

# Forever My Valentine



THE SWEETEST  
OF LOVE STORIES

LUCY DARLING

## FOREVER MY VALENTINE

### **Petal**

Even as a little girl, Petal Prescott knew Vaughn Valentinus was her forever despite the age gap between them. But fate had other plans. In the blink of an eye, she lost her family and her link with the boy she'd always loved. Now that she's older, she's hoping the man she's loved her entire life will see her than more than the broken little girl she once was.

### **Valen**

I've only ever had one goal in life—to give Petal Prescott the life she deserves. But she hasn't made it easy, not when she thinks she's flawed. To me, she is and always will be perfection. But how can I make her see herself how I see her? Maybe there's only one way—by making her mine. The time has come, and now I'm going to stake my claim and show her just how perfect she truly is.

# FOREVER MY VALENTINE

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# LUCY DARLING

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*“That’s when I realized what a true friend was. Someone who would always love you—the imperfect you, the confused you, the wrong you—because that is what people are supposed to do.”*

*—R.J.L.*

## CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Her Christmas Surprise](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lucy Darling](#)





“Who let you get that dress?” I spin around to see Vaughn. Or as I call him Valen. I think I’m the only one that would dare call him a nickname. The loneliness and sadness that had settled in evaporates. How can I be at a party with over fifty people and feel alone? I’ll never understand, but it’s always that way when I’m back here. A house that has never been my home.

“I didn’t think you were coming.” I rush over toward him.

He’s in a tux but the bow tie is undone—or maybe he never tied it to begin with. To be honest, it only adds to his appeal. I launch myself into his arms. I know he told me to stop doing that a few years ago, but I don’t care. Valen catches me, the same way he always does.

“I wasn’t going to.” He holds me for a long moment. His nose grazes my neck. I swear he breathes me in, or maybe it’s only me doing that to him. The smell of him is always comforting. It reminds me of home and so many other things from my childhood.

“I missed you.” That is the understatement of the year. I’ve more than missed him.

“I saw you a few days ago.” He had on Christmas. I always get to see Valen on the holidays. The only reason I come back for them is because I know he’ll be there. It’s the only time he comes over to my aunt and uncle’s place. He and his parents. They’ve made sure to remain in my life.

Valen's parents are closer to me than my own family. I never understood why I was left in the care of my father's brother. We weren't close to them. In fact, I can only remember seeing them a handful of times before that.

I could only guess it was because my Uncle Cooper had two kids of his own, and my parents thought it would be better for me to grow up around kids my own age. Still, I know David and Judith Valentinus aren't my blood, but they have been in my life more than anyone else. That meant Valen had been too. At first, he was like an older brother to me. That was until I grew up and started looking at him differently.

Our parents owned ValenScott Corp together. Both our fathers created the telecommunication services business decades ago. I suppose now I own it with the Valentinuses. Really it's Valen that does everything when it comes to ValenScott. He wasn't given much of a choice after the accident.

He had big shoes to fill after my parents died. His own parents barely made it out alive themselves. It took David three months to wake up from his coma. It had been a miracle that anyone survived that crash.

I bear my own scares from the night that changed all our lives. The only one untouched was Valen. He hadn't been with us. He'd still been making the trip back home from college to meet us all for an event hosted by our moms. He had come home most weekends back then. His college was only an hour away.

I don't remember any of it. One second I was in a vehicle, and the next Valen was standing over me, the sounds of beeping machines all around. Valen might have come out untouched physically, but he was thrust from being some college kid to full-on adulthood in the blink of an eye. It wasn't only us he had to think about. He was now the head of a company with over a hundred thousand employees.

I don't blame him for not wanting to be in this house. I don't care to be around my aunt and uncle either. My Uncle Cooper's resemblance to my dad can be hard to deal with. I

think if I loved my uncle, I might feel differently. He might resemble my dad, but he is nothing like him.

He and his wife are always comparing me to my cousin, Tia. She's a grade-A bitch but no one else sees that but me. She is very good at hiding it. Everyone thinks Tia is perfect. On the outside, she is. Her modeling career is proof enough of that. Too bad her inside doesn't match. She's rotten to the core.

"Yeah, but before that it had been forever."

"Thanksgiving," he reminds me.

"Whatever," I huff. He slowly puts me back on my feet, but I don't let him go. "Where have you been?" It's New Year's Eve. It's almost midnight. "Another party?" I bite the inside of my cheek. Why put on a tux to come to a New Year's Eve party right before the party is close to ending? Unless you'd been at another party before. The thought of him celebrating with someone else threatens to sour my mood.

"At home. I got caught up working."

"Are you lying to me?" I drop my head back to stare up at him.

"I was working."

"You're always working. You could have been spending your night with me." I rise to my tiptoes and kiss his cheek. "Will you kiss me?" I whisper next to his ear. I can't help but tempt him.

"Petal." He breathes my name.

"It's almost midnight." I lick my lips. His eyes drop to them. "I bought the dress for you," I admit. It's not something I'd normally wear. It's tight and shiny. It draws more attention than I care for unless it draws his. My shoulders are bare, the faded lines of some of my scars from the accident showing. "You told me to stop hiding." Normally I made sure to cover them up.

Valen closes his eyes. I'm never sure where he and I stand. "We shouldn't," he finally says, opening his eyes. I can see the conflict in them. People start to count down.

“Are you really going to make a girl beg for her first kiss?” I tease. People are still counting down.

“No.” He kisses me before they reach one. His mouth presses hard against mine. I melt into him. Valen’s tongue slides across the seam of my lips. I part them for him, and he deepens the kiss. I moan into his mouth.

Valen’s arm wraps around me and pulls me close. My heart is beating so quickly that it feels as though it’s going to come out of my chest. The hard outline of his cock pressing against my stomach only makes it worse.

“More,” he groans, his mouth leaving mine to travel down my neck. My eyes flutter open to only find darkness. I don’t remember moving, but Valen must have led us into another room. “I’m going to need to taste way more.”

It’s not a question. Not that he needs to ask. I’m Valen’s. I’ve always thought of myself as his. I never listen to other things I hear about him from people. Gossip in these circles can be terrible, so I do my best to stay away from it. Being away at a boarding school can help with that to a degree. I choose to believe Valen sees himself as mine as well.

“Valen.” I gasp when I feel him drop down in front of me. My back hits a wall as he pins me to it.

“So damn soft.” His fingers glided up my legs, pushing up my dress.

“Oh God,” I moan when he pulls my panties to the side, his warm breath teasing my clit. Damn, I wish the lights were on. I want to see him so badly.

“You’re turned on. I can smell you.”

“You do this to me. I always get this way when I see you.” He lets out another groan before burying his face between my thighs, pulling one of my legs up onto his shoulder. I brace my hand on his other, needing to cling to something as his mouth devours me. “Valen,” I moan.

I can’t believe he’s doing this. How long have I wanted this? Dreamed of it even. Valen is finally acting on our unspoken feelings for one another.

A groan rumbles from him when he pushes a finger inside of me. His tongue first circles my clit before latching on to it. It's shameful, but that's all it takes to push me over the edge. I cry out his name as the orgasm rushes through my body. The pleasure is beyond anything I ever could've imagined. I should have known it would be this way with him.

"Pet." Valen slowly lowers me until my one foot is back on the ground before he rises to his feet. His mouth meets mine in another kiss, giving me a taste of my lingering orgasm on his lips. I want to give him the same pleasure he gave me. When I reach down to touch his cock, I gasp, not realizing he already has it out.

Valen presses it against my clit. A grunt leaves him as he strokes himself a few times against my slick folds before groaning my name, his warm release hitting my clit. He doesn't stop there, though; he continues to rub the head of his cock up and down it, sending me into another orgasm.

I let out a gasp when the head of his cock sinks into me. He jerks, and I feel him come more inside of me.

"Fuck," he mutters, his cock slipping from me before he pulls my panties back into place, both of our releases soaking them. The cotton material makes them stick to my sex. "We shouldn't have done that."

"Don't say that." His words immediately bring me back down to reality.

"Petal, you're in high school." My eyes have adjusted somewhat to the darkness, but it's hard to make out more than the outline of his face. Not that I need to. I know what expression he has on it. I've memorized every detail of him.

"I'm eighteen," I point out.

"High school," he grits out.

Valen pulls my dress down and back into place. The sound of his zipper is loud in the room even with the party in full swing feet away. His phone starts to vibrate. Valen pulls it out, glancing at the screen.

"They're looking for us."

“Who?”

“My parents. You go out first. I’ll follow behind in a few minutes.”

“No, you go first. I need a second.” He takes an audible breath.

“Fine.” He brushes his mouth against mine in a feather-like kiss. I go to grab him and pull him back, but he’s gone before I ever get the chance.

I stand there for a few minutes trying to collect myself. My heart is still racing. I might have orgasmed twice, but still my body wants more of him. When it comes to Valen, I never get enough. He’s been so distant since I requested to be sent to boarding school.

I might be under my uncle’s care, but there are a few things I got to choose, and boarding school was one. I hated being in this house. The reminder of why hits me the second I step back into the party to see Valen standing with his parents and my aunt and uncle. Of course my cousin Tia is there fawning all over Valen. The same way she always does.

I hate it. I hate *her*.

She is only a few years younger than Valen. They went to the same university together. More than once she’s talked about how the two of them have hung out. It drove me insane. I know she tells me on purpose, and that’s what really gets to me. It’s part of the reason I chose to leave here. If I wasn’t here, there would be no reason for Valen and his parents to visit. They are my family, and I’ll do whatever I have to in order to keep it that way.

Tia notices me first and smirks, placing her hand on Valen’s arm. I have the urge to go over there and rip it away, but I control myself. I watch as Valen glances down at her. There isn’t one flaw to Tia’s perfect skin. Not wanting to watch the show Tia is going to put on, I turn and leave, going back up to my bedroom.

