



GUARDIAN'S  
*Obsession*

*She belongs to me now.*

**MINIK**

# GUARDIAN'S OBSESSION

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MINK



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Guardian's Obsession

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## MINK

Vivian is my ward. I'm tasked with taking care of her and handling all her needs. The only thing is, I was expecting her to be a child, one I could easily hand off to a nanny. But she isn't. She's a grown woman with wicked curves who fascinates me.

I'm in charge of her inheritance. I want to be in charge of her. All of her. I'm the sort of man who'll stop at nothing to get what he wants. I've crushed my competition again and again over the years, and now I'll turn my skills on my young ward, breaking down her defenses until she's completely open to me. When I finally get a taste, I'm hooked, and I realize I'll never let her go.

But her foolish brother has other plans, and he's made deals involving my sweet Vivian. He'll find out just how ruthless I can be when it comes to protecting what's mine, and Vivian irrevocably belongs to me, just as I belong to her. Forever.

MINK's Note: Grab a kitty and an iced coffee for this sweet and steamy tale of a guardian and his innocent ward.

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The funeral begins with the warbly tones of prayers from the priest. I check my phone, quickly shooting off a few texts and emails while the somber ceremony continues. David wouldn't want me to let our business go to hell just because he's died. Well, he and his wife.

I told them I didn't think their plans to reach the peak of Mt. Everest were a good idea, simply because their time could be better spent building our business empire. But they didn't listen. They always had the spirit of adventure in their veins. After training for almost a year, they began their trek. But after the base camp and then a few farther up the mountain, they went missing in the high snow as a storm rolled in.

Mourning isn't something I intend to do here in view of all these friends, family, and business associates. It's not in my nature. So instead, I conduct business, letting partners know that Griffin Endeavors, Inc. will continue to lead the world in the development of top-notch tech.

"And now, Charles would like to say a few words." The priest steps back so David and Laverne's son can stand at the foot of their graves.

He's unsteady on his feet, his cheeks pink from the cold and the alcohol. "Mom and Dad were good people. The best, really. When I was little ..."

He continues as I check a few more emails, sending a few to my secretary Linn for follow-up.

I feel an elbow at my side and turn to find Linn right next to me. “You’re not at the office?” I whisper.

She gives me a teary yet horrified look and shakes her head. “I was his secretary, too. You know that, right? For almost ten years. Of course I’m here.” She dabs her tears away with her handkerchief and turns back to listen to Charles.

I suppose I’ve been a bit oblivious to everyone here. If I’m being honest, it’s because this whole fiasco reminds me far too much of my own parents’ funerals. The stodgy priest and the onlookers who range from barely knowing the deceased to people like Charles, just an overgrown kid who’s lost without them. I was him a long time ago. But I don’t have any solace to offer, no special knowledge to grant him. We all suffer. So I return to my phone, controlling the things I can instead of the things I can’t.

Charles rambles on about good times and bad times, the wind picking up as the caskets are finally lowered into the ground. I’m well back from them as the family members sitting in the rows of chairs closest drop flowers and tears into the yawning graves.

I’d rather honor them by continuing to build our companies and making a bright future for their kids. Charles is clearly going to need some support now that his parents are gone, and I’ve yet to see Vivian, their younger daughter. I wonder if she’s one of the children along the front row. There are only a couple. I should send her a toy or something like that, anything to brighten her world now that her parents are gone.

“Linn, send a toy to Vivian for me, please. Something bright and sparkly to cheer her up.”

Linn looks up at me, her eyebrows drawing together. “A toy?”

“Yes, I assume children are still interested in those?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Griffin?” Frank, one of our lawyers, reaches out to shake hands. “Oh, sorry, Linn. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You aren’t interrupting. I’m going to kiss Charles and Vivian, then head back to the office.” She turns to me, the wrinkles

around her eyes deepening. “I suggest you do the same.”

“I’ll be in the office as soon as—”

“I *meant*, go see about the kids!” She turns on her heel and stomps off.

I stare after her, at a loss.

“Emotions run high on days like this,” Frank says with a shrug.

“That’s true.” I watch Linn pick through the crowd and stop to hug a particularly curvy young woman. Damn, the ass on her has my mouth watering, even though it’s absolutely inappropriate given the setting. She speaks to her for a moment before continuing on her way to the front row where Charles and a little girl are still seated. Poor Vivian, she can’t be more than what, twelve?

Though I know I should be following Linn’s advice and going over to offer my condolences to the kids, I can’t seem to stop watching the woman in the black dress with the hourglass figure. She has snagged my attention. Something not easily done.

“Griffin?” Frank asks, and I can tell from his tone he’s been calling my name a few times.

“Yes, sorry about that.”

“It’s all right.” He leans closer. “We need to discuss a few things to do with the will.”

“Their will?” I raise my brows. “I thought they put everything into trust.”

“They did, of course. But they still left instructions for their children. I believe they did this before Charles came of age, but their instructions are still legally binding should you want to accept your position as guardian.”

I may as well have tripped over a headstone and landed flat on the ground—the level of surprise would be the same. “They named *me* as guardian?”

“You’re their trustee as well as Vivian’s legal guardian.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose she is still a child.” I’ll have to hire a nanny and—

“No. She’s 18, but the will makes clear that you are to remain her guardian until she turns 21. The trust documents are set up in a clever fashion that leave the trust in your total discretion until she’s 21, at which time she can make her own decisions. It also requires that she live with you and that you keep her under your wing, so to speak. Apparently, they didn’t think Charles could handle the responsibility of watching out for Vivian, especially since she’s been very sheltered at an all-girls boarding school her entire life.”

“But they think *I* can watch out for her?” Didn’t they know me at all? I have zero interest in babysitting their child. My mind is devoted to business, to conquest, to destroying any companies that even think of setting foot on my turf.

“Ah, here she is now.” Frank steps back.

“Who?” I ask.

“Hi. I’m Vivian. You worked with my parents?” The curvy beauty from earlier offers me her hand, her big eyes looking up at me with trust and curiosity.

I’m powerless. Unable to do anything except take her hand in mine and hope that I can do right by her as her parents intended. Though, the more I look at her angelic face and downright sinful body, I don’t know how long my good intentions will last, if at all.

“*Y*es, I’ve worked with both of them for many years. I’m sorry for your loss.” His deep voice rolls through my body.

I tilt my head to stare up into his dark, cold eyes. Throughout the whole funeral, I never saw his face show any other expression except for annoyance when Linn spoke to him. It made me wonder what she said. She’s always been so sweet to me over the years when I spoke with her. Not that it was often.

I drop my gaze from his when I feel his thumb start to drift across the inside of my wrist. A warm tingle forms there. My body is having a reaction that I don’t understand. I suppose I haven’t understood any of the feelings I’ve been having since I spotted him.

Griffin’s giant hand makes mine look so delicate and tiny with his wrapped around it. I jerk my gaze back up to his handsome face. An unexpected rush of heat swirls in the pit of my stomach, causing my breath to catch.

All of Griffin’s focus is on me now. Through most of the funeral, he could barely pull his attention away from his phone while all my attention had been on him. I had a feeling he was Griffin Friarlane from the moment I spotted him.

I finally had a face to put with the name. He is nothing like what I was expecting. Sure, he’s cold and brooding. I noticed people were giving him a wide berth. What surprised me was that no one mentioned how handsome he is. I’ve heard him described as ruthless many times. In fact, I’ve heard some

rather terrible stories about how cutthroat he could be when it came to business. It often made me question why my parents would want to leave me in his care. Then again, I question a lot of the choices they made in their lives.

I suppose the upside to someone who is ruthless about money is that they will make sure mine is well taken care of. But I think what has thrown me for a loop is the fact that I have to live with this man. The thought of staying under the same roof as him causes the swirl of heat in my stomach to grow.

“Thank you,” I finally say when I realize I haven’t spoken, the silence having stretched around us. Griffin still has my hand in his. His thumb continues to stroke back and forth.

“Did you want to go back to your home and go over things?” Frank asks, bringing me back to reality.

“You’re not going back to her home,” Griffin snaps, surprising me. I take a startled step back but don’t get anywhere. He gives a tug on my hand, pulling me back to where I was. I can feel people start to stare our way. I drop my head forward, letting my hair fall to cover my face, not used to all the attention on me.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Frank rushes to say. “She doesn’t know you, and I thought we should—”

“What is there to really go over?” I ask, cutting in. “I think it’s been made clear I have no choice in any of this.”

“For now.” Frank nods in agreement. We’d already been over everything a few times now. There’s no reason for us to do it again.

No one wasted any time with getting things into place. My bedroom has already been partially packed up. Not that there had been a ton to do. I haven’t had enough time to accumulate a lot of things. I’ve only returned to my parents’ house after recently graduating from boarding school. A graduation that my parents had missed because they wanted to climb a stupid mountain. I grab hold of that anger like it’s a life raft. It’s better than sadness. Or that’s what I’m telling myself, at least.

“For now?” Griffin questions.

“Charles isn’t too happy about it. He thinks Vivian should be with him.”

“That’s too bad,” Griffin snaps again, and I wonder if this is the way he speaks normally or if he’s actually getting mad. You’d think he’d be happy to get rid of me. I tug on my hand, trying to get free, but all it does is drag his attention back to it.

“I need that.” I wiggle my fingers. He lets go, but again annoyance shows on his handsome face. “Is Charles taking over my parents’ home?”

“That will be up to Griffin,” Frank answers.

“We’ll see,” is all Griffin says with a dismissive shrug.

I’m worried about Charles. When I was younger, we were closer, but it’s hard to be close to anyone in your family when you’re sent away to school. He looks as though he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. I’m pretty sure he’s drunk today. Actually, I think he has been for the past few days. I know everyone processes grief differently, but I can’t help but think something else is going on.

“Charles should stay at our house. I should stay with him. It makes sense. So why not?” I suddenly feel very lost. Unsure of where I belong now. I have no control over my life. Not that I had much before, but I thought I was about to. That I was going to get a chance to break free of the hold my parents have had on me for so long. I should have known better than to get my hopes up. Griffin stares at me for a long moment. I fold my arms over my chest and wait. I don’t think he’s used to being questioned.

“I only just found out that I’m your guardian and trustee. I would like to read over the paperwork.”

“Then I should wait back at my parents’ home until you’ve done just that.” I raise my chin, trying to seem strong. My hair falls back out of my face. His lips twitch, and I almost think he’s going to smile, but it’s gone as quickly as I thought it was there. He leans down closer to me. My heart starts to pound at his closeness.

“You’ll do as you’re told. Understood?”

My head nods on its own. What the heck?

“Meet us at the house,” he tells Frank before taking me by the elbow.

“You’re taking me now?” He leads me to a black SUV. A man in a suit gives us a curious look but opens the back door for us.

I don’t think I’ve ever stayed in a home with a man that wasn’t related to me. That was far from allowed.

He turns me to face him, his dark gaze eating me up. “You belong to me now, Vivian.”

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She fidgets, her fingers straying to the hem of her dress and smoothing it, then back up to her lap as if she's making a conscious effort to *stop* fidgeting. Only a few seconds pass before they're on the move again.

I reach over and capture both her hands in one of mine, holding them still as she turns her head sharply toward me.

“What are you doing?”

That's a good question. What the hell *am* I doing? I don't know how to look after another person. Hell, I rely on Linn for more things than I care to admit. Not to mention Mrs. Putnam. She's the only reason my home remains in order.

“I'm going to take care of you.” It's the only thing I can say for sure. Because when I look at Vivian, I have several ideas that veer far, far away from simply taking care of her. I want her in a way I've never wanted anyone.

Even now, I glance at her lips, at the forbidden fruit dangling right in front of me. She's my business partners' daughter. She should be off limits, especially now that they're dead and made the foolish mistake of leaving her in my care. It's as if they didn't know me at all. But of course they did. They knew me better than anyone. We've been working together for so long that they became something of a ... family. Not close, not sharing birthdays or holidays or anything so crass as all that. But we had an understanding of how our business functioned, each of us playing our respective parts.

“I don’t even know what that means. I’m an adult now. I don’t need anyone to take care of me.” She shakes her head.

“You’re mistaken.” Once again, I find myself staring at her lips.

“You can’t just say that.”

“Hmm?”

She rolls her eyes. “You can’t just say ‘you’re mistaken’ to someone like that and then offer no explanation.”

I rather enjoy her tone—pert with a side of schoolmistress. Amusement starts to bubble beneath my surface. “Why not?”

“Well, first off, it’s rude. Second off, you don’t know what you’re talking about, so when you say ‘you’re mistaken’—she tries to drop her voice low, mimicking me—“with that tone of yours, it makes it sound very dismissive. But you don’t even know me. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

I smirk. “Sounds to me like your two points all boil down to just the first point—you find me rude. And, no disrespect intended, Vivian, but there’s no way in hell you are capable of taking care of yourself.”

“What?” she asks sharply.

“Just look at you. A little lamb in a world full of wolves.”

“Does that make you one of the wolves?” she fires back.

“Yes.” I don’t see any point in hiding that fact. “I’m the only wolf you’ll ever have to worry about.”

“What does that mean?”

“Now that you’re under my guardianship, I intend to protect you. All you have to do is follow my commands and—”

She wrinkles her nose. “I’m not a pet.”

*No, you’re my pet.* “I don’t see what’s so bad about following your parents’ final request.” I have no qualms about weaponizing their untimely demise, especially when it means I’m keeping their daughter safe. Safe and *close* to me.

“I don’t know.” She leans back with a sigh. “Like I said, I don’t even know who you are. Not really. When I’d talk to Mom and Dad, they rarely mentioned you. And when they did, it was more or less in conversation with each other about what a total hardass you are. How you got this business deal, or that victory, or crushed so-and-so. That’s the extent of what I know about you.”

At least her parents did me justice in their glancing mentions. “That’s more than I know about you.”

“Exactly!” She sits up. “That’s why you should let me stay with Charles at my parents’ house and—”

“Why do you call it that?”

“What?” she asks.

“‘My parents’ house.’ Don’t you mean ‘my house’?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I mean ...” She slumps back again. “I’ve barely set foot there. I have a room that I get to stay in a few weeks of the year—holidays and stuff—but other than that, I live at my boarding school. Mom and Dad had kids, but then they sort of ticked that off their to-do list and left the raising of Charles and me to nannies and boarding schools.” She glances at me but then doesn’t look away, as if searching my face for any sort of ridicule or possibly understanding. She must find something encouraging because she continues, “I loved my parents. Don’t get me wrong. But ... when I think about them, I think about them like two well-meaning strangers. They never wanted to hurt me. It took me a long time to realize that. I’m still trying to work through it, I guess. But I have to hold on to that—they didn’t want to hurt me.”

“But they did?” I squeeze her small fingers in mine.

She shrugs. “It doesn’t matter now. They’re gone.”

“It matters.” I release her hands only to wrap my arm around her shoulders. To my surprise, she leans into me, resting against my chest. “They’re gone, but your feelings toward

them are still there. You have to own that and live your life with the promise to yourself that when you have kids one day, you'll do better for them. That's what I have to tell myself, too. I was raised by my father. Long story short, he was a violent drunk. I never drink, don't touch a drop. It's part of my promise to myself to be a better man."

She's silent for a long while. We ride in silence, my driver taking us straight to my estate, only stopping for a moment at the front gate.

When we roll to a stop, she looks up at me, her eyes so big and full of innocence. "You're not what I expected."

I glance at her lips again, unable to stop myself. "Neither are you."

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*M*y lips start to tingle as Griffin's eyes linger on them once again. Why is he always looking at my mouth? The sound of the gate has me jerking my attention away from him. Thank goodness, because I found myself staring at his mouth too. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see a flash of orange that catches my attention.

"Stop the car!" I scream as I open the door to jump out. Both the seat belt and Griffin stop me from going anywhere.

"What do you think you're doing?" Griffin growls at me as I fumble with the seatbelt. Thankfully, the driver has stopped.

"There's a kitten," I tell him. I point to show him the kitten I spotted off to the side of the gate. "Oh, there's two!" Finally I get the seatbelt off, but Griffin's hold on my arm is unbreakable. "Griff," I plead. "They're babies." They both are so small. They can't be more than a few weeks old.

"All right." He releases his hold on me. I jump out. One of my shoes catches on the step bar. I almost faceplant, but Griff's arm wraps around my waist and catches me before I can hit the ground. "See? You need someone watching out for you." He smirks.

I want to be annoyed by it, but it's almost a smile. A reaction I'm starting to think is rare coming from him.

This time it's me that can't take my attention from Griff's mouth. It dawns on me why he's been staring at mine, because right now all I can think about is kissing him. That must have been what he was thinking too. Right?

I don't know what comes over me as I start to rise to try to press my mouth to his, but thankfully the sound of a tiny meow wins my attention before I can make a fool of myself. What was I thinking? There's no way Griff was staring at my mouth because he wanted to kiss me. I bet it's because I have some of the cream cheese on my mouth from the bagel I shoved into it this morning.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand as I wiggle away from Griff to go to the two kittens. He stays close behind me as I slowly get closer, not wanting to spook them.

"They're babies." I fall to my knees.

"There," Griff whispers from behind me. I turn to him and follow his line of sight to see a white cat coming back toward us. She's not very big herself, but I know she's their mama.

"It's okay," I encourage her. She slowly moves closer to her babies that are now cuddled up in a ball together. The second she lies down beside them, they wiggle around to find a nipple to nurse from. "Griff."

"I've got it," he says. His phone is pressed to his ear.

"We're taking them?"

He nods. I let the mama smell my hand before I pet her, and she starts to purr. I glance up again when a coat is dropped over my shoulders. The smell of Griff surrounds me. To my surprise, he kneels next to me on the ground. It's a bit damp, and I'm sure it's ruining his fancy suit but he doesn't seem to mind. I'm starting to think there's another side to him after all.

