll take her acceptance just like I took all of her other firsts including becoming a wife and mother. “Settle down angel or I’ll end up fucking you right here in the park with all of them watching.”

With a few last pecks, she cups my face and grins at me. “Okay. I’ll be good.”

“That’s dangerous too.”

She laughs and awkwardly climbs off my lap, back to her original position. Once she settles against my chest, I grab her hot chocolate. I’ll let her enjoy her romantic Christmas proposal for as long as she wants.



CHAPTER 38

Melchior

Out of the corner of my eye as I pass the dining room doorway, I catch sight of Seraphina talking to a guy I assume to be the caterer. I knew he's supposed to be here early this morning before she went to work so that's fine. What's not fine is Seraphina.

She's not smiling.

Seraphina always smiles.

If she's not smiling, something's wrong.

And, I'm pissed.

I backtrack my steps in the hallway and join their discussion.

The man has style, I'll give him that. In a slim fitting navy blue suit with sleek black loafers and a hot pink handkerchief, he sets his own trend and pulls off the look impressively.

However, he also has my sister-in-law slash step-mommy frowning. Which I will end just as impressively.

He gives me a long side glance, showing his appreciation of my awesomeness with a quirked eyebrow before he returns his attention back to her. "I think we want something more sophisticated than that, don't we? This is a wedding in a mansion, not a potluck in the park."

Condescending bastard.

Seraphina nods. "I know that but they're Alex's favorite, and I want—"

"Well, if we're actually even going to have potatoes..." He sniffs his disapproval. "...then they should at least be Hasselbeck or Romanoff."

Strike three motherfucker.

I keep my fury in check and beeline to Seraphina. “Hi baby girl.”

A hesitant smile perks up her pretty face. Although I know she hates to be rescued, I have to. She will not squirm except in happiness.

I gently clutch her delicate hand and lift her fingers for the moron to get a closer look at the eighteen-carat stone. “Ever see a rock like that before?”

Fucker swallows hard. He’s not a fool, catching the antagonistic tone floating in my question.

“No, no I haven’t. It’s gorgeous.”

“So, let me ask you something. As you stand in the middle of a mansion with a beautiful woman wearing an engagement ring like this, who do you think the boss is?”

All the color leaves his handsome face. “Her fiancé.”

Proof he doesn’t understand the power of pussy. “No, friend.” I tip close enough I can smell his enticing cologne. “*She is.*”

“Yes sir.”

He humbles quicker than I expect. Disappointing. I was hoping to have more fun. No more threats are required to keep him in line.

I kiss Seraphina’s temple. Of course, that’s not enough for her. She twists and gives me a huge hug.

“Thank you Melchior.”

“Anything for you.”

After I pat her back a few times, she lets me go. I nod companionly to the man who will be my new toy in the dungeon once the reception ends. “Anything for her.”

I stroll to the kitchen and accept the coffee Mary makes for me without me even having to ask. Seraphina puts her in a good mood too.

When I return to check on the progress my plaything has made pleasing Seraphina, I have to chuckle. She has her little notebook out checking off her list while he scribbles on his tablet. She’s satisfied while he’s terrified.

Perfect.

“Everything good here?”

A genuine smile lights up her face. “Yes, we have their favorites. I know they’re going to love it.”

A bogus grin plasters on his. “I’m thrilled to be of service and that you’re happy Seraphina.”

I wink at him. “Why don’t you just go ahead and call her Mrs. Wiseman.”

Seraphina gasps but he nods. “Yes, of course. I’m glad you’re happy Mrs. Wiseman.”

“I am. Thank you.”

Uncertainty sounds in her voice from the name. That’s fine. She might as well demand the respect she deserves with or without the title. I wrap my hand around the back of her neck. “Come on. Let’s get some breakfast. I’m starving.”

We leave the man to let himself out but she still glances over her shoulder. “Thank you! See you on Saturday.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Dude practically runs out of the room to the foyer. All of his arrogance extinguished the way I like. Now he won’t be a problem until he learns the quandary he’s in from me.

At the aptly named breakfast bar, she climbs on a stool and meets my gaze. “Why did you have him call me that? Balthazar and I aren’t married yet.”

“Don’t play coy. I know you liked it.”

Her giggle confirms what I suspected.

“I know. I’m excited to get married too but I don’t want to be a liar.”

I shrug. “You weren’t. I was.”

Our housekeeper ends the discussion, setting plates in front of us heaped with omelets, hashbrowns, and bacon. Thank fuck.

I inhale my food while Seraphina thanks Mary and cuts small pieces of eggs before daintily sliding the bite into her mouth. I’m almost finished, and she isn’t even a quarter in.

I roll my eyes. Girls.

“What do you have left to do for the wedding?”

She lights up from my question and sets her fork down. At this rate, she’ll never finish before Balthazar comes for her.

“Just the last of the decorating. The flowers deliver tomorrow.”

Sounds like work but she never sees the labor as effort.

“Do you want to help me?”

“No.”

Laughter from her and Mary bounces through the room. They both know I’m lazy unless I’m fighting. “I don’t want to be a liar.”

“Hey!”

Little fists curl on her hips from me mocking her. The exploding smile

gives her away. She still loves me, and I always want it to stay that way. “If you’re free tonight, I want you to watch me practice. Rude’s coming over.”

The implication of what I’m really asking flashes in her eyes, and her lips part with a sharp inhalation. “I’d like that.”