I remind myself that freedom is closer than it ever has been.



Out of all the restaurants in the city, Cooper had to pick the Blue Diamond? This place is always crawling with socialites. It's one of the handful of restaurants that is always buzzing with some kind of gossip. It's not an easy feat to get a table for most people. I bet my assistant made the reservation.

When it gets later into the night, you slip back into the kitchen and through a doorway to a speakeasy-like back bar that turns into a small club. At least that's what I've been told. I've never gone back there for a multitude of reasons.

I check my phone to see the time. My irritation grows when I see it's five minutes past the hour. Nothing annoys me more than people being late. It's rude as fuck. It shows they don't value you or your time.

"Vaughn." I pocket my phone at the sound of Cooper's voice.

"Cooper." I stand, extending my hand to meet his. Years, I've had to be cordial with the man. Life has given me no other choice. I don't think Cooper cares much for me either. I still remember the rage on his face when he found out that no part of ValenScott would be his. Nor had his brother left him anything.

Except Petal.

I'd understood his rage. We shared in that, but for two very different reasons. I would have loved nothing more than for Petal to be left to me. I'd sell my soul for her.



That is something I keep close to my chest. There's too much at risk. I knew from the very start when the cards started to fall into place that I would have to be very careful when it came to Cooper. He has possession of the one thing that matters to me the most.

"I'm glad you could make it. I know you're busy."

"This is business," I remind him. I always make time for business, and more than that, I always make time for Petal. I'll take any scrap of information I can get when it comes to her. She's been quiet since New Year's Eve. I'm not sure how she's processed what happened between us, but she hasn't been texting me. I get the rare email.

"Right." He takes the seat across from mine. "What are you having?" Cooper nods to my drink.

"Glenmorangie Scotch Single Malt."

"Would you like the same?" the server asks him.

"No." He gives a disgusted expression. "I'll do the Dalmore 40 years."

"We only have 25 at the moment."

"That will be fine," I cut in before Cooper can make a snide remark. The server nods before going to get his drink.

"You'd think here they'd have—"

"It's a drink." One that Cooper shouldn't be ordering and not because his flushed cheeks tell me he's had a few already. It's beyond his paygrade. Especially, come a few more months when his meal ticket is cut off. Petal might be eighteen, but Cooper will still be reaping off her until she graduates in the spring. Tick tock, mother fucker.

"What did you want to speak about?" I ask, already knowing the answer. It's always money.

"Petal will be picking a college soon. I wasn't sure how that would be handled."

"What universities has she applied to?" I hate that I have to ask. I should know, but the few times I did try to touch on the

subject Petal dodged or ignored my question. I've even put feelers out to see if I could get the information myself, but nothing has come back to me yet.

"She hasn't spoken to you about it?" He smirks. I pick up my drink and polish it off, making sure to keep my hands busy so that I don't wipe that stupid expression off his face. I concentrate on the burn of the alcohol.

"Has Petal said if she will be staying with you?" It kills me that I have to ask these questions.

"Well, I'm sure she'll be with us this summer."

"She wasn't last summer." Or the one before that.

"She spent a few weeks with us." Yes, she'd been back to visit a couple times. In which she spent more time with my mom than at her uncle's. It's supposed to be her home. Petal has a room, but she's hardly ever there. She has a few friends at school whose families I trust. I'd agreed to her going on a few trips to Europe with them. I might have hired a bodyguard to stay close and make sure she was safe. Petal forgets that her wealth makes her a target.

I wasn't sure if I was thankful or pissed off when she requested to go to Besly Prep. On one hand, it was one of the best schools in the States, but on the other, it meant she had to move away. The fact that it was an all girls' boarding school helped even it out. If she had stayed here, I'm not sure which school she would have picked. I'm guessing the same coed prep school Cooper sent his daughter and son to. My days of keeping my little pet locked down are ticking away.

That boarding school is the only thing that is keeping her from me now. Petal turned eighteen months ago. For a while, I lied to myself. I even hated myself for the things I felt for her. She is young with the world at her feet, but I want her at mine.

When she was little, she followed me around everywhere. Ever since she could crawl, she's been my shadow. As we both grew, our feelings changed. I know Petal believes she wants me. That she is even in love with me. But how could she truly know this when she's never been given the chance to see

anything but me? I pretended she would move on to college and I would watch and look over her. That I would help guide her and let her live her life. It was bullshit. Petal is mine.

Her own parents had left me in charge of her trust. The older she gets, the more control I lose. The last of it will crack away when she graduates. A large portion will be handed over to her. The rest is set to come in waves over the next ten years unless something crazy comes up. And by crazy, I mean her wanting to buy a giant fucking 100 million dollar company. Which I don't foresee happening. Petal could slip away to an island of her own if she wanted. She never has to work a day in her life, and she'll want for nothing.

I honestly have no fucking clue what she is planning. Which is driving me more insane than anything else. She isn't like most other girls her age. Petal has kept herself off the radar. There is no social media to speak of and she doesn't go out to events, and if she does, her family is there. Her cousins are the ones trying to be caught in the limelight.

“Can we cut to whatever it is you're getting at?”

“I'm only wanting to make sure my niece is headed in the right direction. With her graduating and being back in the city, things will—”

“She's coming back?” I can't keep the eagerness out of my voice.

“I mean, ah. Where else would she go? There are colleges here. It's time she settled back into the family. If it had been up to me, she never would have gone off to Besly.”

“It isn't up to you.” That was one of the many clauses. Cooper only wants her here because then he can keep milking off her. I think he believed if she'd stayed with him full-time he could have worked more money out of her trust, but Petal's expenses were laughable. In fact, they downright annoyed me at times.

I wanted Petal here because I didn't want to be away from her. It was selfish, and I know that. I understood why she would want to get away. There was nothing but pain and memories here for her.

Especially back then when everything first happened. Both of our lives had been turned upside down, hers with losing her family and mine with gaining so much responsibility in the blink of an eye. I'd been a mess myself. The world around me had become quicksand. My only lifeline was Petal. Whenever it all started to become too much, I'd think of her. That I had to pull my family and her out of the devastation that was left.

"Cooper, if she does come back to the city after graduation, she'll get her own place or go to my parents'."

"She wasn't left to your parents." My hand slams down on the table, making the silverware clatter, and a few people glance our way. Most of them try to hide that they are listening in.

"She's eighteen," I remind him. Old enough to choose for herself where she wants to stay.

"She is." He leans back in his chair. "And you've been waiting, haven't you? Biding your time?" I want to reach across the table and wrap my hand around his throat, but the server steps in, setting Cooper's drink down.

I take a deep breath and remind myself that I need to keep my composure. He's trying to bait me. Giving in now will only play to his advantage.

"I think you forget that Petal owns a controlling portion of ValenScott. Everything she does reflects on the company." It's not a complete lie, but it might help steer him away from my infatuation with Petal.

"Don't you think that's something her own family should be keeping an eye on? For all we know, you could be stealing it out from under her."

"You're treading on very thin ice, Cooper. I might be younger than you, but I am very aware of your dealings with ValenScott. They didn't go so well. You're lucky your brother was kind enough to get you on at City Trust."

Now it's Cooper's turn to get pissed. His problem has always been that he's too greedy. He has a well-paying job, not to mention his brother James helped him invest well. But some people can never get enough. They always want more. I

suppose I can relate. I'm the same way with Petal. The time apart isn't helping. Eating her sweet cunt hadn't either. I haven't gone one night without thinking about it. My only solace is that she'll soon be mine.

I can go into dry spells when Petal is away, but whenever she is back in town, I gravitate to her. Then my cock ends up in pain for the next week. Not only because of a case of blue balls. No matter how many times I try to relieve the pressure on my own when I get home, it's never enough. My dick will not be satisfied until it's where it belongs.

"I think I want another lawyer to go over this trust." Cooper takes a large swig of his drink.

"Do you really want to play this game with me? Because I'm guaranteeing you that you don't. Your brother loved you to some degree. I think his concerns were more for his niece and nephew, and that's why he made sure you were somewhere stable. But remember, I don't share the same sentiment."

"We're still Petal's family." A shit one. It takes all my self-control not to let loose on this fool. I hate having to bite my tongue because I'm not sure how connected Petal wants to stay with them, so I hold it in. If she wants to continue to have a relationship with them, I'll need to remain cordial to them to keep her happy. It will kill me, but I'd do anything for her. Based on the interactions I've seen between Petal and them, I don't think that will be the case. Whenever she's around her uncle and his family, she's not as affectionate as she is with my parents.

"Daddy! I didn't know you were going to be here," Tia chirps, and her voice goes right through me like nails on a chalkboard. She kisses her father on his cheek before pulling out a seat for herself. Tia catches me off guard when she leans over and suddenly drops a kiss onto my cheek. I pull back immediately. Her small gesture felt like a betrayal to Petal even though I had no control over it. "Sorry." She grabs a napkin and tries to rub it across my cheek. I yank it from her hand. "Trying to get my lipstick off." Tia lets out a giggle that I think is supposed to be seductive.

“Sweetheart, what are you up to?” Cooper asks his daughter.

“Got plans in the back. You should join, Vaughn.”

“I’m about to head out actually.” Tia puffs out her bottom lip. I don’t know what it is about her, but I’ve never liked her. Not even back when we were kids. She puts me on edge and not in a good way. We actually went to the same college. Different years but we ran in the same circles sometimes. I’d only been cordial because she was James’s niece. The man was a second father to me, and I’d never do anything to disrespect him. Didn’t mean I still didn’t have a hidden dislike for her.

“You promised we’d go out one night.”