"The mom is so small."

"I think that's why she probably only had two." He peers at the kittens.

"Their daddy must have been an orange cat."

One is pure white like the mama while the other is white and orange. I move my hand to pet one of the kittens and manage to steal a peek to see what their gender is. The all white one is male. I gasp when I check the orange one and see it's a girl. "Is something wrong?" He almost sounds panicked.

“It’s a girl,” I whisper loudly. “You know how rare orange tabby female cats are?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, only about twenty percent are female.”

“How do you know such interesting cat facts?”

I shrug. “I have a small obsession with cats. I’ve always wanted one of my own, but it wasn’t possible living at a boarding school.”

“Now you have three, it seems.”

“What?” I gasp. Is he saying what I think he’s saying? I don’t want to get my hopes up until he clarifies what he meant.

“You don’t want to keep them?”

“Really?” I half scream, making the mama cat meow. The kittens keep nursing, not caring about anything else that’s going on around them. “Sorry,” I whisper and scratch under her chin until she starts to purr again.

“If you want them, we’ll keep them,” he offers. “But they will live here, not at your parents’ house.”

I purse my lips when I realize he’s just caught me in a trap. I shouldn’t be surprised. The one thing I do know about Griff is he’s lethal when it comes to business. He’ll do anything to get his way, and he’s made it clear from the start I was staying under his roof as his ward. “So are we keeping them?”

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see a man in all black start to approach with a box in his hands. I’m guessing that’s what Griff called for.

“Yes, we’re keeping them.” I hold my hand out for the man to give me the box. Griff snags it from him first, then gives it to me. “I’m going to need some things for them.” I pick the babies up first to put into the box. The mama jumps right in when she sees what I’m doing.

“Make a list.” Griff lifts the box from the ground. “Hop up, and I’ll put it in your lap,” he instructs, nodding for me to get

back into the SUV. I notice more men in all black lingering about now.

“Do they all work for you?” I ask as Griff puts the box in my lap just as he promised.

“Security.” He shuts the door before I can ask anything else. Why does he need so much security? I watch out the window as he talks to one of the men before he slips back into the SUV with me and we start to pull up the long driveway toward my new home.

I can't help but wonder about all the guards that linger around. Is there some danger I should worry about? I peek over at Griff, who is staring at me again. My heart gives a strange flutter.

I think he might be the real danger.

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“*W*hat will you name them?” I ask as I carry the box into the house with Vivian by my side.

She looks around at the foyer. “Wow. I thought my parents were the richest people I’d ever meet. I guess I was wrong.”

I shrug. “I excel at business.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“You’re not going to the office?” Mrs. Putnam bustles out from the back hallway, then stops dead. “And who’s this?”

I was wondering how meeting Mrs. Putnam, the matron of my house, would go. I can only hope for the best and silently promise Vivian that I’ll keep her safe from the elderly terror if need be. “Mrs. Putnam, meet Vivian Shelby. She’ll be staying with us for quite some time.”

“She will?” Mrs. Putnam’s gray eyebrows hit her hairline.

I can’t help but feel slightly accomplished. After all, surprising Mrs. Putnam is no easy task.

“She is David and Laverne’s daughter. Apparently, they appointed me her guardian until she reaches her 21st birthday.”

“How old are you, dear?” Mrs. Putnam adopts a warm tone that she’s never used with me as she bustles up to Vivian.

“Eighteen.” She smiles. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Putnam.”

“I’m so happy to have you here, and I’m very sorry about your parents.”

“Thanks.” Vivian lets Mrs. Putnam take her arm.

“You must be hungry. Come into the kitchen. I was making some chicken salad croissant sandwiches for lunch. Do you like chicken salad?”

“I do, actually.”

“Then you’ll love mine. I put grapes in it. But I can always leave them out if you don’t like them. Or I can make you anything you want. Just say the word.” She draws Vivian deeper into the house, leading her right to the kitchen.

I find myself trailing behind with my box of cats. Mrs. Putnam hasn’t even spared me or the animals a glance. Honestly, I find it beyond amusing how she’s taking to Vivian like this. I never would’ve imagined it.

“Have a seat right here.” She pats a stool at the kitchen island. “I’ll have it whipped up in two shakes.”

I slide the box onto the counter and walk into the pantry. There has to be tuna or something a cat would like in here.

“Here you go, my darling girl.” Mrs. Putnam places a heaping sandwich in front of Vivian, then gives her a glass of ice water. “I can order whatever food or drink you like. Just tell me what you want, and I’ll have it all here.”

“Mrs. Putnam?” I call.

She turns. “What?” That’s the Mrs. Putnam I’m used to. Irritated and with absolutely no time for me except to make sure I’m fed and the house is in order.

“Do we have tuna in here?”

She finally looks inside the box. When she coos and starts making *psss psss psss* sounds, I truly start to believe she’s got multiple personalities. The ornery one for me. The sweet one for Vivian and her cats.

“Of course we have tuna. But I’ll send an order to the store right quick and have cat food, litter, and toys delivered. No

problem.”

“Wow, this is so good,” Vivian says around a bite of sandwich.

“I’m happy you like it. Here, let me get you some pita chips. I make them myself.”

Wait, Mrs. Putnam makes her own pita chips? Why has she never offered me any? I shake off those questions and slide onto the stool beside Vivian.

The kitchen goes quiet, and when Vivian looks up, she swallows hard.

Mrs. Putnam throws up her hands. “Oh, look at us two fools just staring at you as you eat.”

“It’s okay.” Vivian smiles. “Most people don’t pay attention to me at all.”

“I find that very hard to believe.” I can’t seem to take my eyes off her.

“Griffin, come into the hall. We need to talk cat logistics and let our guest eat in peace.”

I want to refuse, to stay near Vivian. But bucking Mrs. Putnam’s orders will only lead to suffering, as I’ve learned over years of living with her.

Reluctantly, I follow her into the hall.

She closes the kitchen door and turns to me. “You brought a girl home!”

“I, well ... Yes.”

She claps, then grips her hands to try and contain her burst of glee. “Okay, this is wonderful. She is sweet as can be. Pretty, too. I had no idea David and Laverne had such good genes. Anyway, doesn’t matter.”

“About the cats—”

“I can handle all that.” She swipes a hand through the air. “I just got you out here because I want to tell you not to screw this up.”

“What?”

“You heard me. That girl is already a breath of fresh air.”

I bristle. “She’s my ward. *Mine*.”

Mrs. Putnam laughs. “There it is. That’s what I thought.”

She’s knocked me off balance yet again. “Are you having a stroke? What do you mean ‘there it is’?”

“You’ll see.” She opens the kitchen door, apparently dismissing me, and strides back in. “Come on, Griffin. You can have a sandwich too. Unless Vivian wants another one?”

“I’m stuffed. Thank you.” Vivian is petting the mama cat as the kittens snooze in a little furry heap.

“All right. Just give me a list of your favorites, and I’ll be sure to keep your tummy happy.”

“That is so kind. I appreciate it.” Vivian smiles. “No one’s ever cooked for me before.”

“What?” Mrs. Putnam stills. “Never?”

“At boarding school, I just eat whatever they serve in the cafe. And Mom and Dad—they never cooked. Or at least I never saw them do anything like that.”

Mrs. Putnam nods. “David and Laverne were more about having experiences and traveling, I suppose. A quiet evening at home cooking for their family was never in the cards.”

“Right.” The sadness in Vivian’s voice has me walking to her and putting my hand on her shoulder.

“I know today has been a lot. Are you all right?”

She keeps petting the mama cat but looks up at me with teary eyes. When she smiles, it’s a mix of sadness and hope. “No, but I think I will be.”

“*T*he cats have more boxes than I do.” I laugh. It feels nice to laugh. Today is turning out better than I ever possibly thought it could have. As fast as everything is happening, at least it’s keeping me busy.

Griff keeps my mind busy too. Instead of my thoughts drifting to my parents over and over, they are now drifting to him. He’s the puzzle I’m trying to put together. At moments I see the man I’ve heard people describe, and other times he’s not that man at all.

The bedroom Griff has given me for my stay has slowly been filling with boxes all afternoon. He already sent someone back to my parents’ to collect my things. It wasn’t long before anything and everything a cat might need started to appear in my room as well. I’m not sure if that’s all Mrs. Putnam’s doing or his. But every time I turn around, I swear there’s another box.

“If there is something *you* need, make a list and I’ll have it picked up for you,” Mrs. Putnam says without missing a beat. She’s so efficient. Everyone around here is.

I absolutely adore her. Since I stepped into this palatial home, she’s been the sweetest person I’ve ever met in my life. A bit of a fairy godmother really. It’s part of why I think this place is a palace.

I mean, it doesn’t get much better than this house. First, I find kittens, then I get to have Mrs. Putnam. Then there’s the fact that whenever I need something, it magically appears within

almost minutes. Those things alone are a dream, but then you have the house itself. Every inch of it is stunning. My bedroom could be an apartment minus a kitchen. My closet alone is bigger than my old dorm room.

There's even a sitting area with two loveseats and a fireplace. I can already picture myself cuddled up with the kittens there while reading a book.

"Oh, Mrs. Putnam, I think I have more than I'll ever need." I ignore my own boxes and go for one of the cat boxes that looks to have some toys in it. Mrs. Putnam is building one of the cat treehouses. I might have requested three of them after I saw how big my bedroom was.

We've already put together a gated area where the mama can jump in and out on her own, but the babies will stay safely inside when there is no one around to look out for them. I was worried I could lose one. A silly fear, I'm sure, but when I voiced it to Griff, he told me not to worry my pretty little head, giving my nose a tap with his finger. Then the palace did its thing, and boxes appeared with gates in them for us to put together. This house is made of magic.

"How are things going?" Griff asks, stepping into my bedroom. He's changed out of his black suit and into another. Though he doesn't have a tie on or the jacket so it's a bit more relaxed. Not much though. He always looks so serious.

"Great. I think Mrs. Putnam was a carpenter in a past life. Look at her go." I pop out from behind some of the stacked boxes. I point to the cat tower that is taller than I am. Not that it's hard to be taller than me. Most things are.

"I'm convinced there's nothing Mrs. Putnam can't do."

Griff's eyes run up and down my body. "You changed." His tone is back to being curt again.

I'd wondered where he disappeared to after he showed me to my new room. He's been gone for a few hours. Is it weird that I missed him? Every time someone entered the room to drop something off, I would peek over to see if it was him. A pang of disappointment would hit me each time when I realized it

wasn't. I'm sure he went to his office to work. He'd pointed it out to me when he gave me a mini tour of the house. He seemed to be in a bit of a rush after lunch. His phone kept going off, but he ignored it for the most part.

My father's office was always off limits. I'm guessing Griff's will be the same. It's probably why he pointed it out to me so I'd know to stay out.

"I did." Who wants to hang around in a black funeral dress? I'd put on my favorite lounge clothes that I thought were extra fitting because of the cats.

It's a matching sweat set of shorts and crop hoodie. It has little kittens all over it. The set goes perfectly with my kitten slippers. I might have gone a bit overboard when I put on my headband with kitten ears, but Mrs. Putnam said I was as adorable as the kittens, so I left them on. I actually thought I might even be a bit sexy. Not that I know anything about being that.

He stands there staring at me. Is he thinking it's a bit too snug? My hips are a bit wider than the girl who modeled it in the picture online. I thought since the model was taller than me that the size might still work. She looked sexy in it. But based on the way Griff is looking at me, I'm guessing I'm not pulling it off. I might have told myself it was to celebrate the kittens and that's why I picked it to wear, but I was curious what Griff might think too.

"I wanted to be comfortable." I walk over to him and undo the buttons on his sleeve, then roll one sleeve up to his elbow. The man needs to relax a little. He's in his own home and dressed to the nines.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making you more comfortable." I do the other sleeve before I go for the top two buttons around his collar. "Is that better?"

"No." The one word comes out deep and growly.

"Really?"

“When you come to dinner, you’ll need to be dressed properly.”

“Are we going out somewhere?”

“We’ll go to the dining room where we’ll have dinner each night at seven sharp. I’ve made a schedule. I emailed it to you.”

“Emailed me?” I scrunch my nose.

“I got your email from Frank. Is it not current?”

“I think.” I shrug. “I never check it really. If I’m bored or something, but now I’m a mom of three so I’m a bit busy,” I deadpan.

He doesn’t even crack a smile. Tough crowd.

“I’ll have it printed for you.”

“Can it be laminated too?”

“I suppose.”

“I’m teasing you, Griff.” What the heck? Did something change in the last couple of hours? I shift on my feet, feeling a bit unsure of myself. I tug on the bottom of my hoodie, trying to make it cover more of my stomach.

“That you are.” There he goes, growling again. My stomach flutters at the sounds as another strange sensation ripples through my body. It’s the same one I felt when he touched my hand.

“Are you over there screwing this up?” Mrs. Putnam asks from across the room. The hell? She’s got the second tower half built now.

“I’m not screwing anything,” he mutters. “Dinner is at seven.” He turns and leaves my room. I stare after him.

“You’re not changing,” Mrs. Putnam says.

“But—”

“Trust me, sweet girl.” She winks at me, leaving me unsure of what to do.



Instead of dwelling on it, I grab a toy and go test it on the mama, completely forgetting about dinner or any schedule at all.

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“*Y*ou’re certain these are her favorite foods?” I watch over Mrs. Putnam’s shoulder as she places the bubbling dish of macaroni and cheese onto the counter.

“I told you I’d handle it. Why can’t you leave me be?” She tries to swat me away with her oven mitt.

“I just want to be sure is all.”

“Well, I’m sure, and that should be good enough for you.” She flips up her middle finger, then goes back to the stove where a pot of chicken and dumplings is simmering.

“Where did she even get chicken and dumplings? I’m certain her boarding school didn’t serve that.”

“She saw it on some cooking show.”

“Wait, so she’s never actually had it?” I ask.

“Nope. But she told me she’s certain it’ll be her favorite and hopes one day she’ll get the chance to try it.”

I had no idea how Mrs. Putnam even knows a recipe for the dish. It’s not as if she’s ever made it for me. “Wait, why don’t you cook like this for me?”

She snorts a laugh. “Because your favorite foods are domination and revenge. Neither of those are on the menu here.”

“That’s business. This is food.”

“Quit your belly-aching.” She stirs the pot, the simmering sauce promising a hearty meal.

I check my watch. It’s almost seven. She may already be in the dining room. Why are my palms sweaty? I’ve gone into a million boardrooms and destroyed grown men without so much as batting an eyelash, but somehow Vivian has me worrying about whether she’ll like the food, or, more importantly, the company.

Smoothing my hand down my shirt, I smirk when I look at the sleeves rolled up to my elbows. She wanted me casual. So she can have me that way. I, on the other hand, want her naked. She was wearing this fucking adorable kitten outfit that showed me her soft skin. I wanted to just run my fingers along her sides, feel her shiver beneath my touch.

“Griff, are you going to start drooling?” Mrs. Putnam says sharply, and I realize I’ve been standing here for a while, just thinking about Vivian.

I need to get my shit together.

“You need to get your shit together,” Mrs. Putnam chides.

Instead of snapping back at her, I stride from the kitchen and into the dining room. It’s right at seven, to the second. I’m never late. It doesn’t befit a man like me.

I sit at the table in my usual spot.

I wait.

Then I realize I look somewhat stiff with my back too straight. Maybe I should try to be a little more casual for her. I pull my chair back and try to lean against the arm of it. It’s uncomfortable. But I keep doing it, hoping it gives off casual vibes.

I sit that way for all of a minute before I shift back into my usual straight-spined posture. Casual really isn’t in my vocabulary, but I have to keep trying for Vivian. She’ll be here any second. She’s late, but I’m certain she’s on her way.

Trying again, I lean back, letting the chair take my weight more. I feel like I’m getting the hang of it.

Until Mrs. Putnam peeks in. “Why do you look like a corpse?”

“Oh my God.” I sit up straight and glare at her. “Where is she?”

“How should I know?” She closes the door.

I can’t decide if I should throttle her or march upstairs to find Vivian. Neither. I decide I need to be patient. After all, Vivian’s only a little bit late.

Another pose, another five minutes. I get a crick in my neck from trying to lean on the table in a super casual way.

She’s ten minutes late. This is unacceptable. To a man like me, time is money. I stand, the crick in my neck making itself known.

“Dammit!” I turn around and kick my chair away. “Son of a bitch bastard. I’m just stiff, all right? I’m hard!”

“Um, Griff?”

I whirl to find Vivian just inside the dining room door, her eyes wide.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“Nothing.” I right my chair and pull it up to the table. “Nothing at all.”

“Really? Because it looked like you were—”

“You’re late.”

“Oh.” She shrugs. “I was playing with mama and the babies. They are the absolute cutest. I lost track of time.”

“In this house, I expect you at dinner on time, Vivian.”

When she drops her gaze, I know I’ve fucked up.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly.

Fuck, I’m a goddamn asshole. “No, don’t be sorry.” I sigh and go to her, then pull her into my arms. “It’s all right.”

“Really?” She hugs me back.

“Yes. I guess I’m just sort of set in my ways. But I can’t expect you to do everything the way I’ve always done it.”

“I want to try.” She looks up at me. “I just don’t know what you expect.”

“I expect you to be happy.” I don’t know why I say that, but it’s the truth. I never want to see tears in her eyes or sadness on her face. She’s already had enough of that.

“That’s a tall order, isn’t it?” She snuggles against my chest.

“It can be. But I want to make it a reality for you.”

“You do?”

“Of course. I’m your guardian, after all.”

“Oh.” She drops her arms.

What did I say?

“Okay.” She steps back.

I immediately miss having her close. “Are you hungry?”

She nods. “Yes.”

“Please, have a seat.” I pull her chair out for her.

She sits, and I take the seat at the head of the table. I don’t even bother trying to look casual.