I can’t help my own grin. “I know. Me too.”

Mary must sense the filth brewing between us because she scurries away after pouring Seraphina more orange juice and disappears into the pantry. “It makes Rude pretty happy too.”

I swear she attempts to hide her moan when her hand touches her chest. Luckily, as my brother strolls in, he doesn’t catch anything but her flushed face.

The obsessed bastard he is, he frowns and palms her cheek. “Are you okay angel?”

All of her attention swings to him. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Uncertainty still lines his face. My work here is done. I hop up and pat him on the shoulder. “You’re welcome.”

As usual, he’s a grump and snarls at me. “For what?”

I only chuckle in response, laughing even harder when he calls me a dumb ass to my back as I jog out.

He should be grateful I get his girl worked up. He’ll be thankful tonight once she’s back in his bed even if he doesn’t realize why.



CHAPTER 39

Balthazar

I shove my phone into the inside breast pocket of my tux and step back into the formal dining room that my angel has turned into a Christmas wonderland for her friends' reception. With business getting in the way, I have M watching over our girl. There are people in here I don't know, which automatically means I don't like or trust them.

My gaze finds her instantly. With her long hair twisted up with sparkling pins and her sweet face slathered in heavy make-up from the stylist who got the girls ready, she looks incredible.

I hate it.

Her genuine beauty is hidden, and I'll be glad when this is over so I can get the real Seraphina back. In the meantime, I'll play the part to keep up appearances for her sake.

She's glorious with all that she's accomplished in such a short amount of time. Before I beeline to her, I take the second to drink her in as she directs the woman setting out dishes for the ice cream bar. Seraphina has a plan, and she's making sure everything comes together. The soft voice and sweet smile on her face confirms she's still a kindhearted boss though.

"Balthazar?"

Loathe to lose sight of my girl even though my brother is two feet from her, I turn to Bree who obviously has something on her mind that she wants to unload on me without Seraphina in the conversation. Before I can speak, she jumps right in.

“Thank you for all of this. I appreciate it.”

Her flat tone implies an obligation to be gracious rather than sincere gratitude for her party. Although the begrudging acknowledgement is directed to the wrong person. I nod toward my fiancée. “You’re welcome. But Seraphina did all of the work.”

The mention of her friend’s name coaxes a small smile from her pursed lips. “I know and she did an amazing job. But I also know that you paid for everything. I’m sure this was very expensive.”

Nothing to me but I aim to impress. Instead of the simple cake and cookies she planned, we provided a five-course meal, massive dessert table, and full open bar. “Just like I told Seraphina, my money’s her money. Anything she wants she can have.”

Now she sighs. All glimpses of her grin fade away. “I know why you did this.”

We can cut the shit then. “I did it to make Seraphina happy. If she thinks you’re happy, then *she’s* happy. That’s all I want.”

My honesty seems to impress her, and she nods. “The same goes for me with her. I just don’t want to have to pick up the pieces when you break her heart.”

“I’m not sure why you think I would ever do that. I love Seraphina.”

“What happens when you get tired of her?”

Ah, now I understand her fear. Any relationship that moves this fast can’t last. The fire will fizzle, she suspects. “What’s to get tired of? She’s sweet, kind, generous, loving, smart. Absolutely perfect, don’t you agree?”

She glances over at her best friend, and the genuine smile returns. “Yes.”

Seraphina must sense our attention on her and looks our way. Thrilled to see us chatting amicably together, she laughs and waves at us.

Before she makes her way over to where we pretend we’re polite and not arguing, I give Bree one last threat to consider, disguised as advice. “Don’t ruin this for her. All she wants is your approval. If you don’t give it to her, she’ll never truly be happy.”

Not that I expected one, but I don’t get a response. I’ve given her a lot to think about on a busy day. Seraphina joins us, hugging me first, and I hide my smirk. It’s already happening—Seraphina chooses me over Bree.

Her friend seems to realize the fact too. They embrace for a long time, engaging in the back and forth of girl conversation, each confirming to the other how beautiful they look, the room looks, the cake looks. With lots of

laughter and joy, I know I've got both of them right where I want them.

Alex joins in, shaking my hand and kissing his bride, then Seraphina's cheek. I claw back the desire to rip off his lips and scrub him off of her face. His gesture is innocent, and I have to let the impudence slide. I can't jeopardize what I've just achieved. Not when I'm this close to taking everything I want.



Gaspar

“No more Daddy. I can't take it.”

Seraphina sprawls in the center of my bed, which I'm thrilled to have her back in again after missing her for the past three days as busy as she was with her friends' wedding preparations.

Now I have her all to myself again, enjoying her spent from the three orgasms I worked her through with my fingers and then my tongue. While I let her catch her breath, I admire her beauty, that's more than just her exquisite face and sumptuous body.

She's gorgeous all the way to her angelic soul.

Even though I push her to the edge of what she can tolerate, she still smiles at me.

Holds out her hand for me.

Offers her heart to me.

I take them all. Own and protect them. “I have something for you.”

Her face lights up more than I thought possible. “You do?”

“Of course, I do. It's Christmas Eve. But you have to roll over first.”

Nerves keep her from moving as she worries her bottom lip and frowns at me. I have to remind her to be obedient. “On your hands and knees, little one.”

My dominant tone works as expected. She nods and quickly flips over. So fucking beautiful with her watching me from over her narrow shoulder.