“I did?” I question, knowing there is no way in hell that I agreed to such a thing.

“Yes, at the New Year’s Eve party.” Tia’s smile is forced now. I’m sure that she’s pissed that I don’t recall this moment. If I had to guess, it was a question she asked me seconds after I had my face buried between Petal’s thighs. I don’t recall much after that. It was all I could think about. Pretty sure I gave a few nods just so that she would leave me alone.

“You know, you two would make a nice pairing.” Cooper sips his drink. “Tia is beautiful and more age-appropriate for you.”

“Are you calling me old?” Tia gasps at her father. The girl is barely twenty-one. Not that she hasn’t been getting into clubs for years. I don’t make it a habit to keep up on gossip unless the last name Prescott is attached to it.

“Reach out to my assistant if we need to discuss this further.”

“Okay.”

“Fine,” they both agree. I was talking to Cooper but whatever. I stand, dropping a few hundreds on the table. I don’t bother saying goodbyes. I am irritated with all of this. I text my driver Matt to pull around but not before I check to see if Petal has sent me any messages.

Still nothing. My SUV pulls up. I don’t wait for my driver to get out. I open the door to get in. The sooner I get out of here, the better.

“Vaughn!” I turn back when I hear my name called. Tia practically runs into me. Her body colliding with mine. I want to push her off but in those heels she’ll fall on her ass and there’s no room for me to step back. I’m pressed against the vehicle. “I don’t have your number.” She rested her hands on my chest.

“Tia,” I grip her wrist, forcing her to step back. “You can get my assistant’s number from your father.” He’ll never give her an appointment. I’ll make sure of it.

“Really? Why can’t I have your cell?” She bats her eyelashes up at me. Her eyes are the same color as Petal’s. But that’s the only similarity.

“I have to go.” I slip into the SUV, slamming the door closed.

“You sure know how to piss the hot ones off.” When I look up, I see Matt shaking his head at me.

“That one has claws.”

Claws I’m going to need to keep an eye on. I don’t trust any of the Prescotts except Petal. But if I have my way, she won’t be a Prescott much longer.





“*J*ust tell me what it says!” I sit on my bed staring into the bathroom. My best friend and roommate at Besly Prep, Christy, is reading over the instructions on the box for the tenth time. “One or two lines! That’s all you need to know.”

“I was checking the time again.”

“Three minutes!” I shout as the timer goes off. After I peed on the stick, I ran from the bathroom, unable to read the results myself. I don’t know why I’m on edge about the results. I know what it’s going to say. I’ve known for two weeks. I haven’t had a period since before New Year’s.

There’s also the little fact that I randomly become sick and throw up. Not a clue why they call it morning sickness. That shit tends to come out of nowhere at any time. It also hasn’t gone unnoticed by me that my breasts hurt and my moods have been all over the place. I don’t even track my periods because I never needed to, but that shit is MIA.

Christy puts the box down to look at the test I left lying on the sink. Her mouth opens and then closes. “They really weren’t lying to us about the whole ‘the cock doesn’t have to go fully inside you thing’ because you’re definitely pregnant.”

I fall back onto the bed to stare up at the ceiling. How in the hell? Of course this would happen to me. I can’t even say that I’m upset about it. I’d be lying if I did. Sure, I’m scared and nervous, but I love the fact that I have a piece of Valen inside of me.

“I’m a pregnant virgin,” I mutter. I press my thighs together thinking about that night. Valen had come on my sex and even pressed the head of his cock into me a little. It hadn’t been far, but I felt the warmth of his cum inside of me. It never crossed my mind that I could end up pregnant. He was barely inside of me.

“Hey, look at the bright side.” Christy stands over me beside the bed. “You won’t show ‘til probably summer, so no one will know. You can finish your classes and graduate.”

“I don’t have to stay. I already have enough classes to graduate.” I checked into it last week when I got an inkling that I could be pregnant. The classes I am taking now are all toward college credits. I am essentially done with prep school.

“You’re leaving?”

“I don’t know.” I pull the pillow over my head. Shit just got real complicated. As if things between Valen and me weren’t complicated enough already.

The new year had really started out with a bang. It was the first year since I lost my parents that I thought I was going to finally let the cuts that still lingered heal. The scars will always be there. They are a part of me, but I’ve felt that I was still bleeding for so long. That was until Valen kissed me. Afterward, it felt like my life had finally pulled back to the path I always thought was mine.

As quickly as that feeling came, it all slipped away. He hadn’t even bothered to chase after me. I went up to my stupid room at my uncle’s house to sulk. Later on that evening, I had to hear Tia gush over Valen having danced with her. What kind of sense does that even make? He comes all over me and then goes and dances with her? The fuck? And since when does Valen dance? I’m starting to wonder if I know him at all.

The accident changed me. I suppose it had done the same to him. This Valen isn’t mine. I’m not sure who he is.

“Don’t do this.” Christy pulls the pillow off my head. “The man mauled you. He wants you. Don’t torture yourself for no reason.”

“Well, if he wants me, he sure doesn’t act like it. I hear from him less than I did before.”

“I’m sure this is hard for him. I mean, come on Petal. The man is a bit older than you, and you are still in high school. I know you’re eighteen but still. Imagine the inner battle he’s probably having with himself.”

“Stop.” I grab the pillow and hit her with it.

“It’s true! It’s even what you said he was going on about.” She yanks the pillow from me. “Either way, you’re about to find out how he really feels when you give him the news.”

“No.” I gasp, sitting up. “No.” I shake my head adamantly. “I can’t tell him. I know what he’ll do. He’ll demand we get married and so on.” I refuse to corner him into a life that he doesn’t want.

“I don’t understand your math, and I’m a mathematician. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Not by force. Who wants someone to marry them out of obligation? I would never want that for him no matter what.” Christy cringes, knowing I’m right.

“Want me to find out what he’s up to?” Christy offers for the millionth time. Christy is from the Bernadotte family. A very wealthy and somewhat large family. Their family isn’t shy about being out in public. There is always a Bernadotte at any party or event that is important. Hence they know everything when it comes to gossip.

“I don’t know.” I chew on my bottom lip. She has asked me before, and I always tell her no. I never thought Valen was some playboy, but if on some off chance I had everything wrong and I was living in Naïveville, I didn’t want to face that reality, so I always said no. At least I hadn’t wanted to face it then, but now I don’t think I have a choice. I need to know the truth.

“I’m doing it. Sometimes a best friend has to do what needs to be done.” Christy pulls her phone off the charger and starts clicking away. If her track record is anything to go by, I know this won’t take her very long.

The girls in her family have secret Instagram accounts under fake names. They keep all of them private and only friend each other. They share random pictures and gossip with each other on it. It's sweet how close their family is. Especially the women.

I could never get to that level with Tia. She has had this weird dislike for me since we were kids. She was very good at hiding it in front of people. Her below the belt comments were made for only my ears. They never bothered me until after the accident. She was quick to bring up my scars and took every chance she could to talk about Valen in a way that she knew would hurt me. She loved that she could use him to get under my skin.

“What?” Christy mutters.

“What?” I parrot.

“Ah, hold on.” She keeps clicking. When her eyes widen, my stomach drops. I know what the expression she's wearing means, and it's not good.

“What?” I raise my voice, becoming impatient.

“It's just gossip. Nothing confirmed.” I jump up from my bed to go over to her. Christy presses her phone against her chest so I can't see it.

“Show me!” I hissed. There is no going back now.

“There are a few pictures is all.”

“I thought you said there were only rumors.”

“Maybe you should call him. See what's up. If anything new is going on.” She's still holding out on showing me what she's discovered. Which only means it's a lot worse than I imagined.

“Christy!”

“The rumor is he is getting engaged to Tia.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No way.” Tia flirts with him and has a giant crush on him. I can't blame her, but he never gives her attention. Not in front of me at least. “Show me the pictures.” Christy finally flips her phone over for me to see.

The first picture is them outside of a restaurant. Another shows them coming out of a coffee shop. The third isn't them together but of Tia coming out of the Vanity building. It's where Valen lives.

"I'm sorry," Christy whispers.

"They're not intimate in any of them." Then again, I don't see Valen doing PDA. But I also didn't see him as the type to pull me into a room and have his way with me. "What makes you think they're engaged?"

"Tiff is dating one of the Dassault brothers." They're known as the diamond boys because their family specializes in custom jewelry for high end clientele. "According to her, Vaughn requested bands and diamonds to be brought to his office last week. He's designing a ring." I swipe at the tears now rolling down my cheeks. The betrayal I feel is almost too much to bear. How could I be so naïve?

"Judith hasn't said anything." I suppose I haven't talked to her much lately either. I have been avoiding all of the Valentinuses since the New Year's party. My responses to her texts have been short. Judith called a few times, and I let them go to voicemail. I hated it, but I knew she'd talk about Valen.

"So weird." Christy glares at her phone. "Maybe this is him pushing you away because he's so in love with you and he thinks this is for the best!" She blurts out as if that solves the riddle. "Okay, that's stupid. I hate men."

"What am I going to do?" I rest my hand on my stomach. What if he's been in love with her for awhile but hasn't acted on it for fear of hurting me? It's no secret I'm in love with Valen. I've never tried to hide it. Maybe he feels this weird sense of guilt like he has to take care of me since the accident. Have I been holding him back from living the life he truly wants to?

I guess it's Valen keeping all the secrets. Now I've got one of my own. And there is no way in hell I plan on telling him anytime soon.



I check the time after I clear out my Skype meeting. This day is dragging. All of them are. Work normally helps my days pass quicker. That hasn't been the case lately. Every second of this new year drags on at a snail's pace. My only peace is when I can find sleep. In my dreams, I have my little pet, but when I wake it's a nightmare. All of it being ripped away from me once again.