Mrs. Putnam walks in with the macaroni and cheese.

Vivian’s stomach growls, and I immediately start scooping some onto her plate as Mrs. Putnam returns to the kitchen for the chicken and dumplings.

“Eat up.” I scoop even more.

“That’s enough.” She laughs and digs in.

“Wait!” I take her hand, holding it still. “It’s hot.” I blow on the mac and cheese she’s got on the end of the fork.

She watches, and I can feel her legs fidget beneath the table. When I look at her, her eyes are on my mouth.

“Now.” I slide my fingers down her arm then release her.

“Now you can put it in your mouth.”

Opening wide, she does just that. Then she moans. The sexiest goddamn thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

And right at that moment, I realize I am well and truly fucked.

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“*I*’ve never eaten something so wonderful.” I shove another giant spoonful of mac and cheese into my mouth, followed by a spoonful of dumplings.

If Ms. Morgan was here right now, she’d take my plate and send me straight to bed for my lack of manners at the dinner table. It didn’t matter that we ate off cafeteria trays at school; we always had to be very proper at the table. I don’t think Mrs. Putnam would ever do that. I’m pretty sure that woman doesn’t have one mean bone in her body. She’s gone out of her way to make me feel welcome here.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

I glance over at Griff, who is being very proper. I sit up straight and drop my elbow off the table that had crept up there somehow.

“Are you not hungry?” I ask Griff since his plate is untouched.

“Starving.” He picks up his fork and takes a bite. He doesn’t seem as excited about the dinner as I am. “Go on.” He nods toward my plate.

I go back to eating.

He watches me. “Tell me, did you have any plans for after you graduated?”

“Not really. I’m not sure what my parents had planned for me. We hadn’t discussed it in much detail. I think they were still fighting over whose college I’d attend.” I shrug.

“You didn’t have a say in what school you were going to attend?”

“No, it didn’t really matter to me,” I respond as Mrs. Putnam walks in.

“How is everything?”

“It’s wonderful. Are you not hungry? You should join us.”

“I nibbled while I cooked.” She places her hand on the back of my chair.

“Do you think that maybe next time I could cook with you? I have all these recipes I’d like to try.”

“I take it you like this one?” She lifts one of her gray brows.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I look at my plate to see I’ve already eaten everything.

“Sweet girl, I’m teasing you. We have more dumplings. Eat as much as your little heart desires.”

“You can have all the dumplings you want.” Griff spears one onto his fork and offers it to me.

“You don’t have to do that. It’s yours.”

“Open,” he orders. His tone leaves no room for argument. I lean forward and open my mouth. He feeds me the dumpling. I let out a small moan as I chew and then swallow it. I swear I hear a growl come from him, but it’s over so quickly I can’t be sure.

“There are lots of dips and things I’d like to try. You know, start small?”

“Dips are always fun. We can make whatever you want,” Mrs. Putnam offers.

“Really? It’s not too much of a bother?” Griff’s kitchen here is a dream. I’d love to learn to cook.

“You could never be a bother,” Griff says before Mrs. Putnam can respond.

“Not at all.” She winks at me before she disappears back through the door into the kitchen.



I'm not sure I believe Griff, but I also don't think he's someone that lies. I've already thought I've irritated him a few times. He's such a hard man to understand.

"If you need anything, Vivian, all you need to do is ask. It's not a bother. I have a staff that can run out and get whatever you require."

"They've already done so much." People have been coming and going from my bedroom all day to deliver things.

"It's what they're paid to do, and I pay them well." Griff offers me another dumpling. I open my mouth and take it. I oddly enjoy him feeding me. It makes me feel special and taken care of in a way I've never been. If he keeps this up, I'll never want to leave this place.

"Does anyone else live here?" I ask. The place is massive for only one person.

"Mrs. Putnam lives on the property but not in the main house. I don't care for guests. I value my privacy."

"This place is so big." Why have this giant house if you're not going to do anything with it? That makes no sense to me.

"I got it for a good deal. When I go to sell it one day, I'll make a killing."

"Then what?" I take a bite of the mac and cheese. My stomach is starting to feel full, but I don't want to stop yet.

I'm curious about Griff, and I have a lot of unanswered questions. I also know if we're done eating then I'll have to go back to my room. I spent so many years in boarding school being alone.

Now that I have Griff's full attention, I want to hang on to it while it lasts. I'm sure he'll slip back to his office soon enough. Right now, though, it actually feels as if someone gives a crap about something I'm saying. When Griff is in the same room as me, he seems to pay attention to everything I do.

"I'd find something else." He puts his fork down, not interested in eating. He barely touched his plate. I think I ate more off of it than he did.

“You wouldn’t miss it? The memories?”

“No.”

Right. Griff isn’t that type of man. He’s the same as my parents, only younger and even more driven. I need to remember that. I push my food around my plate. If I take another bite, I might be sick. As much as I don’t want to go back to my room, Griff doesn’t make it easier to talk to him. “Are you done eating?”

“I suppose.” I put my fork down. He pushes back from his chair.

“Let me.” He takes my plate, leaving me sitting there alone. A weird ball of emotion starts to rise up in my throat. I stand, fleeing the dining room. I race up the stairs, almost running into one of the men in all black that are always lingering around.

I don’t want to cry in front of anyone. Honestly, I’m not sure why I’m going to cry at all. I go straight for my bathroom, pulling off the stupid black pants and shirt I’d put on to make Griff happy. I change back into my other clothes before I grab the blanket and a pillow from the bed. I pull it over to the gated off area where the kittens are and set up a makeshift bed on the floor next to them before I let my tears escape.

“At least I have you guys now.” I pet mama, who purrs loudly, loving my attention. At least someone does.

When I get back to the dining room, she's gone.

"You already ran her off?" Mrs. Putnam walks in and grabs the serving dishes from the table. "Can't say I'm surprised given the way you stared at her and barely ate."

"I didn't stare."

She gives me an irritated glance. "You stared. You're going to scare her off, and then you'll regret it. Loosen up, Griff. She's a keeper."

"I'm her *guardian*," I remind her. Or am I reminding myself? Because when Vivian let me feed her, when she moaned, hell when she just fucking existed in the same space as me—I couldn't look away. I can't seem to think straight when she's near.

My phone buzzes. I pull it out and scroll through several emails concerning one of the big deals I'm working on. Nothing pressing. Not yet, anyway. The landscape has changed now that David and Laverne are gone. It's going to be tricky to reassure certain partners that their business is safe in my hands.

I switch my phone to silent and pocket it.

Mrs. Putnam notices, but she doesn't say anything. I can already hear her thinking *He never turns his ringer off. Ever.*

"I'm just going to go—"

“Go upstairs and apologize for being a stuffy weirdo.” She disappears into the kitchen.

“I wasn’t being a stuffy weirdo,” I grumble as I climb the stairs. But it’s not like I’m taking advice from Mrs. Putnam. I was going to follow Vivian anyway. I can’t seem to help myself. Wherever she is, I suddenly want to be. *I’m not a stuffy weirdo, I’m an obsessed stalker.*

I pause in front of her door and lift my hand to knock, but then I hear a snuffle inside. Is she ... crying? Not on my goddamn watch! I open the door and find her in the kitten enclosure.

“Griff?” She sits up, and that’s when I see the tears running down her cheeks. I’ve always hated when people try to shorten my name to Griff. With her, I enjoy it.

“No.” I go to her and lift her from the pen, then put her on my lap as I sit on her bed.

“No what?”

“No tears, Viv.” I wipe her cheeks. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She shrugs. “Everything. I don’t know.”

“Is it because of your parents?”

“I think it’s just a lot. My parents. Moving here.” She sighs.

I realize she’s exhausted. She has to be. And she has a point—maybe she didn’t particularly enjoy boarding school, but being ripped away from the only home you ever knew can’t be easy.

“I’m sorry.” I kiss her forehead.

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I know that.” I kiss her again, loving the feel of her soft skin.

“And I generally never say those words, but with you, I’ll do whatever it takes to make it better.”

“I’m already better.” She snuggles against my chest.

“Did you get enough to eat? I can bring a plate up here for—”

“I can’t eat another bite ... Until tomorrow.”

I hold her tight and rock her a little. “I know it’s a lot. I get it. I’m not an easy person to get to know. At least, that’s what

people think, and I rather like people believing that about me.”

“Why? To keep them away?” She sounds drowsy, her body relaxing in my hold.

“Exactly.” I’ve never thought about it with any sort of direct clarity. But she hit it right on the head. I don’t want anyone to get close to me. Having someone really *know* me is a weakness, a mistake. It’s something I’ve never even considered. But with Vivian, I find I want her to know me.

“I feel like I’ve learned a lot about you today.”

I scoot back, keeping her in my lap as I pull the blanket over us. “I want to know everything about you. More about school and your plans for the future.”

“No one’s ever asked. I mean, my mom would sometimes ask me what I wanted to do for a living, but I have no idea. And then she would change the subject to whatever it was she and my father would be doing next—skydiving, scuba, some sort of hike to a Hawaiian volcano. At first, I held their disinterest against them, but then I learned to live with it. It’s just how they were, you know?”

“You should never have to learn to live with that, especially when you were still a child. You deserve parents who love you and show it.”

“But you didn’t have that either.” She breathes out on a sad sigh.

“No.”

“You deserve that kind of love, too.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” Her voice grows stronger, and she leans back and looks me in the eye. “Don’t ever doubt that, Griff. You deserve love, the sort that’s unconditional and unbreakable.”

Fuck, why do I feel a goddamn tingle beneath my ribs? Right where my heart should be. She’s so earnest, her eyes like pools of truth. I want to believe her, but she doesn’t know me. Not the darkness and the bad deeds. All she’s seen is me as her

guardian. Whatever tales she's heard of my ruthless business tactics aren't even the half of what I've done.

She settles back against me, her breaths becoming slower until I'm certain she's out. Her body goes lax, and I ease her next to me so she's resting comfortably, her head still on my chest. I run my fingers through her soft hair as mama kitty jumps onto the bed. She looks at me with the same burning reproach I'm used to from Mrs. Putnam.

"I'm not going to hurt her," I whisper to the feline. "Ever."

She gives me a look as if to say "You better not, bitch," then returns to her kittens in the enclosure.

I keep stroking Vivian's hair. It seems I can't keep my hands off her. She sleeps peacefully, and I let her. I won't move until she's gotten all the rest she needs. Because she deserves the same sort of rock-solid support that she just described to me.

While I realize I'm not the kind of man who's capable of nurturing anyone, I feel like maybe Vivian is the exception to that rule. At least, I hope she is, because she's quickly become the center of my world.

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## VIVIAN

Warmth surrounds me. It's everywhere. I want to burrow down deeper into it and never dig my way out. I've never been more comfortable or content in my life. Something inside me has settled. I don't dare move, in fear that it will all be taken away.

I drift in and out of sleep—or maybe I'm never actually awake and it's all a dream. Griff slowly strokes my hair. If I was a kitten, I'd purr loudly so he'd know to never stop. At some point I shift, rolling to my side and wrapping my arms around his waist to ensure he can't go anywhere now.

"Sir," I hear someone say. I think it's Vinnie. He was one of the men that helped with some of my boxes. I think he is in charge of security for Griff. I noticed he was the one always giving the orders to the men in black.

"You don't ever come into Vivian's bedroom," Griff growls, the sound rumbling through his chest. I keep my eyes closed and don't point out that a few people had been in my room yesterday.

"Sorry, we've been trying to get hold of you. I think your phone isn't working."

"I turned it off. Leave," Griff orders.

"Sir, it's important." The room grows quiet, and Griff strokes my hair again.

"I'll come down to my office shortly."



A moment later, I hear the door close. I expect Griff to move, but he keeps stroking my hair for a few more minutes before he finally shifts me. He's handling me so delicately. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at how slowly he slips out from under me.

Then he tucks the blankets all around me and places pillows next to me on each side. Does he think I'm going to roll off the bed or something? I reach out, grabbing on to one of the pillows and pulling it closer to me. I wrap my arms around it, loving that his smell lingers on it.

I assumed he left the room since it grew quiet, but then his mouth brushes across my forehead. He pauses, his breath tickling my skin before he kisses my cheek next. His fingers start stroking through my hair again, gently petting me. I have no choice but to drift back to sleep again. The lure of comfort is too strong to resist.

I wake suddenly. My eyes flutter open to a completely dark room. I sit up, my body feeling heavy. There's not even a sliver of light, and I'm unable to see anything. "No," I whisper. Fear threatens to overwhelm me. I almost panic as my mind searches to remember where I am. My light. Where is my light? I always leave it on. I reach for my nightstand but find nothing. "Where are the lights?" I start to get a bit frantic.

"No, no, no no," I say over and over again. What did I do? Why am I here? My mind spins as I try to remember. I must have broken some rule. But I don't think I did. I'm always so careful not to break any of them because I hate punishment.

Griff. My mind pulls him to the surface. I run my fingers through my hair. I have Griff.

"Griff?" I call out into the darkness, but there's no answer.

"Anna?" I call out to my roommate next. "Please turn on the lights!" I beg. She must have forgotten and turned my light off. I put my hands over my face. Anna wouldn't forget. Which tells me what I need to know: I'm stuck. Again. I'm not in my dorm room. I'm in the quiet room. "Please, turn on the light." I pull my knees to my chest and start to rock. "I'm in here!" I shout. "Don't forget me!" I scream. Not again.

“*Meow.*” Soft fur brushes against my arm.

I gasp as everything comes flooding back to me and I’m thrown into reality. My eyes start to adjust to the darkness, and I notice a sliver of light peeking in under the thick curtains that cover the window. The room suddenly floods with light as I grab Mama and pull her into my chest.

“Vivian.” Mrs. Putnam stands in the doorway to my room. “What happened? Are you okay?” She rushes over to the side of the bed. “Look at me.” She cups my face in her soft warm hands. “Did you have a bad dream?” Her thumbs swipe at my cheeks, wiping the tears away. I hadn’t even realized I was crying.

“It was dark,” I manage to get out. My heartbeat is finally starting to slow down.

“Are you afraid of the dark?”

I nod.

“Have you always been afraid of the dark?”

“No,” I whisper.

“You want to tell me what happened to make you scared of it?” She drops her hands from my face.

“It’s fine.” I shrug, not wanting to get into the details of my past. “I forgot to unpack my light. I usually keep it on my nightstand. When I woke up, I was a little disoriented.” It must be in one of the boxes still. When I’d gone to bed last night, I’d left the bathroom light on and the door open. I glance over and see the door is still open but the light is off. “Did Griff sleep here?” Or had that been a dream also? I’m just grateful that I’m at Griff’s house and not back in that dreaded room at boarding school.

“He was here for a while.” She smirks. He must have turned the light off. “We’ll get your light out of the box, but I’d still like to know why you’re scared of the dark. I heard you shout. You said ‘Don’t forget me.’”

My eyes fill with tears again.

“Oh sweet girl.” She pulls me in for a hug, squishing Mama between us, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

“I got in trouble a few times at school. Anna, my roommate and I liked to talk a lot. A few times we were talking in class so I got sent to the quiet room.”

“The quiet room?” She releases me from the hug.

“It was a stupid little room they put us in when we would get into trouble. Usually it was only for a few hours, but one time they forgot about me.”

“How long did they forget about you?”

“A while. It was a Friday when I got in trouble, and Anna, my roommate, had gone home that weekend so no one was there to remind them to get me out.”

“Vivian, when did they come and get you?”

I close my eyes, hating to think about it. The room was so small and had nothing in it. I remember begging for someone to let me out. But my pleas fell on deaf ears. I remember going to the bathroom on myself. I’d been so ashamed.

“I don’t know. Pure darkness came twice, I think. Then I woke up in the hospital, and it was Monday, I think. I stayed at the hospital for a few days before I went back to school.”

“Did your parents know about this?”

I shake my head. They’d been out of the country on some trip at the time.

“You didn’t tell them?”

“What’s the point?” I shrug. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“All right.” She stands from the bed. I let out a breath, happy she’s going to let it go. I always feel ashamed when I think back to it.

“How about we make breakfast?”

I’m grateful Mrs. Putman changes the subject. “Together?”

“Yep. Are any of those recipes you have for breakfast items?”

“Yes! There’s one for funnel cake pancakes.” I have a whole pile of recipes for breakfast, but that’s at the top. “Has Griff eaten? I can make them for him.”

“I think he’d love that.” She smiles as I spring from the bed. All my thoughts are now focused on Griff, the darkness all but forgotten.

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## GRIFFIN

“*W*hat is so goddamn pressing?” I storm into my office.

“Sir—” Vinny holds up a hand.

That’s when I see Charles sitting on my couch, a drink in his hand.

“You’re dismissed,” I bark at Vinny.

He closes the door behind him as he leaves.

I sit at my desk.

“Want one?” he asks.

“I don’t drink.”

He snorts a laugh. “What a gripping life you must lead.”

“Is there a reason for this visit?” I lean back and get a better look at him. Disheveled. Bloodshot eyes. And beneath that, there’s true sadness. He’s lost his parents, after all. Even if they were absentee at best, they were still part of his and Vivian’s life.

“I want my sister, and I want my share. After that, we don’t have to see each other.”

I steeple my fingers and consider him. “I know we haven’t spoken much, if at all. But I have to say I’m somewhat puzzled by your hostile tone.”

“Listen, I know what kind of man you are, Griffin. My sister doesn’t belong here with you. She belongs with me. The

company does, too.”

There it is. What he wants. He’s too foolish to realize a real player never tips his hand.

“You think the company should belong to you now?”

He nods and finishes his drink, then rises to pour himself another. “Why does an asshole who never drinks have liquor in his personal office?”

I let him finish pouring and take a drink before I respond.

“Well?” he asks as he retakes his seat.

“Because when I have business guests who think they can gain some advantage over me, I prefer to give them just enough rope to hang themselves with. Alcohol is included in the rope part of that analogy.”