I massage her back, soothing the fear I generated in her. Her tiny body softens under my huge hands, and I stroke her slick skin until she practically

purrs with pleasure that matches my own. “I love you Seraphina and if circumstances were different, I’d make you mine alone.”

“I love you too Daddy.”

The sentiment is bittersweet. We can’t change our age difference or her feelings for my son. Not that I’d want her to, but it’s a struggle sometimes for us to share when both of us want all of her all of the time. “I know you’re going to marry Balthazar and give him babies, which is right and what I want for both of you.”

My comment earns me a soft smile. I know that’s what she wants too—to be his wife and mother to his children. I’m realistic and aware of how I fit into this relationship. “But that doesn’t change how I feel about you. I want you to know that you mean just as much to me, that I think of you as mine.”

I climb off the mattress and open the nightstand drawer, drawing out the jewelry I had made for her. “You wear his ring, but this necklace will remind you that you belong to me too.”

Shiny eyes follow my movements as she sits back with her ass on the soles of her feet and sweeps her long hair out of the way. I carefully curl the silver chain of interlinking snowflakes with diamond centers around her throat and click the lock with the tiny key. “Only I can take it off of you, which I will never, ever do.”

Reverent fingertips brush over the intricate details as she lets out a little sob. “Thank you. I love it.”

“You’re welcome.” I kiss her softly, tasting the salt from her tears. “Now be a good girl and get back on your knees for me.”

Much more submissive, she hurries to comply. I caress over her head, down her throat, and between her shoulder blades. “Do you know how much you please me?”

She squirms in response, absorbing my praise. I position myself behind her, rock hard dick in hand. “I’ve been wanting to fuck you like this since the Christmas tree farm. Do you remember?”

“Y-yes. I remember. I wanted that too.”

I guide in the tip and almost lose my mind when her lips flutter around the head. “You wanted my cock buried in your sweet pussy right out there in the fresh air and sunshine.”

“I wanted to feel you, heavy on me and moaning because I was making you happy.”

Sweet, sweet girl cares about my happiness more than her own. Soon

she'll realize hers is all I live for. I thrust into her, curling over her back and holding her tight. "Like this?"

"Exactly like that."

Her taut ass presses backward accepting all of me that will fit. I plunge again and again accompanied by her moans of pleasure. Fucking hell. I'm addicted to her—getting her off, making her feel loved, keeping her content forever. "You feel so good."

I fuck her with my words as well as my cock, knowing she needs the affirmation. "You're all I'll ever want. You letting me love you is all I'll ever need."

So close, she trembles, tumbling to her elbows. Incoherent words mumble into the sheets, but I hear my favorite one. I want to roar out, confirming that I am her daddy, yet I don't want to scare her.

Instead, I wrap my hand around her throat and slip my finger between her neck and the choker, stealing her breath. "Never forget you're mine."

"I won't."

On the edge, I have to take her with me. I work her clit as I pump into her until she finally cries out with her release.

"Merry Christmas, little one."

"Merry Christmas, Daddy."



CHAPTER 40

Melchior

Why am I not surprised to find Seraphina in the kitchen?

Flour dusts almost every surface and a stack of batter clumped mixing bowls fill the sink. Chocolate macaroons garnished with cherries cool on the table between a huge white mixer and a pile of wax paper with crumbs from her earlier baking.

Obviously, she's been in here for hours. She's happy though, with her Christmas music playing and her candles burning, so who am I to judge?

I guess that's why my brother and father don't have her on her back or on her knees. She needs more than them mauling her to be satisfied living here with all of us.

"There you are."

I stride directly to her and engulf her in a backward hug, breathing deep. "Hey baby girl."

With her arms pinned under my embrace, she pauses in icing her gingerbread men. "Hi."

"Something smells good in here."

Just like her not to be mad from my intrusion, she giggles. "It's the cookies."

"It's you."

She's the only goodness in our world, and I want to absorb as much of her as possible. Lest the greed and brutality consume me completely.

"Do you want to help?"

I immediately release her and jog backwards as if I can't get away fast enough. Her sweet laugh bounces through the expansive room again. She knows I'd rather eat her goodies than perform the actual work required to make them.

"Okay, I get it. I get it." Her wholesome expression still manages to implore me. "Do you at least want to keep me company?"

"That I can do."

Today is Christmas Day, and since Mary's off visiting with her niece, I don't have to worry about her fussing at me. Luckily, she made a feast ahead of time so that all we have to do is warm up the food because I don't like to cook either.

I grab a beer from the fridge and plop down on a stool across from Seraphina's work area.

She frowns at me as I twist off the top and take a long swallow.

"It's not even noon."

This time I laugh. "I'm celebrating."

I hold up the bottle in a mock toast. "Happy birthday, Jesus!"

Her braids flit across her shoulders as she giggles and shakes her head. "You're terrible."

"I know." I grab her gift from my pocket and slap the rectangular case on the counter. "But maybe with this, I'll redeem myself."

The way her lips part and create a perfect o makes me wish I liked pussy. Or at least her in that way. Alas, I don't. So, friends we shall remain.

A blush explodes on her cheeks as I pop the lid revealing a silver anklet with four charms—three crowns and a snowflake. "Balthazar has your finger and Dad has your throat, so I thought I'd take your leg. Together, all of us claim you as ours."

"Oh my gosh!"

She drops the piping bag and quickly bends to shove off her sock.

"You're so sweet Melchior. I love it!"