Touching her ruined me. It made me crave her even more. I thought it would sate something in me and allow me to hold out, but I'm finding it's only made it harder. Oh, I was already ruined before, but my willpower was stronger.

I didn't know what she tasted like, how she sounded when she came. The small puffs of breath that came from her when she drew close to coming. But now I know all of those details. Along with the way her tight little cunt squeezed the head of my cock. I'd gotten a glimpse of heaven, and now there is no turning back.

"Vaughn," my mom calls as she pushes open the door to my office.

"What if I was in a meeting?"

"I don't care." I glance up at her. She's pissed. As mad as my mother is, she still manages to look put together from head to toe.

"What's going on?" My mother's wrath isn't often directed towards me. I try to keep it that way. Judith can be the

sweetest mom you've ever met, but it is far from her weakness.

"Petal."

"What about her?" I start to stand. It's the one word that can bring every part of me to attention.

"She's ignoring me." I pause, not sure what she wants me to do about that. Petal hasn't been great about responding to me either. If I had some special power to make her do so, I would. For now, I'm giving her the space she needs to finish out her last semester. Then we'll go from there.

I have plans in motion. I'm just not sure of how she will handle them. They have always been coming. No matter how much I tried to push them to the back of my mind. Each time they persisted, moving front and center, making me feel like a dirty bastard.

"She's at school." I know my response is the wrong one when Mom folds her arms over her chest. She's not buying what I'm selling. She might not know the details, but she knows something is off.

"You did something. She's been different since she went back to school." She glares at me. I drop my head, sucking in a deep breath. I did do something. I can't bring myself to regret it.

"Mom."

"Fix it" are the only words she says before allowing the silence to stretch. I know she's not going anywhere until I give her some plan on how I intend to make things right with Petal.

"I'm not sure you want me to fix it." I speak honestly.

"That's where you're wrong. We've been waiting for you to fix it for months." My head snaps up, her words surprising the hell out of me.

"What does that mean?" She rolls her eyes at my question.

"That girl is in love with you." Her words hit me hard, right in the chest.

"She thinks she's in love with me," I correct her.



“I swear you’re the smartest stupid person I know.” When I look up at her this time, she’s wearing a look of pure frustration.

“Tell me how you really feel.” I drop back down into my chair.

“No, I think it’s you that needs to be telling someone else how you really feel. She deserves to know. And you both deserve to be happy.” Leave it to my mother to hit the nail right on the fucking head. “The scars they—”

“What of them?” I cut her off. “There is nothing wrong with her scars.” Those scars show she fought to survive. That’s how I’ve always looked at them.

“I know that, and you know I do. It’s her. I worry she thinks that—”

“I told her to stop covering them.” My mom’s brows lift. I’m not sure if it’s because that’s the second time I’ve cut her off. It’s not something I typically do. Or if her reaction is because I told Petal to stop hiding her scars. I’m guessing it’s a bit of both. Some of the anger fades from her expression.

A knock sounds at my door before Carter pops his head in. “Sir, Zane Dassault is here.”

“Dassault?” Now my mother is smiling.

“Send him in.”

“Why is my son in need of diamonds?”

“You know why.” She tries to keep pretending she’s mad at me, but I can hear the smile in her voice.

“So you were planning to do something about this mess you’ve made.”

“You know how this is going to look, don’t you? The fallout that it will bring with it?” I remind my mother.

“If we’ve learned anything from what happened to us, it’s that life is short. You need to live every moment of it and do the things that make you happy. And since when did you ever care what people thought?”

“When what I did started affecting Petal.” My mother is right about me not giving a shit about what people thought of me in the past. But all of that changed when my decisions began having consequences for Petal.

“What you are doing already is clearly affecting her. She has only applied to one college. I thought she might tell me she was taking a year off and that she wanted to come stay with me, but nope.”

“She’s not going back to the Coopers’. That family is a bunch of bloodsuckers.”

“Then give her a home, Vaughn. That’s what she wants.” My mother makes it sound so fucking easy. I don’t think she understands the things I want to do to Petal. How I want to sink into her and never let go. To feel every fucking breath she takes until I draw my last one.

“Vaughn, I think you’re going to love what I put together.” Zane comes into my office. One of the two guards with him uncuffs the case from his wrist before they exit. “Judith, it’s been awhile.”

“You should speak to my husband about that, not me,” she teases him.

“Show me.” Patience is not my strong suit. Zane sets the box down on my desk. My mom moves closer, wanting a peek for herself.

“I brought a few I put together, but I think I know which one you’ll want going off the details you gave me.” He opens the box and pulls out one ring. A ring I’ve been thinking about in my mind for some time now.

My mom lets out a small gasp when she sees it. “It’s beautiful.” It really is.

“It’s Petal.”

My little pet.



“*I* owe you big time,” I tell my best friend as I unpack my belongings. There was no way I could stay at school.

I let the administrators know of my plans of leaving. They couldn't stop me. I was eighteen and had the credits I needed for my diploma. My only problem is how long it will be until they reach out to the Valentinus family. It's inevitable. Secrets never stay that way. More so when Besly Prep would do anything for the Valentinuses to keep them happy.

The school had a small meltdown when I said I was leaving. They thought it was something they'd done. I did my best to reassure them it had nothing to do with the school. In fact, as soon as I'm able to access more of my trust, I have plans to donate to the school, in the form of scholarships for other girls.

The school is incredible, and I want people of all walks of life to get a chance to experience it. Not only the people that have money. I understand how privileged I've been and hope to give other young women the same opportunity.

Besly was there for me in a time I really needed them. I knew I couldn't stay with my uncle after the accident. It would have been torture to look at his face that so closely resembled my father's every day. I hadn't been emotionally strong enough to withstand that. The city had been raw to me at the time. Everywhere I went reminded me of the life I had before. Of how happy I'd been and how in the blink of an eye it was taken away.

My whole family was trying to heal, and the staff at Besly along with other girls there let me lean on them. I'll always be grateful for them. There is really something to having a school that is all female. Everyone bonded on different levels. There were no fights over boys or stupid drama. It was in a way a family at times. It gave me stability and a sense of home when I needed it the most.

"I know you're good for the money." Christy laughs. No one asked me a question when I slipped her black AmEx across the counter at the hotel. This is technically the first time I've done anything of this caliber on my own. I'd been relieved that I hadn't run into any roadblocks so far, knowing there are going to be plenty on the road ahead of me.

Christy is helping me get a head start. I knew I had to be smart and careful about how I went about this whole thing. If I started filling up my credit card with charges and making withdrawals from my accounts, Valen would have quickly found out. I needed a minute to get my footing before he tried to talk me into going back. I'm not ready to tell him I'm pregnant. Not yet. I don't think I can face him at all right now. He would know something was off, and it would only be a matter of time before I folded like a cheap chair and spilled everything to him.

Once I get my place together, he'll see just because he knocked me up it doesn't mean we have to get married. Even if I want that more than anything in the world, I don't want it this way. I would never make him be with me. Especially if he's in love with my own damn cousin. That shit hurts. I was sure out of everyone, Valen could see through her beauty and into the rottenness that lives at her core.

I want what my parents had. The way they loved each other made me crave to have the same. It hurt to lose them both, but I'm not sure how one would have fared without the other. The two of them were a team in everything. I would roll my eyes at the way my father couldn't keep his hands off my mom. As a little girl, it grossed me out while at the same time knowing I'd want my own husband to be the same with me.

“I have set up a few appointments for a realtor and a doctor. I already know I’m pregnant, but I want to make sure that everything is okay. And I’m doing the things I’m supposed to be doing.”

“One of my cousin’s husbands is a realtor. I can have one of them reach out to you,” she offers.

“I might do some soft looking around myself. See what is out there before my appointment.” The quicker I find something, the closer I’ll be to telling Valen the truth.

“You can’t stay in a hotel for too long. Once he checks for you under your own name, he’ll look under mine. If he finds you before you get settled, it will be easier for him to pull you back.”

“I know.” Finding a place should be at the top of my agenda, but I have no clue what I’m doing.

“Well, just know I’m here if you need anything. Text or call. I’ve got your back.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too,” Christy says before ending the call.

I look around the hotel room. It’s beautiful and bigger than the dorm Christy and I used to share. It only makes the loneliness sink in. When I was at school, at least I had her at night. I’ve never truly been alone. Even if at times I’ve felt like I was.

My phone goes off in my hand. I expect it to be Christy wanting to tell me one more thing, but Valen’s name lights up my screen. I’m surprised he’s calling and not texting. That’s what he normally does. Why the heck would he be calling? It stops after a few more rings before it goes off again. Still I don’t answer it.

**Valen:** We need to talk.

Great, those are the words that no one ever wants to hear. I don’t think he knows about me leaving school yet. This has to be about him and Tia. I drop my phone and dash for the bathroom, barely making it before the small snack I had earlier comes up.

Who am I kidding? This isn't about the baby. My stomach can't take the idea of Valen and Tia getting married. How could I ever live with that? I would have no choice now that we're having a baby. Tia would be my baby's stepmother. The reality of the situation is beginning to really sink in. I'd lose it again if there was anything left in my stomach.

I get myself together, take a shower, and finish unpacking. I don't really have much. I can either buy new clothes or I'll have to go to my uncle's and clear my stuff out. Honestly, if I showed up there no one might notice. I'd say I was on some break from school, and they'd believe it. They never check in on anything.

**Valen:** Stop ignoring me

I see another text from Valen as I pack up my purse. I'm not remaining stuck in a hotel room. I'll go insane. I have to do something.

**Me:** Why? You're good at doing it to me.

Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, you big jerk. I can't help but get a small thrill at pushing back at Valen. I'm always so sweet. It's what I want to be, but I'm not sure I have that in me anymore.