He holds his glass out and stares at it. “Is it poisoned?”

“No more than regular alcohol is just that, a poison.”

He drinks anyway, then coughs into his palm. “Long story short, the business is mine. I already have some partners who are ready to hit the ground running on a revamp and new lines of—”

“What partners?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Just business people, ones with *good* reputations.”

His glancing insult is amusing. “Anyone in business with a good reputation is absolute shit at business.”

“I don’t need any double talk from you. Just hand over my sister and agree to cut ties with the business, and we’ll be fine.”

“Why the interest in Vivian? You didn’t seem to care that she was locked away at boarding school for years on end.”

His eyes widen. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think I do. I think now that there’s a large inheritance at play—and I’m well aware they left her the lion’s share of the money based on your many, many bad habits and

untrustworthy behavior—you want to keep her close to you until she comes of age.”

“Let’s get one thing straight, asshole. I love my sister. Maybe I wasn’t there for her when Mom and Dad put their lives ahead of ours, but I can be there for her now. She shouldn’t be locked away anywhere—not at that school and not here with you prowling after her.”

He’s right about one thing: I’m definitely prowling after his sister. How could I not? She speaks to me on an instinctual level. I want to protect her, but I also want to hold her in my hands, her body and soul in my possession.

“I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time coming here today, Charles.” I stand and let out a sharp whistle.

The door opens, and Vinny steps inside. “Mr. Shelby, right this way.”

Charles glances at Vinny, who’s almost as tall as I am and built like a particularly angry linebacker. “You don’t want to do this, Griffin. My partners aren’t the kind of people who take kindly to insults or refusals.”

“I thought you said they were good people?” I’m going to have to get in touch with some of my contacts to find out who exactly has Charles by the balls.

“They’re better than you. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“That’s not saying much, now is it?” I smirk.

“At least let me take Vivian.” He puts his glass on my desk. “I’d be doing you a favor taking her off your hands.”

“No. Vivian stays with me.” I flick my gaze to Vinny.

He takes Charles by the elbow and pulls him from the room.

“You can’t do this!” Charles yells as Vinny shoves him through the foyer and out the front door.

A few of my guards reach for their weapons.

“No. He’s harmless. Stand down.” Is he, though? I think to an extent, Charles is impotent and certainly doesn’t have a leg to stand on regarding the business, but if he’s gone and gotten



himself mixed up with the wrong sort of people—this could get messy. I send a message to Linn, my secretary, to put a few feelers out. She'll know who to contact, who owes me favors.

I turn and stride down the hall to the kitchen.

Vivian's already looking up when I walk in. "Was that Charles? It sounded like Charles."

"He stopped by for a chat, but he had to be on his way." I smile. It's not a lie, but it's not quite the truth either.

"Oh, I wish he would've come to say hello." She grabs a spatula and flips a pancake.

"Those smell amazing." I sit at the bar as Mrs. Putnam comes out of the pantry with syrup.

"She chose the recipe herself." She gives me an eyebrow waggle, as if to say *You better like them or else*.

"If that's the case, I'm ready to dive in." I watch Vivian, her body perfectly curving in those goddamn adorable kitten pajamas of hers. It's like she chose the one thing that would make my cock harder than stone. I adjust myself as I watch her cook. "They'll be done shortly. I hope you like them."

I lick my lips. "If they're anything like the woman who made them, I'm certain I'll eat my fill and then some."

She blushes, then turns and gives me a view of her round ass. I fight a groan.

I remind myself that I'm her guardian, that her brother was just here telling me not to prowl after her, that I was friendly with her parents—but none of that can stop the desire I feel for her as I watch her move, hear her talk, and realize that at some point in the past day or so, I've fallen for her. Irreparably. Inescapably. I want her, and I won't stop until she's mine.



## VIVIAN

*I* watch as Griff lifts a bite of pancake to his mouth. His nose twitches, and I wonder if he's smelling the food on his fork or if he's still smelling the fire I'd created while making the food. It was only a small fire.

I hadn't even noticed it at first until Mrs. Putnam was there with a small fire extinguisher putting it out. She then helped me clean it up quickly. I didn't want Griff to see. I was scared he'd never let me in the kitchen again.

It's hard to concentrate with Griff staring at me. I swear when his eyes are on me I can actually feel them like a touch to my skin. His attention is addictive. I find myself craving it more and more. I'm not used to someone giving me so much of it. This could quickly become a problem if I'm not careful. I don't know much about Griff, but I know he already has a love in his life—his job. Nothing and no one comes before that.

If his eyes weren't on me while I cooked, I found myself doing something to try to get his attention. One of his men had come into the kitchen and started to talk to him, and I'd dropped something on the floor to bend over and pick up. I made sure to give a small shake while I did it. But I tried not to seem like I was doing it on purpose.

Whenever Griff's phone would go off, I'd just sing a song louder than it to drown it out. I think it worked. He'd ordered the man to leave the kitchen and told him not to let anyone else in. He cleared every alert on his phone, not bothering to

check it after that. I quickly became a pro at keeping his attention. I wish I could say the same about my cooking.

I'm blaming all the burnt pancakes in the trash on Griff. If he wasn't so distracting, I wouldn't have burnt them. At least he didn't see me almost burn down the kitchen with the dish towel that I accidentally tossed on the side of the stove. In my defense this is my first time in a real kitchen.

"Are you going to take a bite?" I ask. The fork is still a few inches from his mouth. He looks hesitant now.

"Of course." His brows pull together as he opens his mouth and takes his first bite. "Hmm." He moans as he chews.

I hear a crunch, which is weird because it's pancakes. Why would they be crunchy? My question is answered seconds later when Griff puts two fingers in his mouth and pulls out an egg shell.

"Oh." I grab his plate from him as embarrassment floods me. Why did I offer him my food? I should have ordered out or had Mrs. Putnam whip something up. "I'm sorry." I try to pull it away, but he stops me, pulling it right back.

I wait for his ridicule to come. With my parents, if you wanted to do something, you'd better do it right or don't do it at all. I learned quickly it was easier just not to do anything for them.

"I'm eating that." He cuts another piece.

"Let me try it."

"No, this is mine." He devours the rest of it before I can even try to get a taste for myself. Out of the giant thing of batter I made, only two didn't burn, and I'd given them to Griff.

"You liked it? I'll make more." I start to slip off my chair, but he yanks my chair to press against his so I can't get out. Effectively trapping me. Not that I mind. I enjoy being trapped next to him.

"It was perfect, but it's my turn to make you something."

"You're going to cook?" I ask, surprised. I don't want him to cook. I want to be the one that cooks for him. It's the one thing I can do for him.

“No,” He shakes his head. “Mrs. Putnam,” he calls.

“I’m not a dog,” she snaps at him when she enters the kitchen.

“I need you to make Vivian some breakfast. I ate everything she made, and now she needs to rest.”

“I’d love to.” She smiles, her attitude changing immediately. Sometimes their relationship confuses me. She can be snippy with him but so sweet when it comes to me. She doesn’t even care that I almost burnt down her kitchen and the place is wrecked.

“He ate all the pancakes I made,” I say proudly.

“See? I told you he’d love it.” She winks at me.

Each time I burnt another pancake, I’d start to get flustered and almost quit, but Mrs. Putnam reassured me Griff would love it with encouraging whispers into my ear.

“With more practice you’ll be better than those chefs at the overpriced fancy restaurants,” Mrs. Putnam reassures me once again.

“You think?” I never thought about working at a restaurant before.

“She’ll cook here,” Griff grumbles as he pulls at the collar of his shirt.

“Are you feeling okay?” I touch his forehead with the back of my hand. I want to touch him in other places too, but I stop myself, unsure of how he will react if I do.

“I’m fine.” He wraps his hand around my wrist, pulling it down to kiss my palm.

“She can cook anywhere she wants.” Mrs. Putnam slides a bagel loaded with cream cheese in front of me.

“She’ll cook here,” he growls again. I duck my head to stare down at my shirt, wondering if my nipples are poking through. Whenever he growls that way, my body reacts.

“Where would you like to cook, sweetheart?” Mrs. Putnam asks me, ignoring Griff. His growls do nothing to her.

“People do those YouTube shows. Something like that, maybe. I don’t think I’d love the idea of working in a restaurant,” I admit. “Honestly, I enjoyed cooking here. I think it would be even better with a few little ones running around underfoot. I could picture it now.” I let out a sigh. “The kitchen island crammed with my babies, chaos all around while I cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner for them all.”

I sneak a peek over at Griff, who is looking rather pale now. Oh gosh. I’ve said too much. I’m totally freaking him out. He looks like he’s going to be sick. That’s the same face my brother would get when I’d ask him if he ever wanted to settle down and have a family.

“You want a big family? This home was built for one.” Mrs. Putnam pours me a glass of orange juice.

“I have a call I need to make.” Griff suddenly jumps up from his chair, rushing from the kitchen.

He might like my food, but I don’t think he cares for the idea of my other dreams that go with it. I try not to let it bother me. I pick up my bagel and take a bite.

“Don’t mind him,” Mrs. Putnam tells me.

“I’m not.” I lick the cream cheese off my fingers. “He acts like it was him I was saying I was going to have the little ones with.”

“You should tell him that.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” She smirks and starts to clean up my mess. I try to stop her, but she orders me to finish my food and then go check on my kittens. I do as I’m told but make a small detour after my breakfast to find Griff. When I don’t see him in his office, I go to his bedroom and linger outside of the closed doors.

My stomach drops when I hear a groan coming from inside. Is he all right? Another moan tells me that, yes he’s actually better than all right. Heat pools between my thighs at the sound.

“Mr. Friarlane isn’t to be disturbed right now.” I turn to see one of the men in black approaching me.

Wait. What if he’s not alone? “Is he with someone?” I ask.

“I can’t speak on such matters,” the man responds. All the air leaves my lungs. Another groan comes from inside the room. I simply nod at the man, not trusting myself to speak. I rush past him and into my room, where I lock the door behind me. This isn’t going to work. I have to get out of here.

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## GRIFFIN

*I* stroke myself harder, imagining Vivian's lips sucking on the head of my cock. Coming hard, I slam my other palm against the side of the shower wall and spend all over the tile floor.

She did this to me. The way she moved, the way her nipples could cut fucking glass, and then she put me over the fucking edge with the thought of her pregnant with my child. I didn't realize that would make me lose my damn mind, but it did.

I groan and finally take a breath. The cool water pours on my back, but it's not enough to quell the fire in my blood. Vivian's ignited something in me I didn't even know was there. Even though I just came, I can already feel my body demanding another release, but this time, I want to coat her pussy with me. To put a baby in her just like she'd said.

*Fuck!* I slap the wall again. She's turned me into someone I don't recognize. Out of control. Desperate. Only for her.

I ignore my growing erection and shower, then dry off. I pull on some boxer briefs, though they do nothing for my current hard issue. When I walk into my closet, I stop dead. I can hear something. Tilting my head to the side, I focus on the sound.

Crying. Someone's crying.

I turn and storm from my closet and dash to Vivian's room. The door is locked.

"Vivian?" I call.

"Just go away!" she yells and snuffles. "I'm very busy."

“What’s wrong?”

“Go!”

I try the handle again. It doesn’t budge.

“Vivian, if you don’t open this door, I’m going to break it down!” I need to get to her, to figure out who’s upset her and how I can dispose of their body.

“What? Why?”

“Because you need me!”

“Go away. I-I don’t need you.” I hear the lie in her voice. I’m certain she does, too.

Rearing back, I throw my full weight against the wood. It splinters and whines, busting open and hitting the wall with a hard thud.

“Griff!” She sits up and wipes her eyes. “You broke the door.”

“I told you I would.” I yank it from where it embedded in the wall and slam it closed.

The kittens mewl sweetly, but their mother swipes her paw at them and scoots them closer so they can drink.

“Go away.” She turns and buries her face in her pillow, giving me a nice view of her ample ass.

My cock pulses at the sight, and I’m doing my level best not to crawl on top of her, rip her cute little bottoms away, and fuck the ever-loving shit out of her.

“Tell me what’s wrong.” I chance a few steps closer to her.

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“I think you’ll find that’s incorrect. When you’re with me, you’ll do as I say.” I grip the bed poster, unable to stop myself from prowling closer to her.

“What about the woman in your bed? Does she do what you say?” she retorts.

There's a woman in my bed? I blink. "What?"

"You heard me!" She sits up, her cheeks wet with tears. "Does she do whatever you tell her to? Does she suck your—" Her eyes widen as she looks at my cock.

Then she licks her lips. Fuuuuck.

My self-control snaps, and I climb into her bed, then grab her wrists and pin them by her head.

She gasps, her body soft and warm beneath me. "What are you—"

"No one is in my bed."

Her eyes narrow. "She hiding in your closet now? I heard the noises you were making. I bet she was following all your instructions to the letter."

I squeeze her wrists. "There is no woman, Vivian. There never has been. There's only you."

Her lips part. "Never?"

I shake my head. I haven't devoted much time or thought to women. They're a distraction, one I don't need. At least that's what I thought until I met Vivian. I find I want her distractions more than anything else. Hell, I've thought about her more than work, and that's never happened before. She's a first for me in plenty of ways.

"Me neither." She blushes. "I mean, not men. Well ... and not women."

That shouldn't be gratifying, but it is. I'm just a man, after all, one who wants to claim this woman in every way.

"When I fuck you, Vivian, you'll be the only one who's ever felt this." I thrust my hips against her hot cunt, feeling the heat through her thin pants.

She moans, her legs spreading wider for me. "Griff."

"You'll be the only one who's ever swallowed my cum, every last drop. The only one I've ever come inside of, filling up your sweet little pussy again and again."

“Griff!” She arches against me.

“What you heard was me thinking about putting a baby in you, about fucking you until you came so hard you blacked out.” I reach down and slide my hand into her panties, then lower, pressing them along her wet flesh. “And I was imagining licking every bit of you.” I press my fingers inside her tight slit. “That’s my girl.”

She whimpers, and I ease down her body and yank her pants and panties away. Wasting no time, I spread her wide and throw one of her legs over my shoulder, then lick her with the broadside of my tongue.

Her cry is erotic and throaty, and she runs her fingers through my hair as I suck on her tender skin. I explore her, flicking her clit and pressing my tongue into her tight hole. Her taste is all over my face, and I can’t get enough. I want more, sucking and licking as she starts to grind against me.

“Here?” I focus on her clit, tonguing it again and again. Reaching up, I push her top out of the way and palm one of her tits, squeezing as she grips my wrist.

“Yes!” She arches. “Griff!”

I go harder, sucking it between my teeth.

That’s when she shatters, and I feel her body unfurling as she cries out my name. Her legs shake, and I swallow down her release, still licking and sucking her delicious cunt.

“Oh my God, Griff. It’s too much.” When she sucks in a breath and tries to close her legs, I keep them open wide and press kisses along her sensitive spots.

I press a final kiss to her pussy, then force myself to rise to my knees. Looking down at her body, I drink in every curve, every bit of beauty.

“This is what you heard, Vivian. This is what you do to me.” I pull my cock out, and it only takes a few strokes before I come hard, splashing her pussy with my seed. I’ve never seen anything hotter in my life... Until she reaches down, swipes my cum with her finger, and then pops it in her mouth with a moan.

Fuck, I'm in love.

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## VIVIAN

“*I*f you stare, it won’t cook.”

“Really?” I only stare harder at the bread rising in the oven. I don’t want a repeat of what happened the other day. “Anytime I look away from something, it burns,” I huff.

The last two days have been magical. I’m either in the kitchen, playing with my kittens, or Griff is giving me mind-blowing orgasms. I’m really living my best life at the moment. The only downside is that Griff hasn’t tried to take things further with us. Why doesn’t he want to make love to me?

I’m trying my hardest to get him to break, but so far, he’s held out. If he won’t take me fully, the least he could do is let me return the favor and pleasure him. I love the way his mouth feels on me. I want to be able to give him the same bliss.

He always ends up pulling his cock out and coming on me. I have to admit that it’s pretty damn hot, though. Like he’s marking his territory. Just the thought of it alone has me squeezing my thighs together.

“It’s an old saying. I promise it’s fine and will be cooking for at least another hour. I’ll set the alarm.” She punches the buttons into the timer. “Why don’t you go check on Griff?” she suggests, making me blush.

“He’s working.” I’m trying not to be clingy. I’m totally playing it cool or I’m trying to, at least. No one likes a clinger.

“I’m sure he’d be okay with you popping in on him,” she tries to encourage me.

I give a nod but have no intention of bothering him in his office. Even though I've thought about going in there to see him more times today than I'm willing to admit.

"I think I'll check on the kittens first." I always lose track of time when I start playing with them. I get lost in all of their furry cuteness.

"Speaking of which." I spin around to find one of the men in black has entered the kitchen area.

This one's name I know. Griff told me if I ever needed anything that I can always ask Henry. I think Griff picked Henry to help me because he's gay. I find Griff's jealousy adorable. I was invisible to everyone around me for so long that I'm relishing the attention Griff gives me. I love that he can't stand the idea of someone else having mine.

"Is something wrong with them?"

"No ma'am. I wanted to let you know the veterinarian is here. I showed her up to your room."

"What's wrong?" I rush past Henry and dart up the stairs. He hurries behind me.

"Nothing, ma'am. Just a check-up," he reassures me, but I still don't stop until I see them for myself. When I burst into the room, I find two women. One is in scrubs with bright yellow hair like the sun, and the other is in a doctor's coat. I watch as she looks Mama over while the one in scrubs pets the two babies.

"I heard you found them outside," the one I'm guessing is the veterinarian says.

I nod.

"I'm Dr. Lombardy, but please call me Amelia." She gives me a giant smile while holding Mama. "Unless my husband is around. He likes it when I use his last name." She gives a playful roll of her eyes. "And this is my assistant, Mariana."