I coil the chain around her ankle and secure the clasp. "First I'm terrible, now I'm sweet. You girls can't ever make up your minds."

Ignoring my teasing, she launches herself at me as soon as I fully rise. "Thank you so much! I'll never take it off."

"You're welcome."

This is the best holiday I've had in years thanks to her. When she beams at me, I'm glad I indulged in being all sentimental and sappy. Just like

Balthazar and Dad, she's changing me too.

"I have something for you too. I'll be right back."

Adorable as she scurries out of the room wearing only one sock. I take the opportunity for a second salute to the baby Lord and grab another drink.

Not quite as quick with her arms loaded down with a gigantic box, she dashes back into the kitchen. What the fuck? I hop up and relieve her of the burden, setting the container on a chair with everything else occupied.

Almost as if preventing me from opening my gift, she fiddles with the bow. "I hope you like it but if you don't it won't hurt my feelings. I'm not sure about these things."

It could be dog shit, and I would still love it since it's from her. I lift the lid and nestled inside the white tissue paper is a black robe. I hold up the fabric and find *Wiseman* embroidered on the back above a gold crown.

"I know the crown is your symbol for your company and you use it for the three of you and I just thought it looked powerful and that you might want..."

Nervous words trail off. Fuck that. I whip the material over my shoulders and slowly turn for her inspection. "I fucking love it. What do you think?"

She pulses with excitement from my approval and lifts her slight fists in a fighting stance. "You look tough."

"I *am* tough."

"I know."

She's laughing again as we hug. I grin too from the glorious thought that pops into my mind.

Later when I go and torture our dungeon guests, I will wear her gift into each room making sure they know it's from her and remind them how sweet she really is.

And, I'm not.



CHAPTER 41

Seraphina

I squeeze Balthazar's hand curled over my thigh. He's in deep conversation with Reid which I hate to interrupt but the generous flowing of champagne gives me no choice. "Please excuse me. I need to go to the ladies room."

London—it still feels strange calling her that instead of Ms. Fine—is not the kind of woman who travels in pairs to the ladies' room. So I'm surprised when she hops up too and grabs her sleek white clutch.

"I'll go with you."

Almost as if on instinct, Balthazar also stands up from our banquet table. "I'm coming too."

A man accompanying us to the restroom would be awkward. Despite how overprotective he is, I still can't help but laugh at his worry. "It's okay. I'll be fine, I promise."

London wags her finger at him, with a deadpan serious expression. "Yeah, she'll be fine. We promise."

The slur of her words shocks me even more. She's always so poised and controlled.

Maybe the stress of her upcoming wedding or pressure for success for tonight's fundraiser causes her to let loose a little more than normal. She's a fun drunk though so I don't mind when she slips her arm through mine and starts dragging me away.

Huge fingers wrap around my other arm. Balthazar holds us both in place with the strength of his grip on my wrist, and he doesn't let go of me until his

lips brush my temple.

“Two minutes and I’m coming for you if you’re not back.”

A shiver ripples through me from his promise uttered in a guttural voice. My feet move fast as soon as he releases me so London and I can go and get back in his timeframe.

Our heels click on the white and gold swirl marble floor once we step out of the party. Just as many people in tuxedos and ball gowns mingle out here as inside the ballroom.

My boss smiles down at me with the mischievous grin that confirms she’s truly amused. “Are you having fun?”

“Definitely. Thank you for asking us. Balthazar said you purchased the table and set everything up for us.”

She laughs her husky laugh from my answer. I’m not sure what’s so funny but I’m happy that she’s happy.

I think.

Normally, I feel very comfortable with her but right now I sense a weird vibe I can’t put my finger on.

“That’s not the only thing I set up.”

Her teasing tone confuses me. “Really?”

I push open the lavatory door and step to the first available stall while London enters the one next to me. I don’t say anything as some people feel uncomfortable talking while tinkling.

“Yep. If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

The alcohol must have really gone to her head since we just talked about the tickets. I giggle from her repeating herself. “Yes, thank you very much. I appreciate you hosting us.”

“No, I mean you and Balthazar.”

Totally lost, I focus on my business until I jump from her banging on the panel between us.

“Are you there, Seraphina?”

“Yes, I’m here. I’m getting ready to wash my hands.”

I flush, open the door, and move to the vanity. Her door flies open too, and she rushes out with a rosy face and humongous smile.

“I thought I lost you.”

Where would I go? “No, I’m here.”

“I know because of me!”

She twists the knob too far and water gushes out, splashing onto the

counter and her dress. With her gaze on me, she seems oblivious to the spray hitting her stomach. I reach over and turn down the force.

Her finger jabs toward my engagement ring.

“I knew he would like you. I just never dreamed how quickly he would fall in love with you. I’m even better than I thought.”

The uneasy sensation from earlier returns with double intensity. She’s trying to tell me something, but I can’t grasp her intention. “I’m sorry. I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

Her head shakes, and she rolls her eyes. “When I hired you silly, I knew you would be perfect for him. So you’re welcome!”

I do understand how drunk she is when she playfully taps the end of my nose with her long fingernail elegant with a perfect French manicure. Maybe that’s why she has everything mixed up. “But you hired me to be your assistant, remember? Then I happened to meet Balthazar.”

“Nope. I hired you for him.”

Heat explodes through my body from the realization of what she implies. “I thought you hired me because you thought I would be good at the job.”

“Well, I mean that was just a lucky break you actually know what you’re doing. But either way it didn’t matter. All I wanted was a nice girl for my friend and you are.”