**Valen:** I'm not ignoring you I'm giving you space

**Me:** Take all the fucking space you want.

I shocked myself with the last text. I guess you really can only push a girl so far.





*G*rip my phone. Her response not only pisses me off, it somehow turns me on too. My little pet is mad. This is not the place or time for me to be getting hard.

I think I might know why. If I was in her place, I'd be saying far worse things. Actually, I wouldn't be saying anything. I'd be doing something.

If I caught wind that Petal was engaged or about to be engaged, there would be blood spilled. Not hers unless you were going to count her virginity as I took it. No, it would be that of whoever thought they could have her. Petal is mine. It was always going to be this way. It didn't matter what we had to go through; we were always meant to come out on the other side of it together.

In college, I kept busy with school and learning from my father. I told myself and others around me I didn't have time to date. I also didn't care if dumb rumors got out that I had been dating someone. It didn't matter back then. I was a world away at college, and Petal was too young.

Things have changed. I'm not in college anymore, and Petal could get wind of this bullshit. Going off her text, I'm thinking she already has. My girl is more than pissed. She has no need to be jealous. There never has been or never will be anyone but her. I'm not even going to try to pretend that I don't love that she's having this reaction. It shows me she cares.

As for her cousin, I regret ever being polite to her. I'd only done it because she was part of Petal's family. Before that, she was James' niece. That's all it had ever been, though. That's the problem with being nice at times. Especially when it comes to a girl like Tia, one that always gets what she wants, and when she realizes she can't have it, she'll only try harder for it.

"I don't understand the problem. Tia is a suitable partner for you then—"

"Don't finish that sentence." I warn Cooper. When I got wind of the rumor, I headed straight over to Coopers' home. This wasn't a game I was going to play, and I would be cutting the head off the snake. I might allow Cooper to get away with some of his bullshit when it came to money, but this was different. He should know that. I made that pretty clear at our last meeting.

"She's eighteen." Cooper tries to pretend he's offended.

"How old was your last mistress?" I toss back at him. Cooper's eyes almost pop out of his head. "You think I don't know what goes on with the people around Petal? I make it my business to know."

Hell, I knew about all of her friends and their families. All I've ever wanted is to keep Petal safe. Sadly, her biggest threat was the people her parents left her to. For years I asked myself why they'd do such a thing, but as of recently I've started to understand. Petal could be a lot like her father. They carried this belief that people could change, and I think he held out a small hope that at his core, his brother wasn't a horrible man.

Not only that, but with how my mother was being about the idea of Petal and me being together, it was clearly a forgone conclusion for both of our parents that we would someday end up together. Thinking back, it might not have been acceptable if my parents had ended up raising Petal. I know for a fact that she would never have gone off to Besly Prep if she'd been placed with them. And then for her to go on and end up with me... People would assume a lot of things.

I'd be a liar if I myself didn't admit the temptation would have been hard. It was one I had failed at without her even being close. Petal might have been an adult when I touched her, but I'd told myself I was going to wait longer. I couldn't, though. Not with her right there in front of me. That damn dress had left nothing to the imagination. That smell of sweet roses and sunshine always coming off her had done nothing to soothe the beast inside of me. Even at nighttime, she smelled of the sun.

"Vaughn, would you really go this low? Marie and I are Petal's solid home. You'd try and destroy that?" I bark a laugh. Not because that's the stupidest shit I've ever heard. They are far from being anything close to that for her. Their marriage is nowhere close to one at all. In some circles, people might consider it one, but when you had parents like mine or Petal's, you have way higher standards. We both know what a real marriage is. We grew up seeing it. Both our parents exuded real love for one another.

"You do know Marie is fucking the tennis pro at the country club, right? He's ranked 27<sup>th</sup>, I heard." Cooper's face turns redder than I even thought was possible.

"She is not." Wow, he's a lot madder about this affair than I thought he'd be. I honestly thought he knew. Looks like he doesn't like cheating when the shoe is on the other foot. I'm not surprised at him being a hypocrite.

"You're right. They stopped a few months ago. She's with the yoga guy now." I lie pretending to only know what might be passing gossip. The Prescotts all went to that club. That meant Petal could end up there. Which in turn means that I knew everything about Jacob the yoga guy. "The wives really pass the men around that club a lot."

"You've made your point." Cooper gets up and walks over to the bar in his office. I guess it's not too early when you have to have your wife's last two lovers rubbed in your face.

Cooper has not only had a string of mistresses but a few I think he might have been in love with. He deserved every affair Marie had on him. Not that I am giving that woman a

pass. She has her own issues. This whole family is filled with them, and it's time I pulled Petal away from that.

"Then you'll speak to your daughter." I stand from my chair.

"I can try, but Tia does as she pleases. She's an adult. I didn't tell her to start those rumors. The girl has been in love with you for years."

"Shut it down."

"I can shut her down just as much as I can close my wife's fucking legs for other men. At least my wife depends on me for money." Cooper takes another shot of whiskey.

Tia has a mildly successful modeling career, I believe. I didn't pay attention to the images. The agency she works for is legitimate. That much I know. I also know I'd destroy her career if I had to. With enough money, you can do anything. And when it comes to my Petal, there really isn't much I wouldn't do to protect her.

"Daddy." The hairs on the back of my neck stand up at the sound of the sugary fake voice filling the room. Speak of the fucking devil. "Mom said you had a guest." I turn to see Tia standing in the now open doorway to Cooper's office.

I'm guessing from the way she's dressed that she is about to go out for a night on the town, but it's only two in the afternoon. Which tells me it's not a coincidence, and she was aware the second I got here. She's spent that time doing herself up in a way I'm sure is alluring to most men. I'm not one of them.

Tia is pretty in what I would consider a very basic sense of the word. What others might consider to be beauty. That's all it is, though. A board room of people sit around and decide what people will find attractive, and the rest of the world allows themselves to play into that.

"Don't play dumb, Tia. While it might suit you, I'm not in the mood." Her eyes widen a fraction.

"I don't—"

“Tia, I hate nothing more than repeating myself.” Her lips purse. She fights hard to hide her anger, still wanting to keep up the façade of being some sweet girl.

“I thought we had a moment at the New Year’s party. Was I wrong?”

“It’s not a question. I think you knew you were wrong the second I removed your hand from my arm. It wasn’t appropriate.” Tia steps into the room more. I’m sure she has another plan to try to lure me in using some of her seduction. Or maybe her plan was for this all to get back to Petal and make Petal want nothing to do with me. But little does she know that Petal will never be done with me. Not as long as I breathe.

“Is there something you find unsavory about me?” Tia’s bottom lip puffs out as if I’ve wounded the woman.

A woman I know that has dated a few pro athletes, a rock star, and I won’t even touch on those random flights she took out of the States a few times that ended with her having more than a few million landing in her bank account afterward. For a half a second, my mother’s voice fills my head, telling me to be kind. In that half second, Tia has my mother’s words slipping away from my conscience.

“It’s her, isn’t it? Petal. Why her? She’s not even pretty anymore. The scars.”

“The scars?” I laugh at how ludicrous the comment is. Does my Petal have scars? Yes. Thin faded white ones that show in random spots on her body from broken glass.

Glass she crawled through to reach my own mother as she ripped her blouse from her body to hold it to my mom’s stomach trying to stop the bleeding before she passed out herself. A girl who could already see her own parents were dead. I’ve always thought Petal was beautiful, but those scars, they made her breathtaking. They did something to me that no others could do. They are a reminder of how strong, selfless, and loving my Petal is. And I’m a greedy bastard that wants all of her goodness for himself.

You can't see inner beauty with a glance. That's what many say. That isn't true with Petal. Those scars bleed out the beauty and pureness of her soul and heart. They left behind the marks of an angel willing to do whatever it takes to save another. To save my mother after having lost her own.

I didn't need those scars to know what was inside Petal. She was the same little girl that was deathly scared of spiders but wouldn't let me kill them. I'd have to trap them and set them free. Once I had to drive all the way over to her house to do it. Not that I complained. Even in my youth, I truly knew what Petal would come to fully mean to me. I seized every moment I could to be her hero.

Too bad I couldn't be one for her now. I granted those spiders and bugs freedom, but I couldn't grant her the same.

"Valen, please just—"

"Vaughn," I correct Tia. No one calls me Valen, and I know Tia is aware of that.

That name is reserved for Petal. When we were both younger, Vaughn would come out as a mess of a word when she said it. Then it became easier for her to call me Valen. It stuck for her. Said it reminded her of a warrior's name. I didn't question it. If she wanted to perceive me as such, I wasn't going to turn that down. One Halloween, our parents even had her dressed as a princess, and I'd been her guard. The pictures sit on the entryway table into my parents' home to this very day.

"Well, I think maybe you should know one small detail about your precious Petal. She booked an appointment with Dr. Eva a few hours ago." My mind searches for the name. "A gynecologist," Tia fills in for me.

"Here in the city?" Petal should be back at school. If she was in need of something medical, I should have been alerted. Her health care falls under ValenScott.

"Yes." Anger starts to boil inside of me.

"And how the fuck do you know Petal has a doctor's appointment? If it's not because she told you, someone is very much about to be without a job and a possible lawsuit." Tia's

face starts to redden as she realizes her mistake. “Your gossip circle has gone too far this time. She’s an adult woman. Of course she goes to a gynecologist,” I point out.

Though why didn’t I know about it? Was it upcoming in the next few weeks? She only made it recently. Was it when she was sending me sassy messages? Was she thinking about birth control? My head starts to throb with all the thoughts racing through it.

“Tia, shut down the bullshit. Don’t make me prove how ruthless I can be. You’ll never book a modeling job again if you continue down the path you’re currently on with Petal. I’m petty enough to have your stupid-ass Instagram and any other social media platforms you might have banned.”