"Hi!" the assistant chirps. "They're beautiful." She coos at them.



“But are they okay?” I ask, my stomach in knots, worrying about whether something is wrong.

“They’re purrfect.” Amelia gives Mama a kiss on the head before setting her back into the gated area. “In a few weeks, I’d like to give her and the babies a few shots. Do you plan to keep them?”

“Yes,” I blurt out without thinking. “I mean...” I start to backtrack. I’m actually not sure if I can keep them. I want to, but this isn’t my house.

“We’re just asking if you want us to put out some feelers for adoption. I know you found them outside, so I wasn’t sure if you were planning on keeping three cats.”

“I want them all. Who doesn’t want cats?” I mutter. There would have to be something wrong with someone to not want a kitty. My only concern would be that Griff thinks this is temporary and that I’ll be getting rid of them once they get a little bigger. I’m not sure if he planned on letting me have them long term.

“Right? Everyone needs a cat,” Amelia agrees, breaking me from my line of thinking. “A few really.”

“Not something we have to settle on right now.” Mariana gives me a reassuring smile.

“But they’re all good?” I double-check, wanting reassurance.

“Promise.” Amelia packs up her little bag. “I think I’m all done here.”

“I didn’t know that the vet did house calls,” I say as I lead them back downstairs. My eyes flick towards Griff’s office. The doors are open. I’ve noticed they have been lately. Not that I venture near them. Amelia, however, is heading straight for them and not the front door.

“Your husband must know how much they mean to you.”

I open my mouth to correct her but can’t find it in me to do it. I love the sound of her calling Griff my husband. It feels right.

“Wait!” I suddenly shout when she’s almost to the open doors of the office. “You can’t go in there.” I go to cut her off and

block her path so she doesn't get in trouble. No women are allowed in the office. Ever.

That was my parents' rule. Business is sacred. No interruptions. Both Amelia and Mariana are now giving me perplexed looks.

"Everything okay?" An arm wraps around me from behind.

I know it's Griff from the yummy smell of him alone. He pulls me back into his office where two other men in suits are. Amelia and Mariana both scurry over to the men, who open their arms to them.

"Everything is fine." I want to melt into him, but I'm stiff. I tell my body to relax, but it's not listening. Griff spins me in his arms, his eyes searching my face.

"Doesn't seem fine. Is Mama okay?"

I nod.

His brows pull together, and I can tell he's irritated. He hates when I only nod my responses.

"Everything went great. How about you boys? Are you done with your business?" Amelia asks them.

"It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Griffin. Keep giving me great investment returns like always," the one who holds Amelia close says. I'm guessing he's her husband. Both women have giant wedding rings on their fingers, and I'm pretty sure Mariana is pregnant, but it's hard to tell with the dress she has on.

"You should come over soon for dinner," Mariana suggests.

"My Sol loves to host dinners," Mariana's husband says proudly.

"My Vivian can make a dessert. She loves to cook," Griffin says with ease.

My eyes widen.

I'm still terrible at cooking, and did he call me his? I'm not sure which one surprises me more. I mean, I know he's always marking me, but that's bedroom dirty stuff like I read in the

books my best friend Anna would share with me back at boarding school.

“I’ll reach out to settle on a date. I should get your number.” Amelia pulls her cell phone out.

“I don’t have a phone,” I admit, feeling a bit silly. I’m a girl in a grown-up world. I shouldn’t even be in this office.

“I’m in the process of getting one for her. A lot of things have changed for my Vivian lately. We’re still settling in here. I’ll send it over to Grant when I get it.”

“All right. Sounds good.” They all say their goodbyes, and we lead them out the front door. When it closes, I feel awkward again.

“Honey, the bread is ready.” Thankfully, Mrs. Putman saves me.

I dart out from under Griff’s arms. He grumbles something from behind me. I peek over my shoulder to see him watch me as he walks toward his office. I try to shake off the feelings as I pull my bread out of the oven.

“I think I did it!” I squeal when I see it. It’s perfectly cooked, the top looking crispy and golden.

“See? You’re already getting better.” Mrs. Putman gives me a giant reassuring smile. Maybe I should try to get better at other things.

Seduction is the first thing that comes to mind. Practice makes perfect.



## GRIFFIN

“*A*re you ever coming back to the office? This place is shell shocked. Everyone’s on edge, wondering if you’re going to shut the whole thing down.”

“People exaggerate, Linn.” I expected the office to talk about my absence, but it seems they’re going a little further than I thought.

“They just keep wondering if it’s Armageddon. I mean, you never miss work. Ever. And now you’ve missed a whole week.”

“I’m just trying to get all the affairs here settled. Being a guardian isn’t exactly in my wheelhouse, so I’m learning as I go.”

She snorts on her end of the line. “What exactly are you learning, Mr. Friarlane?”

Linn is like a smaller, friendlier version of Mrs. Putnam. Whereas Mrs. Putnam rules my home with an iron fist, Linn controls my office like a prison warden—one who sips tea and likes to do the crossword.

“Do you have any information for me on Charles?” I change the subject.

“Just some rumors so far, none of them good. I’m waiting on verification, but it seems that he’s gotten himself involved with the Santivascis.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. He’s had meetings with them and a few other players, but they’re the only ones still in contact with him.”

“They’ve been gunning for me for years.” I don’t need this right now.

“Well, they seem to have found an easy mark, because Charles is in bed with them. But like I said, I’m waiting on confirmation. Our guy is hacking Charles’s phone this weekend, as long as he can get his hands on it.”

“He’ll get it.” I only hire the best. “And then we’ll know for sure.”

“And then what?” She sips her tea, the sound familiar.

“Then we’ll have to deal with the Santivascis and with Charles.”

“Will his sister appreciate you ‘dealing’ with him, as you say?”

There’s always another wrinkle, isn’t there? I’ve been trying to bide my time with Vivian. Not push her into too much too fast. But I want all of her, every last fucking bit. What will she think if she finds out I’m at odds with her brother? As far as I know, they’re still on good terms despite the distance between them.

“Griff, you there?” She sips again.

“I’m here. I need to think, to figure out what angle Carmine Santivasci is working. He has to know there’s no way in hell I’d ever sign over my businesses to him. So what’s he banking on?”

“If you can answer that, you can probably take him down.”

“All right. Let me know when you get confirmation.”

“Sure thing. You coming to work on Monday?” she asks.

“I’ll get back to you on that.”

She snorts a laugh as I end the call.

A shadow darts down the hall outside my office. I’d recognize it anywhere.

“Vivian?” I call.

The shadow comes back, and she appears in the doorway. Today she’s wearing a cute little comfy set with kittens along the hem.

“Sorry. I was just going to the kitchen to practice my dessert. I only have two more days before the dinner thing.”

“Don’t worry too much. Grant and Amelia are old friends of mine. They’ll love whatever you make.” I pat my knee. “Come here.”

She eases into my office, still a little unsure of being in here.

“You’re always welcome, Viv. We’ve been over this.”

“I know. I’m just getting used to it.” She sits on my lap.

I turn her so she’s facing me, her legs on either side as she straddles me. Her cheeks tinge a sweet pink as I stare into her eyes. “I promise, you don’t have to be nervous about dinner.”

“It’s not that.” She sighs. “Well, yes, it *is* that. But I have a question, and I’m worried you’re going to say no.”

“When have I ever told you no?” I grip her hips and pull her forward so she can feel what she does to me.

She bites her lower lip when she feels how hard I am for her. “You don’t, um. You don’t tell me no. But this is kind of a big question.” She moves her hips just a little, chasing sensation by rubbing her clit against me. My greedy girl.

“Ask, and I’ll see what I can do.” I run my hands higher, under her top. No bra. I smirk, then cup her breasts, holding them and running my thumbs over her hard nipples.

“Griff,” she says breathily.

“I know what you like, Vivian. I’ve learned you. I never want to stop learning you.” I twist her nipples, and her hips jerk.

My cock demands to be inside her, but I have to slow down. I won’t spook her. She’s young, she just lost her parents, and she’s completely under my control. No matter how much that last fact turns me on, I have to put her needs first.

She grips my shoulders, her back arching as she rubs against me.

“Get what you need, beautiful.” I drop my head and suck one nipple into my mouth.

She moans, her hips moving faster, sending a buzz through my cock. Fuck, I could come just from this, from her dry humping me as she moans my name.

“I shouldn’t—” She gasps. “This is—” A moan cuts through her words, and she moves more frantically as she comes.

I take her mouth, drinking down her cries as her body rolls against me, getting ever last crumb of pleasure she can find. I want her to have it, all of it.

When she finally pulls back and takes a breath, her pupils are blown, her skin flushed. “Griff.” She rests her forehead on my chest and takes another deep breath. “I just dry-humped you with your office door wide open.”

“Good.” I kiss her crown. “I want everyone to know who you belong to.”

She sits up, her gaze on mine.

“Now.” I squeeze her ass. “Ask me your big question.”

“Can I ...” She rolls her shoulders, then gives me an almost stern look.

This must be serious.

“Can I please keep Mama and the kittens?”

“Yes.” I cock my head to the side. “Aren’t you already doing that?”

“I mean, like, forever. Can they stay here with me?”

God, she was worried about asking me that? What did her parents and that boarding school do to her?

“Of course they can.” I kiss her again. *As long as you stay here with me forever.*





## VIVIAN

*M*y breath catches. Does he mean what I think he does? Is he suggesting that I'll be staying past the guardianship?

"Are you agreeing? You'll stay forever." He traces my lips with his finger. I can't help but lick my lips. When my tongue grazes his thumb, his eyes flare with desire.

"You mean like past the guardianship?"

"I don't give a shit about the guardianship. I want you here because I need you. Do you want to be here?"

"Yes," I say without hesitation.

At first I thought it would be better if I went with my brother, but as much as I've tried to have a relationship with him, we can never seem to connect. I thought he was all I had left in the world, but now I have Griff. And there is nowhere else I'd rather be than here with him. Especially with him saying he needs me to be with him. No one has ever needed me before.

"That's my girl." He pulls me in for a kiss. He takes his time, kissing me thoroughly until I'm rubbing myself against him again, desperate for another release. This time I want more, but Griff never takes it further. Now that I think about it, he did just say that he would give me anything I asked for. Maybe that's what he's waiting for. Could it be as simple as that? There's only one way to find out.

"Will you make love to me, Griff?" I ask, breaking the kiss, my fingers already going for the buttons on his shirt.

“There will be no going back if we go there, Vivian.” His eyes darken.

I think he is trying to give me a warning, but all it does is spur me on more. I’ll take anything that binds us together forever.

“Is there a possibility of going back even now?” I know for me there’s not. The man has already claimed my heart.

“No,” he growls, his hands gripping my ass. “I just don’t want to overwhelm you. You have no idea the things I want to do to you.”

A thrill rushes through my body. “Are you talking about BDSM? I’ve read about that in a few books.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

“I don’t think there’s a name for the things I want to do to you.” He stands with me in his arms. “Do you enjoy reading those things? Does it turn you on?” he asks as he carries me out of his office and up the stairs. I can’t help but wiggle against his cock as it presses into my sex. This is finally going to happen.

“I get turned on sometimes, but I don’t think I’d enjoy the pain,” I admit. That part has never appealed to me. “The being treasured part is what I think appeals to me the most. Followed by the connection and the deep trust that people have to have to be in that sort of relationship.”

“I would never hurt you. You know that right?” He lays me down on the giant bed in his bedroom. He had all my things moved into his room yesterday. Even the kittens’ gated area is set up here now. In fact, we were able to make the space bigger for them since his room is ginormous.

“I know that, Griff. I think you’re the first person to ever truly care for me in every way,” I admit. I love it, but it’s also terrifying. I don’t think I could bear not having him. He’s given me a taste of a different type of life. I can never go back now.

“I’ll be the only person to take care of you in every way,” he growls. His possessiveness only makes me want him more.

“Prove it. Make me yours, Griff.” The words barely leave my mouth before he’s on me. He takes my mouth, his hunger for me evident in the way he’s kissing me.

I pull at his clothes, needing to feel his skin pressed against mine. In seconds, we’re both naked, Griff’s mouth descending down my body.

“I can never get over how soft you are.” His hands cup my breasts. “You’re so damn perfect.”

“Griff,” I breathe. I’m torn between wanting to cry from his sweetness to wanting to scream at him to make love to me already. I’m coming undone. This is what this man has done to me from the very start.

“I know, love.” His tongue circles my nipple. “You’re needy, but I won’t rush this. You don’t want pain, and I’m going to make sure you have as little as possible.” My heart leaps at him calling me love. “Need to get you ready.”

“I’m ready,” I rush to say. I’ve never been more so for anything in my life. He smirks as he slips further down my body, spreading my legs wide to make room for his broad shoulders.

“More ready.” His tongue circles my clit as he works two fingers inside me. I’m already soaked from the orgasm in his office. My hips move with his fingers as his tongue pulls me to the edge before he halts.

“Griff.” I whimper, gripping his hair in my hand to try and guide him back, but I’m no match for him. He only adds another finger before his tongue goes back to where I need it. He pushes me to the edge of pleasure before pulling back again and again. “I can’t!” I cry out. My whole body feels as though it’s on fire. Why is he doing this?

“You can and you will.” He shifts suddenly, coming down over top of me. The head of his cock slips easily inside me. My sex locks around it, demanding it to enter. My body is screaming for this. “You need to come?”

“Please,” I beg. His hand slips between us, his fingers going to my clit.

“You know I’ll be coming inside of you.”

“No more marking me?” It’s a half tease.

“Oh, I’ll be marking you.” His fingers press down firmer on my clit as he gives shallow thrusts. “I’ll be claiming you inside and out.”

I go off. My orgasm explodes through my whole body. Griff groans my name and starts to come with me. I feel his release start to spill as he thrusts all the way inside of me. I gasp at the sudden sensation. He claims my mouth in a kiss. He remains completely still, buried to the hilt deep inside of me.

“Move,” I demand between kisses. I need more of him.

“Tell me how you feel first.” He lifts his head, his eyes searching my face. His whole body is stiff, and I can feel the tension that’s built up in him. He’s fighting himself not to take me further before I’m ready.

“I feel like I’m falling in love,” I admit.

“You will love me,” he demands before he finally lets go, giving me what I asked for. The last of that control he’d been holding on to shatters. He proceeds to claim me over and over again.



## GRIFFIN

“*N*o more.” She rolls over.

I pull her to me, my cock nestled against her ass.  
“You must be joking.”

“I can barely breathe.” She giggles. “And I’m pretty sure we haven’t slept much the past two days.”

“Mrs. Putnam has provided food, and I let you sleep ... Some.” I bite her shoulder.

She squeals and turns toward me, her lips still bruised from days and days of kissing. I lean down and nibble at the bottom one.

“You’re a bad influence.” She wraps her arms around my neck and snuggles closer with a yawn. “I’m certain this behavior isn’t befitting a guardian.”

“Not in the least.” I grab her ass and squeeze.

“Griff!” She laughs again and smacks my arm. “Sleep!”

I give up and stroke her hair. She’s right, after all. She needs rest. We’ve spent every moment tangled up in each other, passing the days in a sensuous haze. I don’t want it to end, but even my sweet Vivian needs rest sometimes.

“I love you, Vivian.” I kiss her hair as she lets out the cutest little snore.

Mama stands up and stretches, then hops over the enclosure and pads to the bedroom door. She sits and stares at me.

I don't want to get out of bed. I'd much rather spend all my time with Vivian, but Mama stretches and claws down the side of the doorframe, then sends yet another look my way. With a sigh, I ease out from under Vivian, then make sure she's tucked well beneath the covers.

"Yes, ma'am," I whisper and open the door for Mama, who trots off like she's on a mission. I have no idea where she's headed. Maybe she heard a mouse or something.

I consider getting back into bed, then decide Vivian needs some actual sleep, not me pawing at her. Because even now, I want to jump her, to pin her beneath me and make her moan.

Before my resolve fails, I hurry to my closet, throw on some clothes, and leave the room quietly. Once in the hallway, I realize it's midday, the sun high and bright through the windows. I don't think I've bothered to open the drapes even once this weekend.

"Look what the cat dragged in. Literally." Mrs. Putnam opens a can of fresh food for Mama as I take a seat at the kitchen island.

If it's lunchtime, I should go back up and check on Vivian. Maybe she's hungry. Maybe she wants more of me. Maybe I can eat her pussy while she eats a sandw—

"Are you even listening to me?" Mrs. Putnam tosses the empty can into the recycling.

"Of course. You were saying?" I clear my throat.

"I *said* you've been shut up with Vivian for days. Would you care to share any information with me?" She goes to the fridge and pulls out her famous chicken salad, then goes to the oven and cracks it to get a better look at the fresh croissants she's baking.

"Those smell amazing."

"I'm aware." She closes the oven and whirls on me. "Have you decided what you intend to do?"

"About what?" I shrug.



She snags an energy drink from the fridge and hands it to me. “About Vivian, young man.” She rolls her eyes.

“I feel like I’ve been doing plenty already.” I smirk.

She smacks me on the back of the head. “You know what I mean.”

I try to imagine anyone else striking me. I can’t do it. Any of my men would lose their hand if they raised it against me. But Mrs. Putnam doesn’t ask permission, and we both know her hands are far too valuable for me to chop off.

“You may have wowed her in the sheets, but it seems you’ve forgotten your engagement for the evening.” She raises a brow at me.

“That’s tonight?” The dinner with Grant hadn’t crossed my mind, but now I rise and start to pace. “We’ll need to get Vivian some dresses to choose from and—”

“Done.” She crosses her arms over her chest, the black fabric of her dress getting wrinkly with disdain just like her face. “I’ve handled everything. I even ordered all the ingredients she’ll need to make the lava cake dessert she’s been talking about. If you hadn’t worn her out, she’d be down here right now.”