She engulfs me, dragging my body to hers with an intensity I don’t expect. “Thank you for making him happy. Now I can marry Reid and not have to worry about Balthazar being alone.”

The gratitude is heartfelt despite being inadvertently cruel. Without realizing the fact, she’s destroyed me.

Although I guess I’m too shocked to cry. The tears I expect don’t come, but that doesn’t mean they won’t. Especially if I have to face both of them together in my humiliation. “Does he know that’s why you hired me?”

“Yes, of course. He’s smart. He figured it out the day he met you. He resisted at first, but he couldn’t deny how perfect you are.”

Another massive squeeze before she pulls back and grins at me, overcome in her boozy stupor. She sighs with relief. “Just perfect.”

I force a smile in return from her compliment. “Let me finish, and I’ll meet you back at the table.”

“Okay.”

She drops her arms and sweeps out. I’m not sure if she even rinsed the soap off her hands but I can’t worry about her hygiene right now. I have to

get out of here. I need time to think.

Maybe I'm a coward. Weak to hide rather than confront them. But I'd rather speak to Balthazar with my head held high even if my heart's lower than it's ever been.

I'll go home and face him tomorrow because tonight the pain hurts too much to talk. Things are always better in the morning. I slide out my phone and tap the screen with trembling fingers.

My friend replies instantly.

***Bree:** Of course, you can come over. Do you need me to come and get you?*

I'm grateful she knows through a simple text that something's wrong. I type back, telling her I'll call an Uber.

My cell pings with her argument that's dumb and she's on her way. I don't have to respond. She won't take no for an answer and selfishly I'm glad.

I need her.

Another message comes through.

***Balthazar:** Where are you angel?*

Hiding in embarrassment.

His sweet endearment belies the fact that my boss only hired me so I could date her friend. In her eyes, I'm not a professional or skilled enough to support her and her business. I'm just good for being a whore, that I've actually turned into.

Gaspar and Melchior probably know too.

The jokes on me. My instinct was right all along. Just like I told Balthazar—I'm broken.

That's why I missed the fact that London thought I was an idiot.

Why I believed being in a relationship with both Balthazar and Gaspar was actually okay.

Why Bree is so overprotective.

Because I obviously can't figure out things myself. I had to have London spell out for me how incredibly stupid I am.

I shake my head. I might be just a plaything to all of them, but I refuse to be immature. I won't just run off.

***Me:** I have something urgent I need to talk to Bree about so she's*

picking me up. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

All true statements. Although I'm well aware he won't care if it's true or not. He'll just want to talk. I can't. Not right now.

"Excuse me."

I glance up from my phone hearing a woman's voice nearby. A girl a little older than me in a gorgeous silver sparkly dress offers me a bashful smile.

"Do you happen to have any gum or mints? I'm on a first date and don't want to be breathing garlic breath on him all night."

The easily solved problem is one I wish I had. I nod to her and pop open my tiny clutch. My hand trembles as I hold out the Trident to her. "Here you go."

But she doesn't take the bottle. She doesn't even seem to see the container with her gaze hypnotized behind me. I spin around to see what she sees.

A man wearing a ghoulish mask and dressed all in black aims his gun at us.

"I knew a bunch of rich lawyers dressed to the hilt would pay off. Give me your purses."

Shock slows my response. I have to transition from heartbreak to utter terror.

"Come on, come on."

He seethes at us, angry from the delay, motioning for us to obey. We both react, handing over our bags.

He rips them out of our hands and shoves them in his backpack, gaping open to store everything he steals.

"Ring, necklace."

Emotions I've been holding in finally burst. Tears sting my eyes from the reminders of what I thought were Balthazar and Gaspar's symbols of love. Now I know they were just marking me as a possession.

I shake my head, brushing the choker. "It won't come off. You have to have a key."

"Don't fuck with me, bitch."

His gloved fingers slide under the heavy chain, leaving me no room to breathe. I grab his forearm, failing to push him away.

He squeezes tighter, trying to rip the jewelry from my throat. My head bobs with his force, and I flail in my stilettos, drifting back and forth across

the slick surface as he yanks me.

“Fuck it. I don’t have time for this.”

He releases his grip with just as much force, and the last thing I hear is the girl’s scream as my head slams into the marble.



CHAPTER 42

Melchior

Balthazar's head whips in my direction. "If you don't stop banging your foot, I will rip your fucking leg off."

I glance down at the boot I didn't even realize I was tapping. Damn. The need to move throbs inside of me to the point of pain. But I don't dare leave. I need to be here when Seraphina wakes up.

We all do. None of us can survive without her so where else would we be except where our girl is.

Where our girl lies motionless with a concussion and bruised larynx from that motherfucker.

Where our girl stays silent and devoid of her normal joy.

Thankfully Casey's gone which makes room for our new guest. If he wasn't, I'd fucking build an entire prison for the thief to ensure he's adequately punished for hurting Seraphina.

The longer she's out, the longer the bastard who did this to her will suffer before I end him.

I grind my heel into the tile to hold still. My brother snarls at me but turns back to her, squeezing her tiny hand with his huge fingers.

Dad lifts his head from her slender forearm. Dark circles of fatigue dull his eyes as he swings his gaze between us but not uttering a single word. Too devastated to speak, he returns his attention to her as well.

Too many stifling memories flood my mind from the last time he was like this. He barely survived. None of us did. We won't last now if she doesn't

wake the fuck up.