“You can’t—” She stops speaking when her eyes fully meet mine.

“If any of you ruin what I have with Petal, I will not suffer alone.” It’s not a threat but a promise. With that, I walk out of the Prescott home without a backwards glance. My first call being to my mother.

“Who is Dr. Eva?” I say the second she answers the call.

“Well, hello to you too,” my mom says dryly.

“Mom, please. I’m begging here.”

“She’s one of the best gynecologists in the city. Why? Are you in need of a pap smear?” She laughs at her own joke.

“Petal booked an appointment with her.”

“Hmm” is her only response.

“Hmm? What does that mean? Is something wrong?” I suppose birth control might be an option. I take a steadying breath, not wanting my mind to start playing out all the reasons she might need birth control.

“Calm down.” I can tell my mom is holding something back.

“Mom!” I’m never one to bark at my own mother, but now I’m freaking out.

“I don’t see a girl going to Dr. Eva for birth control alone.” My mom gives voice to my own thoughts.

“So something is wrong.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. How do you know this to be true?”

“Tia.”

“Why are you even talking to that girl? Have you heard what she is spreading around this city?”

“Yeah, I’ve handled it.”

“Good, about time you got this all sorted out.” There is no missing the smugness in my mother’s tone.

“She’s still in school, Mom.”

“About that. I got a call from Besly. They said they tried to reach you, but when you didn’t pick up they called me.” I pull my phone back to see that I do have two missed calls from them.

“What? So something is wrong?”

“I’m not sure, honestly. Petal is an adult, and they told me she’s good on her credits so she is free to go, but her last semester has already been paid for. I told them to keep it as a donation. The school has been good to her and—”

“Stop.” I jerk my car to the side of the road as I untangle everything my mom laid on me. “She left school?”

“Seems so.”

“Because something is wrong with her and this is why she needs to see this doctor?!”

“Do not shout at me, Vaughn Owen Valentinus.” I rein it in, knowing when my mom uses my full name that she’s no longer playing around.

“That could have been some made-up shit Tia said. She’s going around saying you’re marrying her. She might be playing with your head.” She might not be wrong there.

“Where is Petal?”



“I suppose that’s the million dollar question.”

“That’s the billion dollar question.” I run my hand down my face. My little pet isn’t some run of the mill trust fund baby. She needs bodyguards if she’s not at school. Besly is locked up tight with security.

“I have a feeling my brilliant son will find that out in no time,” my mom chirps. “I’ll give you a head start. No, she hasn’t used any of her cards.”

That leaves two options. She’s using her best friend Christy’s name at first to get settled, but then she would want her own funds. She’ll also want the rest of her things if she’s back in the city to stay. Hell, she might be back to grab her shit and make a run for it.

If my little pet thinks she can outsmart me, she has a whole other think coming.



“Ma’am?” the driver asks from the front seat. We’ve been driving in circles for the last thirty minutes. I was headed to my uncle’s to grab some of my things, but as we were pulling up, I saw Valen leaving. I asked the driver to keep going until I could figure out what to do.

I have to admit that seeing him was like a punch to the gut. It’s a harsh reminder of the circumstance I find myself in. Which only reinforces the fact that I need to make sure that I get my life in order before Valen finds out about the baby.

Valen has always been friendly with my uncle, but I know he doesn’t like him. There is only one reason he’s there, and that’s Tia. I keep wanting to pretend the rumors were only that, but the reality keeps hitting me right in the face.

Why Tia of all people? The one girl that has always tried to make my life hell. Her snide remarks linger in my mind. The way she would always flirt with Valen. I suppose that might be why she disliked me so much. She knew I was in love with him and probably hated the attention he gave me. Tia has never done well with sharing anything. She loves being the center of attention.

“We can go now,” I tell the driver as I brush my finger over one of the faded scars on my upper arm. I push myself away from negative thoughts. Part of my healing had included going to therapy. I was reluctant at first, but over time I saw how much it helped. With the grief at least.

My self-image is something I still battle with to this day. At least the scars don't pull me back to a sad place anymore. It might be shallow, but as I got older it was the thought of being undesirable that would bring me down. With a few words from Valen last Thanksgiving, those thoughts fluttered away. He pushed me to stop hiding myself, and I did. He made me start to feel comfortable in my own skin again. Something I hadn't felt since the day of the accident. He gave me the confidence to wear the dress on New Year's that hadn't left much to the imagination.

Valen was insatiable. I believed him. He didn't find my scars ugly. The more skin I showed had gotten him finally to act. But then he stopped. I swallow the lump that has formed in my throat. What if everything he did was out of pity? Valen always tried to do what he thought was right when it came to me whether it pissed me off or not. What if he had been acting in order to show me that other men could want me? I wouldn't put it past him.

Was I a pity fuck? Ah, joke's on me because it wasn't even that. My phone vibrates in my hand. Against my better judgment, I glance at the screen.

**Judith:** Are you okay, honey?

**Me:** I'm fine.

I break and respond to Judith. The last thing I want is for her to worry. She should still think I'm at school.

**Judith:** Tia has a friend that's doing an internship at Northland Women's Health Care

"Oh my God."

**Judith:** Well, the girl had an internship.

**Judith:** I'm always here for you darling. You know you can talk to me about anything. I love you as though you were my own daughter.

**Me:** Does he know?

I don't have to say who the he is.

**Judith:** Only that you got an appointment there with Dr. Eva.

**Judith:** He also knows you left school

I guess I'm coming clean sooner than I wanted. Of course this isn't going how I planned. Nothing ever does. That seems to be the story of my life.

"I'll be right back," I tell the driver when he rolls to a stop in front of my uncle's home. It would be nice if for once I could have a bit of luck. I think maybe I do when I manage to make it to my bedroom without anyone but staff taking notice of me.

I grab a bag from my closet and put my books filled with family pictures inside before I snag a few other things that are irreplaceable to me.

"Why are you here?" Tia hisses. I spin around to see her standing in the doorway of my bedroom.

"I live here?" Well, I did, but I'm not getting into that with her right now. My eyes glance at her hands, not seeing a ring. He hasn't popped the question yet.

"You never lived here, and you know it." She steps into my room. "I'm guessing you heard the news and now you're throwing a fit." Tia smirks when she notices my bag. "Running away? I suppose that is for the best. It will make things less awkward. Valen and I have been worried how we'd handle your little crush."

Her words cut deep, but I can't help but strike back. I don't have to put up with her shit.

"Did he deal with it by knocking me up?" Tia lets out a loud gasp.

"Liar!" Her face turns red.

"You're the one spreading around my personal information about my doctor's appointment."

"That you made an appointment." She grabs the side of the doorframe. "I thought for like birth control or something." I guess my words cut her as deeply as she'd done to me. "You're lying. This is a ploy to get him to be with you."

"I think Valen would know if there was a possibility that he knocked me up. I can't fake that."

“You got him drunk and took advantage.” She’s grasping at straws.

“I’m guessing that’s something you’d do.” I zip my bag. “The last thing I’m going to do is fight with a woman over a man’s love. I deserve better than that.”

“You do.” Valen’s deep voice rumbles. He appears behind Tia. “You’ve never had to fight for my love, Petal. I’ve always loved you.” I force a small smile. “Your fake smiles don’t work on me, Pet.”

“Vaughn, did you hear what she is trying to claim?”

“Tia, I warned you.” Valen flicks a glance down at her as if only now noticing her once she spoke.

“You can’t be serious. She’s a little girl. You’re misleading her. You don’t love her in that way,” Tia pleads with him.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” Valen’s expression turns to one of rage. Not an ounce of care for Tia shows from him. All I can see is hate. I don’t understand what the heck is going on.

“Look at her!” Tia stomps her foot and points my way, reminding me of a spoiled toddler not getting her way.

“All I ever want to do is look at her.” Valen leans in closer to her. I’m not sure what he says, but her face drains of blood turning white. “Get her or you’ll be penniless come the end of the month.” Valen steps back, and I see Uncle Cooper behind him. Tia doesn’t fight her dad when he grabs her arm and yanks her out of my bedroom.

“What are you doing here?” I ask when we’re alone. Valen is still looming in my doorway. I can tell he’s still very pissed.

“I think I should be asking you that, Pet.”

“I left school.”

“I heard.”

“You can’t make me go back.” I push my shoulders back, letting him know I’m serious.

“You’re not going anywhere.” What the heck? He can’t tell me what to do.

“I can go back if I want,” I blurt out, not making any sense at all. I wasn’t going back but not because he ordered it so.

“You’ll go where I tell you.” Valen strides over toward me.

“You don’t own me just because I’m pregnant.” Valen doesn’t flinch at my words, letting me know exactly how much he heard of Tia and my conversation.

“Wrong, Pet. I’ve always owned you.”

“Stop calling me that!” I can’t deny it. He has always owned my heart.

“Why would I do that when you love it so much?”

“That’s the problem!” I shout. He grabs my chin.

“I tried, Pet, I really did. Now you’re going to get what you *think* you’ve wanted all this time.” I lick my lips.

“What does that mean?” My heart hammers in my chest. I haven’t seen Valen this worked up with emotion since I woke up in a hospital bed with him looming over me.

“You wanted me. Now you’ve got me. You’ll never be free, pet.”





*P*etal is quiet. Too quiet, in fact. After I made her fate very clear to her, those beautiful eyes of hers almost popped out of her head. I wanted to hit something or someone for making her believe anything different.

The last thing you're supposed to do is upset a pregnant woman. I think I've heard that. I know fuck-all about pregnant women, but I'll learn and quick. A small part of my mind had wondered if that was why she'd made that doctor's appointment, but I didn't let myself dream of such a thing.