“Shit.” I scrub a hand down my face.

She finally relents, backing away and returning to the oven. “You have time. The cakes come together quick. But I’m going to need you to give her a moment to breathe. Don’t scare her off.”

I want to tell her it’s quite the opposite. That Vivian is just as ravenous for me. Fuck, the way she rides my cock, the way she licks my cum and swallows when I release in her sweet mouth. But none of that is for Mrs. Putnam’s ears. In fact, that’s for no one’s ears. Vivian is mine, and mine alone.

“Do some work.” She waves me away and disappears into the pantry. “Let her rest.”

I’d argue and inform her I’ve already made that decision all on my own, but with Mrs. Putnam, there’s no point. I don’t know

how her late husband died, but he may have just keeled over from frustration at that woman.

My office is just how I left it, though I already know my email inbox is piled up, as are my messages. I sit with a sigh and begin to sift through them. Only one catches my interest. Linn has sent an email detailing all of Charles's meetings with the Santivascis over the past week. He's definitely in bed with them.

I click on the attachments to find some texts between Charles and Gino, the eldest Santivasci son. The more I read, the more my gut tenses.

**Charles:** You can marry my sister to seal the deal. As long as you treat her right. I don't want anyone hurting her.

**Gino:** I'm not in the market for a wife, but I've seen photos of your sister. I can make an exception, and of course I'd treat her well. Better than that asshole Griffin Friarlane. You need to get him out of the business before we can make any moves.

**Charles:** I'm working on it. Until then, how about we meet up with Vivian. All three of us.

**Gino:** Yes. Make it soon.

Before I can stop myself, I smash my fist into the screen, erasing the words that make my blood boil. No one will fucking touch Vivian.

At that moment I hear a blood-curdling scream. I'm on my feet, running with full force to my bedroom.

To Vivian.



## VIVIAN

Uncontrollable fear grips me. All I can do is scream as my mind tries to find reason. Where am I? How did I get here? Has someone forgotten me again? Why the hell am I naked?

A loud crash sounds to my right as light suddenly fills the room. I'm blinded by it momentarily as a door fully swings open. A large figure fills the space before more light flows into the room. I try to blink my eyes, but they aren't adjusting.

"No!" I scream when someone grabs me. Something immediately grips my face. I fight as hard as I can to get away, swinging my hands.

"Griff!" The name comes out of nowhere right past my own lips as the figure gets hold of me, pinning me to the bed. "Griff, help!"

"It's me, love. Open your eyes."

I shake my head, keeping them closed tight. My mind is still racing.

"I love you, Vivian. Now let me see those eyes. I need to know you're okay."

My eyes fly open, obeying him. "Griff?" Relief instantly fills me.

"I'm right here."

I try to wrap my arms around him as reality settles back in, but they're pinned to the bed. Griff looks almost pale. He's still as

handsome as ever, but his eyes are wide and filled with something I've never seen in them before. Not from him at least. Fear.

"Is she okay?" Mrs. Putnam asks.

"I've got her," Griff responds as tears start to spill down my cheeks. I'm safe. No one forgot about me. I'm not trapped. The next thing I know he's sitting up with me in his lap, cradling me to his chest. I wrap my arms around him as I let the tears run their course.

"Please stop crying, love. I can't bear it." His words are laced with concern, making me cry harder. Never in my life have I had someone care for me the way that he does. "When you're ready, I need you to tell me what that was all about."

I take a deep breath, trying to get myself together. I've never told anyone the extent of what happened to me at boarding school. How they used to lock us away when they deemed our behavior unacceptable. I told Mrs. Putnam a little bit about the time they forgot about me and left me there for days. To be honest, I've always been so afraid that no one would believe me. But I know without a doubt that Griff will.

I lift my head to meet his gaze. "I'm scared of the dark," I admit. It sounds silly when I say it out loud, but there's nothing funny about the fear it causes me.

"We sleep in the dark," Griff points out.

"The dark doesn't bother me when you're with me." I remember that first night he'd slipped into bed then turned the lights off. I thought fear would come, but it didn't. Not when he rolled over and pulled me into his arms, holding me close.

Griff's face softens. It's short-lived, though, when I tell him about the time I was forgotten for a few days and ended up in the hospital.

"What else happened at that school?" He tries to keep his voice calm, but I can hear the rage simmering under the surface. As crazy as it sounds, it's turning me on. His rage on my behalf.

“They get away with a lot of crap. Sometimes, I think they know which of us they can get away with more because our parents are around less.”

“It will be handled,” he vows.

I turn in his lap to face him fully. I have no doubt that he will somehow make sure this trauma doesn't happen to anyone else.

“I would like that. I'd hate for something to happen to another girl there. I hated that place so much.” My eyes start to fill with tears again.

“Vivian.” Griff's brows furrow together. He wants me to stop crying but doesn't know how to get me to. “You're killing me.”

“You're fixing me.” I smile through the tears. His eyes widen at my response. “No one has ever cared for me the way you or even Mrs. Putnam does. It almost scares me at times.”

“Why would that scare you? I can't not take care of you, sweetheart. I love you.”

“See! You even say that. What if you stop saying it or change your mind? I can't go back.”

“I've never said those words to anyone else. They easily slip past my lips for you. There's no going back for me either. I couldn't imagine a life without you in it.”

“Oh, Griff.” It dawns on me that I don't really know much about his past or his childhood. I have a feeling we have a lot more in common than I ever realized. That we are two people starved for love. “You know that I love you?” I'd been so caught off guard the first time he uttered those words to me. He said it so easily. Like he'd done it a thousand times before.

He closes his eyes like he's savoring my words. My heart warms, realizing he needs those words as much as I do. Who knew there was this man inside of Griffin Friarlane? I'm guessing Mrs. Putnam might expect it, but I'm the one who really gets to see it. That part of Griff belongs to me.

“I love you,” I say again, pressing my mouth to his. He moves, pinning me back down onto the bed beneath him.

“I want to hear it again but this time while I’m inside you.” He moves my hands above my head to pin them together with one hand while the other goes between us. He jerks at his pants, and within seconds he’s thrusting deep inside me. “Say it,” he demands, pulling almost fully out.

“I love you.”

He thrusts hard back into me.

“Again,” he orders. Over and over I chant the words until we’re both sent over the edge. Any fears I had about my Griff not wanting me one day fade away. Griffin Friarlane is all mine.

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## GRIFFIN

“*A*re you sure I can’t put that in the back for you?” I glance at Vivian who’s holding on to her mixing bowl for dear life.

“No.” She shakes her head vehemently. “If it spills, the lava cakes will be ruined. I have to keep the batter perfect. I really want to get it right, you know?”

“All right.” I slow down a bit, doing my best not to turn too hard as we drive through the city and head into the country on the other side. “They’re going to be amazing. I have zero doubt.”

“As long as I follow the recipe and do it just like Mrs. Putnam and I practiced, it’ll work fine... I hope. I mean, I know my pancakes weren’t the best, but—”

“I loved them.” I did, despite the many eggshells and a few other mysterious crunchy bits. All she needs is encouragement. Vivian has more potential than anyone I’ve ever known. “Don’t worry.” I squeeze her thigh. “You’re amazing.”

She blushes as I turn off the highway and down a country lane toward Grant’s estate. “So you and Grant are friends?”

“I can’t say I have many, but yes. Grant and I both run different parts of the city and have found ourselves as allies more often than not. We crossed paths a lot. Eventually, we became friends.”

“Grant and Amelia are a cute couple. I can tell they’re different from each other, but it totally works. They seem super nice?”

“Amelia certainly is. She has a big heart for animals, and she puts up with Grant, so she’s practically a saint.”

“Oh, is Grant bad?”

“Not at all. He’s fierce when it comes to the people he loves, though.”

She smiles. “So are you.”

“No truer words, my love.” I squeeze her warm thigh again and slide my hand higher to tease against the edge of her panties.

“Griff!” She squeals and grips the bowl even tighter.

I sigh and move my hand down. “Fine, but I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong idea. I’ll have those panties off you and in my mouth before this night is through.”

She wiggles in her seat.

“Here we are.” We’re ushered through the gate by armed guards, and I ease up the smooth drive to the house.

Vivian’s eyes widen. “Wait. What does Grant do for a living?”

I shrug and maneuver around a couple of peacocks encroaching on the driveway. “He’s a businessman.”

“Like you?”

“Somewhat, but Grant dabbles in a few things that aren’t exactly legal.”

“Oh.” She blinks.

I pull to a stop and lean over to whisper in her ear. “So do I.”

Her breath catches when I graze my lips along her ear.

When she sighs and turns to me for a full kiss, I grab her bowl before she drops it, then I kiss her hard.

She opens for me, and I swipe my tongue against hers, my body heating. Forgetting about the bowl entirely, she clutches

my shirt, and I start wondering if I can somehow get her to straddle me in this sports car.

A loud shriek has me pulling away and turning, determined to protect Vivian, but then an odd-looking chicken lands on the hood of the car.

Vivian bursts out laughing. “My goodness!”

I can’t help but smile. “Come on, love. Let’s go in.” Hopping out, I go around and open her door, help her up, then retrieve the rest of her ingredients.

Grant opens the front door and welcomes us inside.

Vivian immediately shows Amelia her supplies, and they head off to the kitchen. I notice a strained quality in Grant’s manner.

“What’s wrong?”

He glances down the driveway then closes the door. “I received a message from the Santivascis. They intend to drop by tonight.”

I tense. “And?”

“I told them in no uncertain terms to fuck off. But if this means what I think it does, you need to watch your back, because they’ve got eyes on you. Want to tell me why?”

I stare down the hall and listen to Vivian and Amelia laugh amid the clatter of pots and pans.

He follows my line of sight. “Her?” He shakes his head, his own tension falling away. “Then I’m not worried. There’s no way you’re letting any of them near her, are you?”

I turn to him, ice in my veins. “Over my dead fucking body.”



## VIVIAN

*I* watch Amelia as she holds her daughter Phoenix in her arms. Tonight has been more fun than I thought it would be. It's interesting to see such intense men all paired up with women that I would never think would go together. Then again, Griff is everything I didn't know I needed. Opposites really do attract. I can't even imagine anyone else for me but him.

Amelia rocks her little girl back and forth. I can't help but imagine what it would be like to have a baby with Griff one day. We girls had retreated to a sitting room shortly after dinner. We're all on a sugar high—or maybe that's just me. I can't explain how ecstatic I am that I nailed my dessert. I was so nervous. It was so delicious that people even went back for seconds. There wasn't one bite left even after everyone claimed they were too full for dessert after dinner.

Phoenix makes a cooing sound, breaking me from my thoughts. I'm not sure how, but somehow Amelia knows that means she wants her binky. It dawns on me that never in my life have I been around many little ones. I've never even held a baby before. I wouldn't have the first clue of what to do with one.

"She looks so much like you." I honestly didn't think anything could be cuter than kittens. But I was so wrong.

"Thanks." Amelia's whole face lights up. "You know, first comes kittens and then babies." She winks my way. Heat rushes to my face. I duck to try to hide my blush, not wanting

to come off looking like a silly girl sitting at the adult table who blushes when the conversation turns to sex.

“Are you two thinking about babies?” Mariana wiggles her eyebrows at me playfully.

“We haven’t talked about that.” I shrug off the question.

I’m not really sure what to even call Griff and me. Boyfriend is laughable, but at the same time we live together because we were made to. It’s not as though he asked me to move in with him. He really didn’t have a choice in the matter.

“I see the way he looks at you. I bet he can’t keep his hands off you. You probably have a baby in you already,” Mariana says, making me burst into laughter. She kind of has a point. Griff is all over me every chance he gets. I wouldn’t be surprised if I were pregnant either. I mean, it’s not like we take any precautions.

Her words wash away the thoughts I had of them thinking of me as a silly girl who is too young for this. Both of them have really made it easy to talk to them. They’re so different from the girls back at boarding school. I’m slowly learning that not everyone has cruel or dismissive things to say to me. It’s nice to be around girls that are supportive and actually want to get to know me.

“I know he loves me,” I say. That’s the one thing that keeps my mind from spinning and going down a path of insecurities and doubt. It can be really hard to not go there at times, but when he says those three little words to me, everything inside of me always settles.

“And you live together. I didn’t know he was seeing anyone, but I’ve only met Griffin a few times.” Amelia says, coming over to sit next to me. “Want to hold her?”

“Really?” I want to, but I’m nervous. I have no clue how the heck to hold a baby. I don’t want to outwardly say that, though.

“Yes, really.” She slowly lowers her into my arms.

“Wow.” I stare down at Phoenix’s little pudgy face. She’s as adorable as can be, but I understand why they named her

Phoenix. She has a fire in her eyes. It's undeniable that she's going to be a force to be reckoned with when she gets older. Grant is going to have his hands full.

"How long have you two lived together?" Mariana asks.

"Well, not that long, but it's also not a normal situation," I admit.

"It never is." Amelia laughs.

"Isn't that the truth." Mariana laughs along with her. I know there must be a story there.

"Griff was kind of forced to take me in." I don't know why I hate admitting that.

"Yeah, he looks all bent out of shape about it," Amelia teases me. I've never really thought about it like that. I guess she has a point.

"Bent out of shape about what?" Griff asks, entering the room. Both Mariana's and Amelia's husbands are right behind him.

"Nothing." I rush to cover. He gives me a look that says he's not buying it. I know he's going to get it out of me one way or another. His eyes drop to the baby in my arms. Something flashes across his face, but as quickly as it was there, it's gone.

"Are you ready? I think I've had enough of sharing you for one day." His sweet words warm me. I love how affectionate he's being.

"I think so." I hand Amelia back the baby. Griff offers me his hand, pulling me to my feet so that we can say our goodbyes. This time I have my phone so I can get their numbers. We've barely exchanged our info, and Griff is practically dragging me out of the house.

Seeing them all together and how close they are is a bit of a reminder that I haven't spoken to my brother. We might not have been super close, but maybe that can change now that I'm not shoved off at some school. I should make an effort.

The second we're in the back of the car, Griff is pulling me into his lap. "I love you. Now tell me what's bothering you." I

can't help but smile. He knew saying he loved me would help with wherever I let my mind go.

“You want me to live with you, right?”

“You're not going anywhere.” He grips my chin to make me meet his eyes. “You're mine, Vivian, and I'm keeping you.” I press my mouth to his.

I'm not going to let my silly thoughts get in the way of this. Griff and I are together. We might even be growing a family. Something I've wanted my whole life.

This could be a new start even for Charles and me. Tomorrow I'll reach out to him. It's time to let go of the past and start embracing what could be.

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## GRIFFIN

When I see that Vivian is engrossed in her kittens, I take the opportunity to steal away to my office. Dialing Linn, I settle back in my chair.

“Mr. Friarlane. It’s Sunday.” The archness in her tone reminds me of Mrs. Putnam.

“I’m aware. I have a job for you. Find out who owns the Gravebridge Boarding School. Get back to me with the school’s financials—everything I’d need to prepare an offer on the property. Give me a list of staff, too. Especially the instructors in the upper-level courses for older students. I want names.” I need to know who harmed my Vivian. If they’re lucky, they’ll simply be out of a job, nothing more. But my wrath is disinclined to grant even small mercies to anyone who dared hurt her.

“A boarding school?”

I smirk. “And here I was thinking I’d never be able to surprise you, Linn.”

She clears her throat. “I’m surprised, but I think I know where this is coming from. Might this have something to do with your ward? How is the girl, anyway?”

“Vivian is fine. Better than fine, in fact. She will remain with me.”

“For how long? You can’t just keep her as a pet, you realize?” I can hear the amusement in her voice.

“Never you mind. Just get me that information.”

“Will do.” She sighs. “But there is something else. I was going to try and wait until you came into the office tomorrow to discuss it.”

“I’ll be in a little later than usual.” I don’t want to miss the pancakes Vivian’s already promised me.

She lets out a small gasp. “It’s like I don’t even know you anymore.”

“Maybe you don’t.” I have to admit, Vivian has changed me. I can only hope it’s for the better. Before her, I’d be spending all my waking moments making deals and trying to grind my competition under my heel. Now, though, I can’t seem to get back to her fast enough. Even at this very moment, I’m wondering what she’s doing. “But go on, all the same.”

“The Santivascis have been pressuring some of our regular clients to throw in with them. I’ve gotten word through the grapevine that they’ve tried to talk to the big players who rely on your investment expertise and asset placement. They think they can do it better and for less. On top of that, they’ve promised regime change.”

“With themselves as the new head of my business, I suppose?” I shake my head. “Fools. But tell me, has anyone taken them up on their offer?”

She snorts a laugh. “Not a single one. I think people are sitting back and waiting to see how this all shakes out.” Her tone turns somber, angry even. “Poor David and Laverne haven’t been dead two weeks and these Santivasci people are already prowling around like hyenas. They should be ashamed of themselves. On top of that, they’re taking advantage of Charles, who everyone knows is a drunk, and a dunce on top of it.”

“I’ll take care of them.” I’ve put Charles out of my mind, for the most part, but now he’s back. I have to handle him, and I have to do it soon before he digs himself in even deeper. Usually, I’d let a guy like him twist in the wind, but I can tell Vivian still has a soft spot for him. That’s how she is—kind to a fault. I can’t let him go down in flames, not if it means she might get hurt. “First, set a meeting with Charles sometime

later this week at the office.” I may need to save him from himself, but that doesn’t mean I want him anywhere near my Vivian. “Free up some money so I can make him an offer.”

“You’re paying him off?”

“I might. Depends on what he’s really after.” I drum my fingers on the desk. “When I talked to him, he sounded hungry for responsibility. He wants to run the businesses, even though he doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. But if I can flash some money in his face to get him to cool it, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“And what if that doesn’t work? If he’s hungry like you said, a little money won’t be enough for him to stop whatever foolishness he’s gotten himself into.”