I shove off the wall and stride to her, clamping onto her ankle. Not much but the only place I can reach with the two of them crowding around her head.

My gift rolls under my hand. Despite the efforts of the hospital staff, we refused to let them remove her ring, necklace, and anklet. Our queen can never be without her kings' presents.

With her long dark head draped around her pale face, she embodies an ethereal fragility we'd kill to protect. Yet this time an enemy we never expected almost ruined us.

Seraphina flinches from the force of my palm that I didn't realize I was squeezing in my apprehension. None of us miss her eyes fluttering.

"Angel."

"Little one."

"Baby girl."

She blinks a few times, taking us in with a dazed expression. "What... what happened?"

Dad gets to her first, his hands cupping both cheeks, and he presses his forehead to hers.

"Thank fuck. You scared the hell out of us."

Her head slowly twists from his harsh tone. "I...I didn't m-mean too."

The words stick in her mouth. I jump to grab the cup from the side table, but Balthazar beats me to the punch.

My brother gently taps the straw on her lips. "Shhh. It's okay. Take a sip."

She complies, eagerly sucking in the cool water. After being out for so long, I'm sure she's parched.

I can't hold back, inching closer with my hand on her thigh. "Does anything hurt?"

She finishes drinking and falls back, exhausted despite doing so little. "Just my head."

Gaspar snarls and points to the door. "Get that nurse back in here now. She's suffering and no one's doing a damn thing about it."

His worry kindles the tension already boiling in the room. Balthazar aims his anger from me to our father. "Stop freaking out. You're scaring her."

Now I'm pissed from Seraphina wincing from his roar. I keep my voice low but hard. "Both of you shut the fuck up."

Tears roll down her cheeks which is what really quiets us all. Dad grabs her hand and brings her fingers to his lips. “Don’t cry. No more yelling. All we care about is you.”

Balthazar nods and caresses over her forehead and down her cheek. “You have to be okay angel. We can’t live without you. We love you.”

“You love me?”

That head injury must really have fucked her up if she has any doubt. I grab her other hand. “We all do. All three of us. You’re Mrs. Wiseman now, remember?”

The joke fails, and she cries harder. I don’t claim to be a smart guy, but this shit confuses the hell out of me. All I want to know is how to fix this.

My father and brother must feel the same way. Both of them have the same shocked expression.

They each lean in, reminding her how much she means to them, how loved she is, how she’s become the center of our world.

Nothing they swear seems to convince her. She sobs softly until she drifts off again. Leaving us more fucked up than she is.



Balthazar

Bree guns us down with her murderous stare as she and Alex bust into Seraphina’s room.

Or maybe it’s just the terror from seeing her best friend’s tiny body lying motionless in the huge bed.

Either way I deserve her scorn.

This is my fault.

I should never have let Seraphina leave without me.

I should never have let Seraphina get hurt.

I should never have let Seraphina have any doubts about our love for her.

She’s woken up twice and twice she looks at all of us with tears and distrust. I can’t get her to tell me why. None of us can.

Maybe Bree will be able to.

I give up my hold on Seraphina's hand as well as my chair. Bree easily accepts both, scootching the legs as close as she can to hold onto my angel.

Alex shakes my hand, but his gaze lingers on my dad and brother. We all look as shitty as we feel.

Melchior stomps out, pissed as hell we're leaving. I'm not pleased either but what choice do I have. I need Bree to get through to Seraphina. I can't take her being so distraught. I need my angel to have her light back.

My father simmers under the surface. He can't even kiss Seraphina goodbye in front of her friends. They don't know how our relationship works, let alone understand the unique situation.

Normally, he wouldn't give a damn. Despite his concern over Seraphina, he'd never jeopardize her friendships. Especially in her fragile emotional state. She'd never come back from the anguish, and neither would we.

I cracked open the door earlier in anticipation of their visit. When I let her know what happened, Bree raced back from their honeymoon. Now the opening seems normal, and I can eavesdrop.

Sneakers squeak on the sleek tile behind me.

"Balthazar!"

London.

I spin around and shock bounces through me. I thought we looked bad. Fuck.

Tear-streaked make-up, tangled hair drooping down on one side, mismatched jacket and pants. As if she threw on the first thing she touched in her closet and raced here.

I wouldn't recognize her except for her voice.

"How is she?"

"Not good."

My best friend grabs her throat and sobs. I've not ever seen her like this. She's never emotional.

"I should never have left her. The hotel had security, and I really thought she was fine."

God.

"I mean I was just telling her—how perfect everything was. That setting you up turned out so much better than I ever imagined and now this."

I ignore the rest of London's babbling. Connections start sparking in my mind.

The last thing Seraphina text me before the attack was that she was

leaving.

She was fine when she left the table.

So that means something happened between the ballroom and the bathroom.

I look at my crying friend.

London happened.

Motherfucker. I start listening to her gibberish again.

“You told her you hired her for me?”

London’s never been scared of me. Until now.

She takes a step back, and I take a step forward. No way she’s getting away from me.

“Answer me.”

Her head bobs as she whimpers. “I wanted her to know how happy she makes you. That I was glad you ended up together. I was drunk and it didn’t come out right I guess.”

“I guess not.”

Long fingers wrap around my forearm when I shove my fingers across my head trying to figure out how to fix her colossal mistake. I jerk away from her touch. I’d never hit her but I’m too furious right now to trust myself. “Don’t.”