I took a step back to give her a second to breathe. To let the reality of her life sink in. Hell, I need a minute myself. I've never wanted to murder someone while at the same time experiencing what is one of the greatest moments of my life.

She's pregnant. Petal really has sealed her fate.

I wanted to tell the driver to turn the vehicle around so I could go back to throttle her family while also wanting to get her as far away from them as possible. I went with getting her out of there before I committed murder and then fucked her on her bed.

Jesus Christ, there is something wrong with me. I run my hand down my face.

I want to reach over and pull her into my lap, but her seatbelt is staying on. This might actually be one of the better options for us to talk. I can't maul her, and she can't try to run. Yes, my pet is good at that.

“You’ve earned yourself a very short leash, pet.”

“This isn’t the way to my hotel,” she responds. Ignoring me isn’t going to work now. Petal brought herself back to the city.

“You think you’re going back to a hotel? Have you lost your mind as well?”

Her head snaps around. “Do not compare me to Tia.”

“There is no comparison. I’m offended you thought I’d date that bloodsucker. She is a lot like her father.”

“I didn’t want to believe it,” she whispers. One of her fingers absently drifts over the scar on her forearm. I reach out and take her hand, my fingers lacing with hers.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know, honestly.” A humorless laugh leaves me. “For staying away. For not staying away.”

“Why would you want to stay away from me?” God, she’s so innocent.

“I didn’t want to chain you down, but I can’t let you go.”

“You’re not saying all this only because I’m pregnant, are you?”

“You being pregnant was inevitable. I knew what I was doing, Petal. I might lose control when it comes to you, but I’m very aware of what I’m doing.”

“And what is it that you’re doing?” Petal’s teeth sink into her bottom lip. She wants to hear me confess my sins.

“We both know there is a reason I’ve never been with another woman.” Petal’s mouth falls open. “When did you start to question the kind of man I am? All I’ve ever done was try and protect you. I didn’t want anyone, but more than that, I never wanted you to hear about me having meaningless sex.” I also let myself believe that if I didn’t touch anyone that gave me all the grace I needed to make sure no other man so much as entertained the idea of having a chance with Petal.

“Valen.” Petal’s eyes fill with tears.

“Don’t cry. Fuck.” I cup her cheek. “I love you, Petal. Don’t ever doubt that. Every inch of you. All the parts that have made you into the woman you are today.”

“Scars and all.” She fills in my unspoken words.

“I can’t wait to place my mouth on every one of them.” It seems as though I’ve waited a lifetime to do it.

“Please.” She leans forward, claiming my mouth. There’s my girl. I want her to come to me, not run from me. I’m her home. I always have been.

I kiss her back, thankful that we’re pulling up to our place. I don’t bother with anything else. I carry Petal inside. Her bags from the hotel are already here. It hadn’t taken me long to track her little ass down.

“I’ve never been here,” Petal says when I lay her out on the bed. She looks so tiny all alone on it.

“You’ve been here.” I motion toward one of the many pictures I have of her. There’s one on the nightstand. “You’re always with me.”

Petal starts to sit up, but I’m not having it. I strip us both of our clothes and stay true to my words. My mouth touches every inch of her skin. I don’t stop devouring her until she’s begging me to and her body is shaking with pleasure. I don’t want to stop, but I need inside of her. My cock is so hard it’s painful. That’s after coming all over myself while I ate her sweetness.

“Valen.” I smile against her pussy when she tugs at my hair, trying to take her pussy from me. I bite the inside of her thigh, leaving my mark on her.

“I told you to be careful. Now you’re stuck with me.”

“Liar.” She wiggles her little ass around on the bed as I make my way back up her body. “I was always going to be stuck with you.”

She’s finally getting it.

“You’re all mine, Petal.” I press my mouth to muffle any cry of pain she might have as I sink inside of her. I hate how much pleasure I feel as her tight virgin cunt wraps around my cock, knowing it’s hurting her.

“Valen.” She nips my bottom lip. “I’m okay.” I lift my head to stare down into her eyes. A giant smile lights up her beautiful face. I’m so stupid. Of course she’s okay. When it comes to love, Petal will overcome everything for it. “Are you okay?” She strokes my cheek. A wave of emotion engulfs me.

“Yeah,” I breathe out. The breath feels like the first I’ve taken in years.

“I love you.” She gives herself to me. Always so open.

“I love you too, Petal.”

“Your pet?” She smirks wrapping her legs around me as I start to make love to her body.

“My everything.”

## **EPILOGUE**

PETAL

*Weeks later*

“Valen,” I giggle. My face heats as he openly nuzzles my neck in the middle of a restaurant. We aren’t at home at the moment as much as I’d love to be there.

Valen on a surface level told himself that I might not be his for years, but that hadn’t stopped him from not only making one but two homes for us without me knowing. Both of which I love. He is eager for me to put my own touches on them. One is in the city and the other outside of it.

I was in no rush to change anything. Both he and his mom tried to make each of them into something I would love. They had pictures of our families together over the years and so many other small details of things I pushed to the back of my mind.

My parents might not be here with us today, but their lives and love show throughout our homes. The Valentinus family made sure of that. I shouldn’t be surprised in the least. They’ve always taken care of me.

It was the small things that really tugged at my heart strings. Such as some of the paintings my mother not only made herself but also some from her favorite artists. I hadn’t seen them in so long. I was sure they were in storage, but I was wrong. They have hung in Valen’s place this whole time. God, I love this man.

He told himself he was going to give me space while all along creating what some might call a trap for me to fall into. I didn’t fall. I leapt. I mean, I would have run into it if I knew it would lead me to him sooner.

Even when I was a young girl, Valen held my heart. I recall my mother telling me that in time I would get what I want in love while my father told me a man that loved me would wait an eternity to make me his. Both had been right. Often their foresight gave me chills, thinking that they saw what might

come, but my parents were always thinking ahead when it came to me. I was their only child, and it had been hard for them to conceive me.

Tonight we're in a restaurant where anyone can see us. There is no more hiding what Valen and I have together. Sure, everyone knows we're getting married tomorrow, but words and pictures are two different things.

Of course, people aren't openly taking pictures, but I know they are sneaking them. I'm also sure my soon-to-be husband knows my blush has nothing to do with that. I don't want him to stop. In fact, I find it endearing how open he is with his affection for me. I can already see the gossip blogs posting about it now. The always reserved Vaughn Valentinus being openly loving and affectionate is something that isn't normal for him. That makes it even juicier for them.

Some have speculated that we have been in a relationship for years and hiding it. I suppose they're not wrong to a degree, maybe we have been. That's neither here nor there. Valen never touched me in a sexual way until way past my 18th birthday. That's not for a lack of me trying on my end.

My soon-to-be husband might think he has no control when it comes to me, but I know after experiencing his love for me that his control is unlike any others. I don't know how he held back for so long. I also know I didn't make it easier for him.

Back then, I would openly flirt and be provocative toward him. He did not have the same privilege. I didn't understand that before. I was basically torturing the man I love. But I've been making up for it. The only time we've spent out of bed is when we had to attend to wedding plans. I run my finger across my wedding ring. It's been on my finger since that first night Valen took me home.

As of today, neither of us care what others think about our relationship. We both know life is too short to give a shit how others perceive us. I've known since I was a little girl that Valen would be my husband one day. I know that is easier for me to say, coming from the woman that was younger and I understand why Valen had to keep me at arm's length.



Don't get me wrong; it drove me crazy at times, but I get it, and I respect it. At the end of the day, all that matters is that we got to where we needed to be. Love always conquers all.

Tomorrow on Valentine's Day, Valen will become my husband. While it's simply paperwork, it's still something I want. To stand up in front of the world and declare our love for each other. The wedding will be small with only the people who mean the most to us attending.

"It's nice to have you both back," David says, taking a sip of his wine. I'd asked him to walk me down the aisle, and of course he agreed. Both he and Judith have always been like parents to me.

"Things happen when they're supposed to." Judith reaches over and takes her husband's hand.

"I think things happen when you make them happen," I say with a laugh to Judith. It had been her idea for us to get married on Valentine's Day. Which had been a week away from when Valen had slipped the ring on my finger.

"I might have given things a small nudge." She smirks.

The server arrives with our food. I try to get up to go back to my own seat, but Valen isn't having it. His hand rests possessively on my stomach.

"Stay, pet," Valen whispers into my ear before kissing my neck.

"You do know she's not staying with you tonight." Judith pokes at her son, whose hold only tightens on me. "It's the night before the wedding."

"I don't care what night it is." Judith and Valen have a stare-off.

"You're such a caveman." Judith breaks but does so with a smile. "Wonder where he got that from." She gives her husband of thirty years a pointed look.

I don't care where he got it from. It's one of the many things I love about him. All that matters to me is Valen is mine.

Come tomorrow I'll be a Valentinus.

## **EPILOGUE**

VALEN

*Many years later*

“So?” my father asks the second I step out of the car. He’s sitting outside smoking a cigar. I know he’s been waiting for me.

“It’s done.” My dad only smiles at my response. I wasn’t sure how to feel after I signed on the dotted line. Petal had easily done it three days ago without a thought when the contract was brought to her. My pet is always so clear on all of her decisions. When her mind is set on something, there is nothing that can change it. She leads with her heart. My wife is my perfect match.

Today I gave my signature to make everything final. ValenScott is no more. We sold the company off for more money than generations to come could burn through even if they tried. Not with the investments and other things. Still, it felt strange letting the company go. All I’ve ever known is ValenScott. My father and James built it before I was born. In my mind, it was what brought the two families together.

“It’s *not* our legacy,” my father says. “ValenScott was simply something James and I created. Our family is our legacy. ValenScott was dropped on to you. It’s a company. Nothing more. It’s time for you to do what you want with your life.”