“Then I’ll have to get creative.” I don’t have an answer to her question. Not yet. I need to feel Charles out more before I can solve the problem that he represents.

“All right. I’ll get to work on the boarding school research.”

“Good. Let me know when—”

“One more thing.” Her tone turns sharp.

“All right.”

“I need to know you’re treating Vivian well. I’d hate to think I’m over here sitting on my hands while you’re doing something ... something ...”

“Something?” I grin as Vivian walks in, and I pat my lap for her to have a seat.

She looks at the phone, her brows drawing together in question.

“Something scandalous,” Linn finally finishes.

“Linn!” Vivian yells, then claps her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, hello dear!” Linn’s voice turns smooth and sweet again.

“I didn’t realize you were in the room.”

“I just walked in. I’d know your voice anywhere. I think I’ve talked to you more times than my parents. They were always

out when I'd call, but you were so nice to me."

"You always were such a sweet girl. I look forward to seeing you in the office soon. Will you be visiting more now that you aren't at school?"

Vivian looks at me as I pull her against my chest.

"Yes, Linn. You'll be seeing much more of Vivian. In fact, I don't know if I can come to the office without her." I slide my hand up her thigh.

She wriggles in my lap. "I don't see myself as an office-type person, but I guess I'll do what I must."

I kiss her cheek. "You'll do whatever the hell you want. Nothing more, nothing less."

She smiles big, and I swear I feel my heart grow a few sizes at the knowledge that I've made her happy.

"Well." Linn lets out a breath. "You sound happier than I've ever heard you."

Vivian cups my face and kisses me softly. "I am, Linn. I really am."



## VIVIAN

“*I* don’t wanna.” I cover my head with the blankets, making Griff laugh. “Stop laughing. It’s too early for laughter.” He pulls the blanket back down off my naked body before plucking me from the bed.

“I told you we had to get up early. Maybe next time you’ll go to bed when I tell you to.” He tosses me over his shoulder, and my hair falls into my face so I can’t see anything. The man makes me feel like a tiny doll when he manhandles me. It should be annoying, but like most things when it comes to my Griff, it only turns me on.

“Maybe next time you’ll go to bed early.” I mimic his words but in a child’s whiny voice.

“Ahh!” I scream when he smacks my booty. “You’ll pay for that.” I smack his ass right back.

“Name the price. I’ll pay anything for you,” he responds before putting me back onto my feet inside the shower.

“If you want me to go to bed at a decent time then don’t cuddle me while you’re all naked. What did you think was going to happen?” I say, tartly folding my hands over my chest. His eyes drop to my boobs.

“We’re going to be late,” he grumbles before he flips on the shower.

“Why are we going to be late?” I ask. Wait, where are we even going?

Griff never wakes me up all early. Unless it's to give me pleasure, but then I fall back asleep. I usually crawl out of bed whenever I feel like it. I normally get to sleep as late as I want. I'm a bit spoiled.

"You're why we're going to be late." He makes another grab for me. This time he pins me to the shower wall and has his way with me. I have no clue how long we're in the shower, but I don't care. I come out not only squeaky clean, but my mood is now chipper from the two orgasms he gave me. "Get dressed, love. We're going to the office."

"Oh! Really?"

"I need to go in, and I know if I don't take you with me, I'll end up getting little done and coming back home."

"Cause you'll miss me?" I sing-song.

"Always." He plants a long, hard kiss on my mouth.

"Good, cause I'd miss you too," I admit before I dart into the closet to find something to wear. I settled on a summer dress that's a petal pink and a pair of simple white sneakers. "This okay?" I ask when I exit the closet. Griff is in his typical suit.

His eyes drop to my legs.

"What? You don't like it?" I glance down at it. A second later Griff is in front of me, his finger under my chin to lift my head. He uses his thumb to pull my bottom lip out from between my teeth.

"You're beautiful. I'm just a jealous bastard who was thinking about how many men might get to see your legs today."

"Really?" I probably shouldn't be beaming up at him while he's all grumpy, but I can't help it.

"Yes, really," he grumbles, making me laugh.

"Well, it doesn't matter because I'm yours."

"Don't forget it either." He pulls me into him, giving my ass a squeeze. "You want to make breakfast or we can order something when we get to the office."

"Order. I'm excited to see it."



“You’ve never seen it before? Not even once?” he asks as I grab my purse, making sure my phone and Kindle are inside. I try not to go anywhere without those essential things.

“No. Maybe I would have met you sooner if I had.” I wrap my arms around his arm as he heads out of the house. I can sense his anger as we get into the car.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just hate how they shoved you off into boarding school. I was right there. I should have noticed.”

“Griff.” I crawl into his lap.

“Seatbelt.” He tries to protest, but I win out.

“I wasn’t your responsibility—besides, you’re making it up to me. I’ve never felt so loved.” I run my fingers through his short hair. “We’ll be different with our kids one day.” I feel him stiffen for a moment.

I rest my head on his shoulder, wondering if maybe he doesn’t want kids. He’d gotten a strange look on his face when he saw me holding baby Phoenix. I really hope that’s not the case. Each day that passes and as I settle in at Griff’s home it becomes clearer to me what I want, and it’s a family. One that is close. One that is normal. I should probably bring up the idea of maybe one baby and not tell him about how I might have been thinking about a whole bunch of them.

When we make it to his office, he shows me around. People openly gape at us. You’d think they’d never seen Griff before with all the staring that they’re doing.

“Why are they all staring at you?” I ask him when we make it to his office and close the door.

“They aren’t used to seeing me with someone.” He lifts our hands. Our fingers are tangled together, and he kisses the back of mine.

“Oh, I thought I was going to have to claw some of those other girls’ eyes out.”

“Did one of them bother you? Tell me which one it was.”

“I’m joking!” I rush to say. Okay, I’m not totally joking. It had crossed my mind a few times. I don’t love that other girls might be staring at him, but I get it’s probably because of me. I don’t want him to go fire anyone, because based on the look he’s currently wearing, that’s exactly what he’s about to do.

“All right, I’ve got a meeting in the conference room. Will you be okay in here by yourself until I’m done?”

“Yep.” I skip over to the sofa in his office and drop onto it. I pull out my phone and Kindle. He follows me over, bending down and laying a kiss on my mouth.

“I might be a few hours. If you need anything, Linn will get it for you.” He checks his watch. “She’ll be here in a bit. She had a few things to handle this morning.”

“Okay.”

“You can come get me too if you—”

“Griff, I’m fine.” I fight a laugh because he’s being adorable. He lays another kiss on me before he leaves his office but not before giving me one last long look.

I read for a bit before my phone goes off with a text from my brother. I texted him last night, but he hadn’t responded.

**Charles:** You’re at the office?

Someone must have told him. It’s possible he works here. He always worked for my parents, but I never actually knew what he did. That’s what I want to change. I’m hoping we can have a real relationship.

**Me:** Yeah, you should come by!

**Charles:** Meet me out front.

**Me:** You’re here?

**Charles:** Come down.

I stand, making my way out of Griff’s office and back down the elevator. When I step outside, I glance around, but I don’t see Charles anywhere.

**Me:** I don’t see you.

“Walk,” a deep voice says moments before a hand grips my arm. I start to jerk away but realize it’s Charles.

“Hey.” I try to turn to hug him, but I can’t ‘cause he’s pulling me along. “That hurts.” I try to pull my arm away, but he doesn’t let go.

“Calm down. Trust me.” He keeps pulling.

“What are you doing?”

“Griff kidnapped you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s been using you.”

“Stop it, Charles.” I try harder to pull out of his hold.

“Vivian, listen to me. He’s been using you to get control of our family money. I’ll show you everything, but we have to get out of here.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Let go,” I hiss at him as emotions start to overwhelm me.

“Why do you think he doesn’t let me near you? I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I texted you yesterday with my new number. Why didn’t you say something then?”

“Because he would have tried to trick you.” When we get to the road, he finally stops walking. A van pulls up, and the door slides open. I try to back away from it, but I stumble, and Charles shoves me toward it.

“Stop, Charles!”

“Trust me. This is for your own good. I promise.” A man inside the van grabs me, pulling me inside. I try to kick and fight free, but it’s useless. I feel a small prick in my arm seconds before my vision begins to blur. I scream as loud as I can, but my greatest fear comes for me. Darkness takes over.



## GRIFFIN

“*T*he merger isn’t something you can refuse.” I twirl my pen between my fingers, my thoughts going back to Vivian despite the cutthroat business going on in this room. “Without the assets I’m offering, your company goes belly up.”

“There’s no reason for my company to suffer just because I refuse your terms,” Mr. Telfair snarls on the other end of the conference call. “I’ll still have clients, plenty of them.”

“Not when I tell them you’ve been cooking your books. What will they do when they find out that last year was a bust and this year is shaping up to be another one? No one will want to do business with you then.”

“My books are fine!” he bellows.

I sigh, tired of his bloviating. “Listen Telfair, either you agree to the merger for the benefit of everyone on this call or I’ll sink you. It’s as simple as that.”

He grumbles, spewing curses in Greek as his voice rises to a fever pitch. Then he slows down and settles. When he finally goes silent, I tap my fingers on the table.

Linn enters the room silently, a large file in her arms.

“If we do this deal, then I need your assurances that *you* will manage my personal portfolio from here on out.”

“I’m not an investment advisor, Mr. Telfair.”

“I know what you are!” he yells, then calms himself again. “I know what you can do with money. If you want me to roll over on this deal, then I want you to agree to take me on as one of your top tier clients.”

I sit back. In all honesty, Telfair isn't asking a lot. Not really. I handle only a select few clients, and adding one more wouldn't be a burden.

“If this is what you want, I should warn you, Telfair. You give me the accounts and the money, and I make the decisions. I don't consult with you, and I certainly don't explain myself to you. Either you trust me or you don't—much the same as in any other business arrangement. That's the only way this works.”

“Done.” He sounds relieved. “I'll push the merger through at the next board meeting. You have my word.”

I end the call. That's all I needed.

Linn gives me a direct look, one I know well. She finished with her research.

“Out,” I bark at the executives still lingering in the board room.

They scurry like rats fleeing a sinking ship. Good. Instilling fear in my employees is one of my favorite tasks.

Once the door closes, Linn takes a seat beside me and spreads out her file. “I've gotten all the details on the boarding school. It's a purely private institution, no religious affiliation, and its tuition has been rising faster than the state average while the student/teacher ratio has been steadily getting worse. They've also cut a great deal of extracurriculars, and lately they've lost their reputation as being a breeding ground for Ivy League candidates.”

“A school in decline.” I smirk. “If only there wasn't someone who wanted to buy it and fucking raze it to the ground.”

“Not so fast.” She points to a report on the top of her stack. “It's run by a family called the Cankertons. It's supposed to be primarily funded from their family endowment and tuition. However, their endowment ran dry at least a decade ago, though they never tell anyone that. But the numbers bear it

out. Now, they're simply using the place as a piggy bank to fund their lavish lifestyle. They have zero interest in the school or its students."

"Ah. That will make this more difficult." I hate dealing with trust fund assholes, and these people sound like they fit that bill to a T.

"The family member with the controlling interest, Edgar Cankerton, is the one we'll be dealing with. He's known for running up huge gambling debts."

"Does he pay them off with tuition hikes?" I ask.

"You've got it." She taps another page. "He's running the place into the ground."

"Good to know. Get me a file just on him, then set a meeting. I want to own that festering shithole before the week is out."

"Will do." She stands and gathers her materials.

I help her to the door. "I think I've cleared my schedule for the day. The merger is going through, and I don't have another meeting until the morning."

"Already missing Vivian, are you?" She waggles her brows.

"I won't have to miss her for long. She's waiting for me in my office."

"No, she's out and about somewhere." She shakes her head. "I didn't see her. I checked in there for you when I arrived. Your office was empty, though I did see her Kindle and her phone."

My stomach does a strange twist, and I hasten my steps. All the while, I counsel myself to stay calm. After all, she probably just went to the restroom. That makes total sense even if my gut doesn't believe it for a second.

"Vivian?" I push into my office. She's not there.

"You don't know where she went?" I hurry back to Linn.

"No, sir."

I move down the hallway and stop the first secretary I see. "Vivian Shelby. Have you seen her?"

She pales. “I—I—I don’t know?”

“Ugh.” I move past her and ask another, then another. No one’s seen her.

I stop at the elevators and raise my voice. “Has anyone seen Vivian Shelby?”

The entire office seems to halt, the place going silent. From a cubicle two rows over, I see a hand slowly go up.

I stride to it. “Where is she?”

A mousy woman with big glasses points to the elevator. “She left a while ago. Took the elevators to the ground floor.”

“What the fuck?” I whirl and hurry back to my office.

Grabbing her phone, I open it and look around in her email. Nothing. Then I check her texts. That’s when I see Charles’s messages. That’s when my blood goes cold. And that’s when I realize I never should’ve let my Vivian out of my sight.

“Linn!” I yell.

She’s already through my double doors. “What is it?”

“Get me the address where Charles is staying as well as the current address for Carmine Santivasci.” I hurry past her and jam my thumb on the elevator button. I have to go down and look for Vivian, even though I know she won’t be there.

Even though I know in my heart that Charles has made a big fucking mistake. If he’s taken her as I suspect, then I don’t give a fuck if he’s her brother. He’s going to suffer, and Carmine Santivasci will suffer right along with him.





## VIVIAN

*M*y entire body feels heavy. I even have to fight to open my eyes. I swear it feels like they're being weighed down. "Griff?" I mumble, wondering if I feel this way because he's lying on top of me or something. It's hard to even lift my hand, but I manage it, rubbing my eyes to see if that helps.

"Griff?" I call again as I open my eyes to find only blackness. I reach my arm out to find him. He has to be here. He wouldn't leave me in bed alone in the dark. He would have left the bathroom or closet light on for me.

My search for him comes up empty, and reality starts to settle in. This isn't my bedroom. Everything comes rushing back to me at once. Charles, the van, someone shoving a needle into my arm. I wince when I rub the spot. It's tender. But that's the least of my worries right now. I try to calm myself. I know if I allow the fear to take over, it will cripple me. I need to be strong.

I want to scream out, but it's probably not the best idea. Why would Charles abduct me? That doesn't even make any sense. I take a long, deep breath, reassuring myself I'm not in the quiet room. In fact, something about where I am feels and smells somewhat familiar.

Slowly, I slip from the bed, whacking my knee on something as I do. "Crap," I mumble. My hand searches around until I find what feels like a table with a lamp on it. I recognize it the

second my fingers brush along the base of it. I find the switch on the back and flip it on. My old bedroom fills with light.

I allow my eyes to adjust for a minute before I do anything else. I may not have spent much time here growing up, but a sense of relief fills me that I'm at least in a familiar place. I stumble into the bathroom, my head still feeling foggy, and my stomach starts to turn.

I lunge for the toilet, barely making it in time before I'm throwing up.

"Fuck, you okay?" I turn my head to see a disheveled Charles standing in the bathroom doorway.

I turn back and vomit again.

"Think it was the meds?" Charles hands me a hand towel.

I use it to wipe my mouth before I peel myself off the floor and make my way over to the sink to wash my face and brush my teeth.

"The meds you had jammed into me?" I snap when I'm done brushing my teeth. Charles gives me a bit of a sheepish look. There is no missing his bloodshot eyes. I'm not sure what the heck is going on with him, but clearly, it's not good.

"I had to get you away from him. I didn't know about the injection, though. But it doesn't matter. Griffin has brainwashed you, Vi."

"What are you talking about?" I turn to face him, folding my arms over my chest.

My stomach feels better, but honestly, I'm not sure that it's from what they gave me. My stomach had been a bit off all morning. Plus, I threw up yesterday too. I have another theory. One I'll be keeping to myself. I am, however, worried about what was given to me and how that could affect a possible baby inside of me.

"He's been using you."

"Griff?" He can't be serious.

“Yes, without you he’d be fucked.” I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from saying something I shouldn’t. Such as with me he’s fucked. Thoroughly, actually. Wow, my mind has gotten dirty. I blame that fully on Griff.

“I don’t know what you mean. Mom and Dad clearly wanted me with him.”

“They barely even knew us. How the hell could they know what’s best for us?” He shakes his head, but he does have a point.

“Griff has been good to me, Charles. In a way no one else ever has. He loves me.”

He gives me a confused look before he suddenly bursts into laughter. His laughter cuts through my heart.

“You think I’m a joke?” Tears fill my eyes, but I fight them.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Shit.” He runs his hand through his hair. “He’s a cold bastard that only loves money and power. Why do you think our parents were in business with him?”

“He loves me,” I say again. Sure, to others Griff is cold. I kind of like that about him. It’s me that gets the sweet, warm side of Griff. I love that he saves it for me alone.

“As long as he has you, he has control over my and Dad’s shares of the company. I’m guessing he knows that time is limited, so he needs you to want to stay past the guardian date. Let me guess, he’s been telling you that he loves you and wants you to stay forever?”

I nod. Charles rolls his eyes.

“Vivian, come on. You might be naïve, but people don’t fall in love within weeks.”

I’d like to tell him it didn’t take weeks. Griff and I were made for each other long before we even met. “Even if what you’re saying is true, which I don’t think it is, it doesn’t matter. I have to stay with him either way, so I don’t get what you mean. I can’t just leave.”

“You can if you get married.” He smirks as if he has it all figured out. “Griff didn’t tell you that, did he? If you marry,

the guardianship is no longer in place. Everything Mom and Dad left is then yours.”

I stand there.

“Are you listening to me? You’ll be rich!”

“But Griff is rich already.”

“So you think.”

“Let’s call him.”

My brother’s face grows serious at my suggestion. “Call him? I just got you away from him. Are you not fucking listening to me?” he shouts, his face starting to grow red.

“What’s going on?” My eyes flick past Charles to a man in a suit. “Are we doing this?”