She jerks back as if I did strike her. We’ve never fought before but I’ve never been this insanely angry before. “Go home London.”

“Please Balthazar. I can fix this. Let me talk to her. I’ll tell her—”

“What?” I throw my arms out to my sides. “What will you tell her? That it’s not true. That you didn’t give a damn about her degree or skills. That you lied to her for your own selfish reasons?”

The tears stop rolling and her chin flies up. “Well if you were so concerned about me being a selfish liar why didn’t you tell her yourself?”

“Because I love her and would do anything to protect her. I was trying to keep from hurting her, and you did it anyway.”

She softens from the truth. “That’s all I really wanted was for you to love her. I’m sorry I fucked up. I really am.”

Honestly, I believe her. I know she is. But it’s too late for apologies.

Unable to deal with her any longer, I scrub down my face and ignore my father walking her down the hallway. She’s moved on, and so have I.

I don’t wish her any harm, but our friendship is done.

Luckily, Bree and Seraphina’s isn’t. Their soft voices murmur from her

room. I can't make out the words, but I swear I hear Bree tell her *Balthazar loves you*. Please fucking God let Seraphina believe her.

Alex steps out into the hallway. A haunted look pales his face, making me wonder if he's remembering the last time he was in a place like this. The outcome wasn't good for him either, losing his best friend.

He swallows hard and strides straight to me. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure."

I motion to the lounge area across from her room. Only Melchior plops in one of the chairs. He jumps up and bolts as soon as he sees us heading his way. Lazy but smart.

Neither of us sit. Alex clears his throat. I'm impatient with his delay but refrain from grabbing him by the neck and squeezing the words out of him.

"When Gabriel died, I was only nineteen. I wanted to get custody of Seraphina so she wouldn't have to go back to that hellhole. But you know what it looked like—she was just a child. Even though it wasn't like that, and she was like a sister to me, no way a judge would make me her legal guardian."

He's right. Everyone would have thought he was a pervert. Or at the very least lacking any kind of parenting skills as a young single guy to a little girl.

"So I had to sit by all those years without any contact since she didn't have a phone and was only allowed to go to school until she finally turned eighteen. Bree and I took her in and supported her the best we could. She was happy but not as happy as you make her."

His eyes meet mine, focused and unblinking. He really believes what he's telling me. Thank fuck. "She makes me happy too. I love her."

"I know you do. Bree says it's all too fast and she still has suspicions but seeing Seraphina so upset in there, I think you're the only person who can fix what's wrong."

"I think so too."

A bittersweet laugh rumbles in his chest. "Bree won't like it, but she'll accept it if we get Seraphina back the way she was."

"I'll do everything I can. Nothing else matters to me."

"Me neither."

He head bobs me and takes off, returning to her room. Through the doorway, I can see Seraphina's drifted off again.

Bree kisses her forehead and spins around to accept Alex's hug. They

embrace for a long minute, talking in hushed tones.

They pass without speaking. Alex nods toward me again while Bree keeps her gaze to the floor. Silence is better than yelling, I guess.

With them gone, I return to my original spot next to my angel. Ready to convince Seraphina when she wakes up that regardless of how we got together, we're staying together.

I grasp her hand and she startles, her eyes flickering open.

"Bree?"

"No angel it's me."

The struggle is too much, and her lids sink shut. "Balthazar."

From her whisper, I can't tell if she's thrilled or disgusted to see me. "She left but she'll be back to check on you later."

"You're here."

I stroke over her pale cheek. "I'm always here. Because regardless of how we started, we're finishing together."

"We started wrong."

Too drowsy to mask her feelings, she reveals the truth of her trepidation. At least now I finally know and can eliminate her fear. "Maybe. But it doesn't matter now. The only thing that matters is that I love you."

She snuggles into my palm on face. For the first time since this nightmare began, she's welcomed my touch.

"I love you too."

Then she's out. I kiss her forehead and sit back as my father and brother return. We love her together, and we'll wait together.



CHAPTER 43

Seraphina

When I open my eyes again, I need a minute to figure out where I am in the darkness. A steady beep drones near my head and squiggly lines roll across a screen by a tall silver pole.

The hospital.

Oh yeah. I'm less groggy this time, and thankfully the ache in my head is finally gone. Only my throat hurts a little and the crook of my arm feels pinched from the tape stretched across my skin.

I try to touch my tender neck but can't lift my arms from Balthazar and Gaspar, asleep in chairs on each side of me, holding my hands. Melchior dozes at the foot of my bed with his fingers wrapped around my leg, clutching the anklet he gave me.

I've been here for days, and they've been with me the entire time.

I've never been alone. They've never left.

Not once.

Anytime I've woken up, at least two of them have been here.

Ensuring I feel loved and protected as if I'm the center of their world just like Gaspar promised.

And Bree finally admitted. Not that she knows about him being my Daddy, but she acknowledged Balthazar loves me despite how much the idea worries her. She must have been really scared to see me injured like this for her to make that confession to me.

Ironic how the only person against our relationship finally approves, and

now I'm the one who questions things.

From London's drunk comments I feared they thought I was only good enough to be a girlfriend, minimizing everything I aspired for myself and my goals.

I guess they don't have to be mutually exclusive. Neither of them has ever belittled my position or tried to get me to quit. I mean they've both praised me for doing a good job, even going so far as to tell me how great London thinks I'm doing.