“I always knew I’d work for ValenScott.” Even before the accident, it had been my direction. My father shakes his head.

“No, you thought it was what you *should* do. It went along the path of what you thought Petal’s parents would want. You wanted to prove yourself to them. If Petal and the Prescotts have taught us anything, it’s that life is too short to do anything other than what we want to. James and Ava in their death made sure that their daughter was free to do whatever she chose.”

“They did.” My throat grows tight. They made sure that she wasn’t locked down to the company. She would get profits

from revenue, but she never had to participate in its everyday functions unless one day she chose to.

Ava and James were family to me. I know their loss hit my wife harder, but I loved them too. How could I not? They had not only been beyond good people; they gave me Petal. Even in death, they made it clear that they blessed our lives together. That was never more evident than when Petal and I got married.

A day after we wed, a lawyer delivered a letter that had been written by them. Actually there had been two. One was to be given after we married; the other was to be given when Petal turned 21 *if* Petal and I hadn't made steps to be together.

The letters both stated they thought we were destined for each other, and whether we chose to be together or not they'd bless our decisions. They wanted us both to be happy in whatever we chose. But they were also protecting Petal, giving her an out in the rare chance she didn't love me as they suspected. They worried that I would push back in fear of trying to do what I thought was best for Petal. Yes, the Prescotts knew me well.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Good, great actually." Without ValenScott, our children would never think it was something that they had to live up to. They could each choose what they wanted. I too got to let go.

Over the years, I've stepped further away from the company. Petal and I have two kids, and now a third on the way. I wasn't willing to spend all my days in an office even if I could work from home.

"That's all that matters." My father stands, giving me a hug before I follow him into my home. The second I do, I spot my wife, mom, and two little ones at the dining room table doing Valentine decorations. My heart fills with warmth. There is nothing better than this in life. We may have experienced significant loss, especially Petal, but all of it led to this moment.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Daddy!” my oldest daughter Ava chirps at me. She jumps off the chair, running over to me. I scoop her up. Red glitter coats her cheeks.

“And anniversary!” Prescott, my son, reminds his sister. She rolls her eyes.

“I know. It’s in my card.” She holds up her card for me to see, shaking it. More red glitter goes flying off it and landing onto me.

“That for me?” I kiss her cheek.

“Yep!”

“Thank you, princess.” I take the card and put her back down.

“Where’s my card?” My father pretends to be offended.

“I’m doin’ it.” Ava runs back over to the table.

“How was today?” Petal comes over to me. Her hands running up the front of my chest and her small baby bump pressing into me.

“It’s my anniversary. How could it not be a perfect day?” I lean down and kiss her. She lets out a small moan. “We have reservations,” I remind her.

“We should go get ready.” She smiles against my mouth. Both Prescott and Ava are heading to my parents’ shortly.

“Go on,” I hear my mother say, but I’m already pulling my wife toward our bedroom.

“Wait till you see the dress I got.”

“Rather see you naked.” I kick the bedroom door closed behind us.

It doesn’t matter how many years I’ve had Petal, I’ll never get enough.

“Then get me naked.” She licks her lips. “I think your pet needs a shower.”

“We’re never making that reservation,” I tell her as I strip her of all her clothes and carry her into the bathroom.

“Never thought we would.” I pin her to the shower wall. God, I love this woman. I knew it from the second I laid eyes on her that she meant more to me than anyone else ever would. She is my life. My destiny.

My forever Valentine.



Happy Valentine’s Day. Thank you for continuing to read my stories. Stay tuned for my next release.

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Want more of Lucy Darling? Keep scrolling to get a peek of [Her Christmas Surprise](#) available now.

A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, looking down at a gift box. The gift box is wrapped in silver paper and has a large white ribbon bow on top. The background is dark.

*My little gift.*

**HER CHRISTMAS**

*Surprise*

**LUCY DARLING**



## **HER CHRISTMAS SURPRISE**

I'm not the sort of man who deserves a happy ending, not after the life I've led. But when I see Eve, I know I'll need more. She lights up the world for me, like twinkling Christmas lights glinting off fresh snow.

When I hear she's being auctioned off to raise money for charity, I won't allow anyone else to win her. It has to be me, and when I win her, I whisk her away to my cabin and keep her all to myself.

But when my past comes knocking, Eve will have to decide if my sins are too dark for her to ever find her happily ever after in a man like me.

# CHAPTER 1

## MARCO

I take a breath as I stare at Snow Hills Town Hall. This whole town is lit up brighter than any Christmas tree I've ever seen in my life. Every year, they win some silly award over it. I know this because I make it a habit to be aware of everything that's going on in my surroundings. I might live out on the edge of the town of Snow Hills in my secluded cabin, but I keep up on things that happen in town.

It has absolutely nothing to do with my need for control or the mayor's executive assistant that moved here three years ago. I'm pretty sure she came here just to drive me insane. Eve with her dark silky hair surrounding her heart-shaped face. A face that I know and have memorized every detail of. I've never seen eyes as green as hers. Or lips that look so soft and kissable.

I toss that thought from my head. This town is getting to me. Kissable lips? Fuck me. No, fuck her. That's what I want but deny myself from having because the reality is a girl as beautiful as Eve has dreams and goals in her life.

She's in politics, for christsake. I've offed a few politicians and some judges in my hay day. I have no guilt there. I only started to question my past life because of Eve. What would she think of it? Not that it matters. She'll never know about any of it.

I'd never be a man she glanced at twice except for the fact that I stand out in a room by mere size. Not to mention the scar that cuts across my face. The town runs with different speculations

of how I got it. They'll never know. The only person who knows is the man who gave it to me, but he didn't live long afterward. That was my past. Now my life is consumed with Eve.

We have shared a few words over the years. But the mere sight of her does things to me that invoke irrational thoughts and ideas. *Emotions*.

I don't care for that one bit. Something about her pulls me back to the hunt, with her being my prey, but I don't want to harm her. I want to take her for myself.

I came to Snow Hills for peace and quiet five years ago. I was able to drop off the map here. That peace had lasted for all of two years. The day Eve walked into this town, it went out the window. I've been unsettled ever since then, no matter how much I try to deny it. Each day, I become a bit more possessive and cross lines I shouldn't.

It has been somewhat easy to avoid what she does to me since I don't live in town. But this time, she's gone too far. My feisty little Eve has lured me out of my cabin and straight to her. In the three years since Eve has been here, she's become best friends with the mayor's daughter Liza, who runs the town's library. Liza is the reason the town looks like a holiday bomb went off inside of it.

The two of them are always together. Neither of them are known to date. At least I've never heard of them dating anyone. If I had, I'm not sure how that would have ended for the other man. Not good. I know that much.

The mere thought of Eve going out with someone boils my blood. If anything, one would guess them to be a couple as much as the two hang out. I know that's not the case, though. They are somehow oblivious to the lure they hold over the single men of Snow Hills.

Eve and Liza are night and day when it comes to their personalities. Everything about Eve appeals to me. I think her smart mouth and quick wit is what has kept the men of Snow Hills at bay from trying to pursue her. Thank fuck for that.

I hear a few people whisper as they pass by, wondering what I'm doing here. I only ever come to town for supplies. At least that's what everyone thinks. I've been here plenty of times without them knowing. I might be a giant motherfucker, but if I don't want you to see me, then you won't. Going unseen has become a bit harder with the newest resident of Snow Hills. Crane Douglas.

He isn't as he appears. I know a professional when I see one. I'm not sure why he's settled here in Snow Hills. I do know that his interest since he hit town is Liza. Her family is clean cut. I'm not sure why a professional would be here for them, unless he too has come to Snow Hills to lay low.

What are the odds of two men that come from the same type of world pick a small town like this one? I don't believe in coincidences.

I picked the town because it was one of a handful of memories I can recall of my birth parents. They'd brought me here as a child. I remember laughing and having fun with them. We'd come for a long weekend, I believe. I was so young at the time that the memory is hazy, but when I got out of my line of work, knowing if I didn't I'd end up dead sooner rather than later, this town had popped into my mind.

I'm not sure what Crane is up to, but I'm sure in time I'll figure it out. I haven't done too much poking around about him. The last thing I want to do is to alert him to me, but I suppose he and I will likely come face to face tonight at some point. He's here for the very same reason I am: to get our girls, Liza and Eve. My Eve and Liza thought it would be cute to have a bachelorette auction at the annual holiday party to raise money for a charity. An idea that had been Eve's.

I grit my teeth thinking back to the town hall meeting when she'd shouted the idea across the room. I might not attend the town hall meetings usually, but you bet your ass I see them all. I don't miss an opportunity to see Eve.

It would be over everyone else's dead body before I let another man win her for a date.

I don't think Eve has any idea what she's gotten herself into, but she'll be finding out soon enough.

This year I'll be treating myself to something special. Eve.

AVAILABLE NOW!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**ALSO BY LUCY DARLING**

Meant to Love

Meant to Be

Love on the Line

Love Forever

Love in the Mix

Love Undefeated

Love You Always

Belong to Me

Return to Me

Never Let Go

Never Been Kissed

Stalking His Claim

Stalking His Bride

Forever Her Cowboy

Always His Cowgirl

Only Her

Only Tonight

His Forever Girl

His Forever Love

Home for the Holidays

Coming Home For Her

209 Wedding Lane

831 Marriage Lane

Just One Look

You Are Mine

Beauty and the Outcast

Beauty and the Gentleman

Struck Love

Pure Gold

Pure Temptation

Pure Love

Only Christmas

Their Snowy Night

Beauty and the Billionaire

Only Forever



Only Sunshine

Sweetest Obsession

Sweetest Secret

Her Christmas Surprise