“Give me a second,” Charles tells the man.

“I’ve been waiting long enough. You promised her to me weeks ago.”

“What is he talking about, Charles?” I look to my brother.

“Give me a minute,” he tells the man.

“Time’s up, Charles. The deal has already been made.” He pulls a gun out from behind him. I gasp as he points it our way. “We’re getting married.”

“To me?” I squeak. “The hell is happening here?”

“Unless you want me to put a few holes in your brother.” He points the gun right at Charles. “Come to me, my little bride,” he orders, giving me no choice but to go.



## GRIFFIN

“*L*et’s go.” Mrs. Putnam walks into my office, a small arsenal strapped to her body.

“You need to stay here in case she comes back.” I stride past her toward the garage.

“Not a chance.” She muscled past my men and stomps right into the garage by my side. “You wouldn’t last a second without me.”

I don’t have time to argue. Not when I have to get to Vivian.

My phone vibrates again as I jump into my SUV, Mrs. Putnam climbing into the passenger seat as two of my men jump in the back.

I check my phone. “Linn found her. She’s at her parents’ house. Charles really is a fucking dimwit.” I gun it out of the garage as four more black SUVs line up behind me. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. He might be dead by sixteen.”

“This foolish brother of hers—do you think he’d hurt her?” Mrs. Putnam strokes her pump-action shotgun like it’s a pet.

“No.” I grit my teeth and rethink my answer. After all, the idiot took her right out from under me. Maybe I’ve underestimated just how dumb he is. But is he stupid enough to harm Vivian? Surely not.

“Good. I’d hate to get blood on my hands at the moment. Vivian and I had planned to work on making a sourdough starter tonight.”

Mrs. Putnam knows exactly what to say to calm me. After all, she's confident Vivian will be back where she belongs before nightfall. I am, too. I just don't know how I'm going to handle the situation with Charles. I want him gone, but if Vivian still holds on to some spark of love for him, I ... I push that away. I'll deal with it once I know Vivian is safe.

"You know, I've been aching for bloodshed for a while now. Reminds me of the old days." Mrs. Putnam smiles wistfully as I speed onto the highway.

"When Mr. Putnam and I were young, we ran this city. Not like you do now with business and stocks and connections. We were old school." She pets her shotgun some more. "But those days are gone, Mr. Putnam, too. But, oh, the fun we had. No one stood against us for long. I got good with guns and shovels, I'll tell you that much."

I already knew Mrs. Putnam had a checkered past. It's the reason why I hired her. No one in my home would dare cross her. Same for Linn at work. Two strong women who maintain order in my separate spheres, and now I have a queen to rule over all of it. I just have to get to her. And this time, I'm making it official. Vivian will be my wife before the day is out.

I dial Linn. Her voice comes through the car speakers. "Sir?"

"Get a priest or whoever we need to do a wedding ceremony at my home tonight."

She's silent for so long I wonder if the connection was lost, then she says, "A wedding?"

"Yes. I'm marrying Vivian tonight."

Mrs. Putnam grins big.

After another pause, Linn says, "I was wondering when you'd make the right decision." I can hear the smile in her voice. "I'll get it all set up. Let me know if you need anything else." She hangs up, and I wrench the wheel to the right, making the exit toward the poshest side of town. Whereas I preferred living out in the country, David and Laverne stayed in a stately home closer to town.



“Almost there.” I make a few more turns, then stop in front of the gated Georgian mansion.

“Gaudy.” Mrs. Putnam wrinkles her nose.

“Stay here.” I open my door, then hear her open her door despite my instruction. Who am I kidding? Mrs. Putnam is out for blood. There’s no stopping her.

I motion for one of my men to ram the gate. Their SUV speeds by, crashing through the metal and screeching to a halt just inside the property. I stride past the busted SUV and right up to the front doors.

With a hard kick, I knock it in, wood splintering as the door slams against the inside wall.

Before I can get far, Charles comes running toward me, his hands up. “Don’t! What are you doing in here?”

A man follows behind him, and I can tell just from the way he stands that he has a gun in hand.

“Santivasci.” I glower. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“You should be congratulating me. It’s my wedding day.” He gives me a shit-eating grin. “Your ward is going to be my wife. And then I’m taking *everything*.” His implication is clear, and it makes my blood fucking boil.

“I think I ... I fucked up.” Charles runs a hand through his hair and glances back at Carmine, the gun still steady in his hand.

“You think?” I storm toward him.

That’s when I hear my Vivian scream. And that’s when Mrs. Putnam starts shooting.

I shove Charles down and tackle Carmine before he can get a shot off. Running on pure rage, I pin him beneath me and grab the hand holding the gun. I slam it on the marble floor again and again until he screams and the gun goes flying. Then I start on him with my fists. I haven’t done something like this since I was young, since I had to show my father that I wasn’t going to take his abuse anymore. It felt good then. It feels even better now.

“You’ll never fucking touch her!” I yell and swing, breaking his nose with a hard hit. Blood spurts onto my knuckles, but I don’t stop. I can’t, not when he’s trying to hurt my Vivian. “You don’t deserve to breathe the same goddamn air!” I keep swinging as Santivasci’s men fall ahead of me, all of them riddled with buckshot from Mrs. Putnam’s shotgun.

When Carmine stops moving, I finally sit back and take a breath. After that, I’m on my feet and rushing deeper into the house.

“Vivian!” I bellow like a wounded animal.

She comes running from a back room, her face pale, but her eyes light up when she sees me. “Griff!” I catch her in my arms and hold her tight.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I run my hands down her, searching for anything amiss.

“No, I’m okay.” She pulls back and puts a hand to my face. “But you’re bloody! Oh God, Griff. You’re bleeding!”

I shake my head. “Not mine.” That’s all I can get out before I claim her mouth, kissing her hard and leaving my mark. She’s mine. No one will *ever* fucking take her from me.

I’m making her my wife tonight. And after that, we’ll live our forever together. Always.

# EPILOGUE

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## VIVIAN

*Many years later*

“Can we blame this on the alcohol?” Mariana whispers from beside me as she takes another sip of her wine.

“Oh yes. Let’s do that.” Amelia nods like this is the best idea we’ve ever come up with. I fight a laugh but lose out. All the other women turn to glare back at us. The instructor even stops speaking and shoots a glare at the three of us too.

These people are really taking this wine and paint party thing super seriously. This is supposed to be fun. An easy night out to have some girl time together. I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be the second we’d stepped into the art studio. It was as if I was being jerked right back to boarding school, but instead of judgy teenage girls, the place is filled with judgy grown women. They’ve been turning their noses up at us from the second we got here.

Sure, we might be a bit loud. That part we can definitely blame on the alcohol. We started with a few glasses of champagne at the spa before we arrived here. But honestly, I don’t think that’s why they turned their noses up at us. Every one of them has been throwing back wine at the same pace as we have. I’m guessing their reaction to us is because the three of us often don’t look like we belong.

While they’re all dolled up in Chanel and Balenciaga sweaters, we’re rocking tops with kittens on them. I’m sure they’re all wondering how we can even afford to be here. This isn’t some typical painting party. It’s supposed to be all fancy or

something. With overpriced wine and finger foods covered in caviar. I'd prefer it if they had chicken fingers or mozzarella sticks instead. Food that people actually want to eat.

This is what happens when the husbands say they want to treat us to a girls' day out. I mean, the spa was awesome, but then again, there it was only the three of us. I think they booked out the whole facility or something. They also made sure there were only females on staff.

I'd be willing to bet that the three of them were all googling ideas for a girls' day out and a paint party was at the top of the searches. Of course they chose the most expensive one, and I know without a doubt that they'd made sure the class was female only as well.

To be honest, I don't really care what any of these women think of me. This is the first time in a long time that one of us isn't pregnant. We came out to have a good time. That's not going to be happening here. Not only because of the judgmental women, but we suck at this whole painting thing.

While everyone else has been painting the sunset and following after the instructor, we'd gotten the bright idea to paint our cats. I did not do Mama any justice in my picture.

"So...." I trail off, glancing back and forth at the two of them.

"Yes." They both speak at the same time.

When I first met Amelia and Mariana, I was sure they'd been lifelong friends. I loved them both, but I didn't think I'd ever fully fit in with them. I thought I'd always be the third wheel to their little duet. They could have whole conversations without even talking. But I'd been so wrong.

Their friendship was fairly new back then. They'd met each other when they'd met their husbands. That was a whole crazy sweet story within itself.

Amelia and Mariana just clicked, making it seem like they've been friends their whole lives. That too sounded as crazy to me as their love stories with their men until I hung out with them more. Before I knew it, I was clicking with them too. Within weeks, it was like we'd all known each other our entire

lives. I fit in perfectly with them. Now all of us can have unspoken conversations together.

I know their yes response to me saying the word *so* means we're about to make a break for it. Out the back door, of course. We have to get a head start on those husbands of ours. It won't be long until they figure out that we decided to ditch this place and go somewhere a little more fun.

I mean, this is fun but not exactly what we were looking for. We want to cut loose a bit. Even more than that, though, we love to give our hubbies a run for their money. We're going to be in so much trouble, and we'll enjoy every yummy second of it.

We all grab our wines, throwing them back before we start to think of an exit strategy.

What can we say that will send everyone into a panic so we can slip out? It suddenly hits me. I know what would send me into freakout mode.

"Spider!" I shout and almost burst into laughter when Amelia and Mariana scream it at the same time.

All the other girls let out screams, jumping up from their chairs. We do the same. Amelia grabs my arm, and I latch on to Mariana's as we make a break for the door in the back of the classroom, slipping out unnoticed by the other girls.

"Did we all say spider at the same time?" Mariana asks through her laughter as we search for an exit that will take us outside that's not in the front of the building. I'm sure our men are sitting out there even now.

"Great minds think alike," Amelia quips.

"This is true," I agree. "Now where are we going?"

"I think I saw a bar down the street," Mariana suggests.

"How far down?" I ask, stopping when we get to a side exit door. It has one of those alarms on it that will sound when you open it.

"A few blocks. I think. We might not even make it in the door," Mariana says. Yeah, it's not going to take them long to

realize we're not in the event building any longer. I know Griff always has me lowjacked, and I'm sure Mariana and Amelia are too.

"I guess we'll just have to run," I suggest, wiggling my eyebrows.

"Let's do it!"

"I'm in!"

They both squeal at the same time in excitement.

"All right," I agree, putting my hand on the door so we can push through fast so the alarm doesn't go off for long. Hopefully the husbands won't hear it. "Go!" I shout as I push the door open, and we go racing out. "Ahh!" I let out another scream when a thick arm snags me around my waist.

I know it's Griff instantly, because a rush of heat shoots straight between my thighs. I hear the other girls giggling as Griff tosses me over his shoulder.

"You're in trouble," he growls, his hand coming down on my ass. I let out a small scream of surprise. "You're not pregnant either." He smacks my ass again. "I can do whatever I want to this body."

"Oh crap." I hadn't thought this all the way through. I'm so getting tied to the bed tonight.

"Oh my."

"Who is that?"

"He's hot. Who's the lucky girl that snagged him?"

I lift my head, pushing my hair out of my face to see who is talking as Griff keeps on walking with me draped over his shoulder. I spot some of the women that had been in the class with us. Those judgy jerks are all ogling my man. I may not have cared when they were looking at us earlier, but this I won't tolerate.

"What are all of you looking at? That's my husband!" I snap at them. Their eyes go wide.

"Is that one of the kitten girls?" one of them asks.

“Yep!” I childishly stick my tongue out at them. There, I showed them. Griff’s body gives one small shake, and I know he’s fighting laughter. “Look somewhere else, or I’ll scratch your eyes out!” I hiss at them.

“Calm down, kitten. I’m all yours.” Griff pulls me back down from off his shoulder as he puts me into the back of the car, slipping in behind me. The second the door is closed, the driver takes off. Griff pulls me into his lap. “Where did my wife think she was running off to?”

“Clearly I was running to you,” I say tartly. “What? You caught me. So I ran right into you.”

“We’re lying now? You really want to be punished tonight.” I wiggle in his lap, unable to help myself.

“Maybe a little bit.” I lick my lips. Griff fists a handful of my hair, tilting my head back. His mouth brushes against mine. Excitement bubbles up inside of me. I’ve got him all worked up, and we have no kids for the night.

Mrs. Putnam is looking after them. She could handle all three of my boys with her eyes closed and one hand behind her back if she needed to. I don’t know what I’d do without her sometimes. She’s filled the hole I had in my heart for a parent and given our boys a grandmother too.

My brother is even hanging out with them. Griff ended up getting him the help he needed, and he’s been sober ever since. We both handled how our parents treated us differently. Charles turned to alcohol to fill the void. Which led him down a path to trouble. But now, thanks to Griff, we’re a motley little family that I couldn’t love more if I tried.

“Then I shall take my wife home and give her what she needs,” he says before claiming my mouth in a deep kiss. Griff always gives me what I need.



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## ALSO BY MINK

### Rebel Tempts the Beast

As one of the biggest players in the Yakuza, I do my duty and rule my syndicate with a hard but fair fist. I follow my own rules and adhere to my own sense of duty.

Until Mei.

When my mentor sends his daughter to live with me and instructs me to put her on the correct path, I try to use a strong hand to guide her. But that hand tends to gravitate to her rear end, especially when Mei runs her smart mouth. She's young, fiery, and looking for love.

Though I follow strict rules and enforce them in my life, Mei bucks them with ease. She's a little rebel, one I never want to break. In fact, I fall for her just the way she is. She's the one I never saw coming, and the one I can't live without.

When an enemy sees an opening and tries to use her against me, I'll burn his lineage to the ground and salt the earth behind me. For Mei. For our future. For our family.

### Treasured

He's an art thief. She's a mafia man's daughter. She's also kinda clumsy ... With broken ancient vases and a grumpy hero turned mushy for his woman, these two are a perfect match.

### Christmas Crush & Christmas Grump

This Christmas in Reindeer Valley is sure to steam up your Kindle. A second chance romance plus a grumpy/sunshine romance all set in the same small town? Sign me up!

### Married to My Stalker

I've watched her every move from the moment I first saw her. She was irresistible. Still is. Quinn is the one I never saw coming. She's so trusting—running into my arms as soon as I get home. Now she's my wife, and I haven't stopped watching her. I can't. My line of work makes it dangerous to be involved with me, much less married to me.

But she doesn't know that part of my life, and I never intend to show her my ugly side. The problem is, no matter how carefully I treat her, my dark side tries to come out. It's not enough to watch her anymore. I have to control her, to put my hands on her, to make her whimper and call my name.

I stop myself. At least, I try to. Until she pushes for more. More of me, more of the darkness that I've been concealing from her. It's like she wants all of me, not just the parts I've let her see.

When danger comes knocking at our door, I can't hide my true self any longer. But when she sees what I'm capable of, will she still run into my open arms?

MINK's Note: Get your kitty and your cocoa for this sweet tale of unconditional love.

### Plump

My city is at peace, the war between the bosses put to rest. I'm on top, but I still have to keep my eyes open for trouble. Trouble comes in the form of a runaway who takes a job dancing at my club. Thing is, she isn't meant for the stage.

Diamond is meant *just* for me. She's got curves I want to sink my teeth into, and she's as innocent as she is sexy.

I love that about her, but I hate the men in her life who told her she wasn't beautiful, who told her she wasn't the right size or the right shape. **Everything** about my Diamond is perfect, and I'll spend the rest of my life proving it to her.

When I find out who she really is, that's when things get even more dangerous. But it doesn't matter, because Diamond is all mine. I'll go to war for her, and I'll happily destroy anyone who tries to take her from me—even her own father.

#### Obsessed Love

He's fresh out of prison. She pulls him over. So, naturally, he puts her in his trunk and takes her home to make her the queen of his illegal empire. Nice.

#### Crazy Love

He has a screw loose because of a head injury a while back. But he still knows his true love when he sees her. If only her mouthy cat—whom he can hear—would stop distracting him with all its sassy comebacks!

#### Claiming His Kitten

He wants her father's fortune and will go to any lengths to steal it out from under her. But, let's be honest, he's kidding himself. What he really wants is *her*.

#### Vetting His Kitten

A bad man who goes all warm and cuddly for his one true love. Gaaaahhhh, I love this one!

#### Wrecked

He knows how to fight, but can he learn to protect the one woman who's ever made him feel hope?

#### Nanny Tempts the Beast

She needs a job. He needs a nanny. And then he needs only *her*.

#### Unforgettable

Amnesia romance with a sassy kitty and a tantalizing mystery? What's more MINK than that?

#### Bodyguard's Obsession

He's supposed to protect her, but he ends up needing to stay *very* close to her. For, ya know, *safety*. \*wink wink\*

#### His Clever Kitten

She takes him hostage to save her kitty cat shop. It just so happens he's a mafia boss who'll do anything to stay locked up tight just for her.

#### His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when he can't keep his eyes off his client.

#### 119 Kitty Lane

*MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.*

#### Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of Christmas cheer.

**Taming His Bride**

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

**Stealing His Bride**

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

**Claiming His Bride**

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

**Knocking Up His Bride**

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

**Under His Spell**

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right reasons.

**Beauty Tempts the Beast**

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

**Loan Shark's Obsession**

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

**His Stolen Bride**

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

**His Stolen Princess**

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

**Stalking Her Sweetly**

Who's stalking whom?

**Hitman's Heart**

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

**His Secret Treasure**

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

**My Hero's Secret Baby**

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

**His Tiger Queen**

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

**His Virgin Heiress**

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

**Cuffed Love**

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

**Stuffed**

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

**His Sweetest Sin**

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

**Locking Her Down**

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

**Marco's Girl**

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

**Pop-up Love**

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

**Beauty and the Boss**

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

**His Virgin Queen**

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

**His Deadly Darling**

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

**Hitman's Prey**

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

**Snow Angel**

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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