Now as things become clearer, I see the panic that's been consuming all three of them from me shutting them out. They wouldn't be scared of losing me if they didn't truly love me.

I can't deny the truth either. I love them too.

In different ways but no one any less than the others. I guess getting injured made me realize the insecurity I've had all along about myself—they've been the ones to eliminate it.

A laugh bubbles in my throat that I have to squelch so I don't wake them. I realize I was so worried about being seen as stupid, I was actually acting stupid. For not trusting them or myself.

Instead of being hurt by London, I should thank her.

That's what you do when a friend sets you up with the man you're going to marry. And end up with a Daddy and a friend so special he's like your brother too.

I've made a mistake. Thank goodness it's not too late to fix my error. I'll never doubt them again.

As golden streams filter through the window, I squeeze their hands and shake my foot. I'm ready for them to wake up so I can tell them I'm all better and can't wait for them to take me home.



EPILOGUE

Gaspar

As I look around the living room on Christmas morning, I realize once again what a lucky man I am.

Seraphina glows watching as Artaban eagerly absorbs his father's explanation of how to throw a spiral with the new football he just unwrapped. My grandson's four and all boy.

Balthazar is going to have his hands full. But I have to admit the kid has potential. His toss isn't too shabby, and he eagerly scoops up the ball, returning to his father for more practice. I love the intensity on both of their faces. My son is a good father, just like I knew he would be.

Melchior jumps in, teaming up with Michel, the two-year-old, to catch the next one. The ball slips right through the toddler's chubby fingers but his uncle grabs the pigskin before it hits the floor. He cheers like a madman, so the boy thinks they've won. He runs around, high-fiving me and then his brother, which messes with his aim. He chucks the ball into the tree by accident.

Ornaments tumble, clinking against each other before three slide down and bounce on the carpet. Luckily, none of the decorations break. Seraphina laughs and shakes her head, nonchalant about the chaos we've all become accustomed to from the rambunctious kids.

She slowly stoops to grab the hooks and rises even more sluggishly to ensure her stability. I slide behind her and once she's upright, I cradle the bottom of her heavy bump. A sigh full of relief and gratitude blows through

her lips as she sags against me. Her eyes sink shut as her head falls back to my chest.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome, little one. How’s my other grandson?”

“Wild. He loves all the excitement.”

She’s right. I feel him roll and kick under my palms. He’s going to be a brute like his father and brothers. Her fragile body can barely handle the beasts they create.

This baby will be the last she bears despite how much my son loves breeding his wife. We can’t take the risk.

Seraphina reaches back and tickles my scruff with her fingernails. The familiar motion soothes both of us.

“Can we celebrate later, just the two of us, when the boys take their naps?”

My cock, already hard against her back, rises to the occasion. I push my forearm under her belly to hold the weight, and with my free hand sweep her long hair off her shoulder. A happy noise bubbles in her mouth when I stroke over my necklace circling her throat. “You know I’d love that but you need to rest too. With London bringing Ryder over later, it’s going to be a busy day.”

“I know and I will. I promise. But, I love you and want to spend time alone with you today too.”

How can I refuse? Especially with her heavy in pregnancy. I know my one-on-one time with her will be coming to an end for a while after the birth and recovery.

With images of her on her hands and knees taking me from behind the way she loves in my mind, I thumb over her sprinting pulse. “I love you too. We can have one hour and then you have to get some sleep.”

Which I know she will after I fuck her and then follow with the gentle massage of her scalp and body. Does the trick every time.

She squirms with excitement and waddles around to press a kiss on my cheek. I help her to the sofa and once she settles on the cushion, I lift her legs, twisting her body so her feet are in my lap. She slumps back with the first caress of her sole, and I keep my eyes glued on the boys while hers slip shut again.

Our princess has become a queen. An excellent mother to my grandchildren, she deserves to be pampered after the way she spoils us with her love and generous spirit.

The impromptu game continues until the man who should be my son-in-law strolls in with a case of Melchior's favorite beer on his shoulder and a stack of gifts in his free hand. More presents entice Artaban and Michel to race over to Rudolph.

He hands off the booze to my oblivious son and drops to his haunches to dole out the surprises. Practically a kid himself, he vibrates with his own excitement. Once they annihilate the wrapping paper, Rudolph rips the top off the box to the bowling game and leads the boys to the hallway to set up the pins.

Seraphina opens her eyes and struggles to sit up. I shake my head and clamp down on her thigh. "No, you rest. I'll play with them."

"But I need to—"

"You know better than to defy me."

Despite her fatigue, her face flushes. She likes her punishment as much as her pleasure. I enjoy both as well; however, with her frail state I have to keep her in check with only my words.

She slowly glides back to slump against the pillow. "Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl."

The approval calms her, and she grins at me, radiating her normal joy again.

Balthazar catches on to the situation with my praise and hustles over. I rise, and he instantly slides into my place, cupping her delicate feet. With the easy transition from me to him, I smile at the reminder from five years ago that we'd take care of her together and we still do. Our relationship works just like I said it would.

I kiss the top of her head and stride toward the ruckus outside the door. The time has come. I need to convince my other son what he's missing out on without a real relationship of his own.

The End

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Wine & Whiskey: Everything for You

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Nikki Belaire writes contemporary mafia romance and admits to a weakness for bad boys, especially ones who can't live without the strong women they love. She spends more time in her characters' lives than her own. But, when she's in the real world, her passions include reading, wine appreciating, running, and spending time with her daughter.

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