



SWEETEST
Secret

LUCY DARLING

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Emily

Being the sweet, popular girl next door with a family name everyone knows isn't always what it's cracked up to be. In fact, I'm starting to crumble under the pressure of the facade. I tried to be perfect. I tried to be what I thought everyone wanted, but in the end it only left me lonely. They think they know me. They think they see me, but no one really does. The one person I thought did—my brother's best friend—walked away in the end. I shouldn't be surprised. I always seem to be left alone.

Chase

She thinks I don't see her, when all I've ever seen is her. Her forced smiles and laughter are slowly driving me insane as I bide my time. I want to make them real. I want my girl back. I don't care what bridges I have to burn to have her. I'll spend my life proving to her I'm never going anywhere. That I'm the one person she can always count on. In the end, I'll win, and she will be mine.

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“Friendships between women, as any woman will tell you, are built of a thousand small kindnesses ... swapped back and forth and over again,”

Michelle Obama, Becoming

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This is not good. I'm barely hanging on to my control by a thin thread, and now I'm sitting next to the very person that would try to bust my face in if he knew about this thread I'm hanging by to begin with. It's been this way for a while, but I'm going to snap. I'm so close yet so far from getting what I've been waiting for.

It's been easy to hide my truth from Asher with him on the other side of the world, but now he's back, and I don't think he'll be going anywhere soon. When he landed back in the States from Japan, he said he was going to be in and out as quickly as possible. It's only a matter of time before I snap, and there is a big chance that is going to happen right in front of him.

What's the cause of my loss of self-control, you ask? It's none other than my best friend's little sister. I know. It doesn't get any more fucking cliché than that. I've wanted her for longer than I'm willing to admit even to myself.

There has always been something that has drawn me to her. A protectiveness that has changed over the years. Asher has even at times asked me to keep an eye on her. He travels a lot. I do some but nowhere near the level he does. I'm not the one running from home. I rather enjoy being right where I am, but then again, I have a functional, loving family. The same can't be said for Asher.

At least today he and I are both on the same page about this party that he's barreling down the highway to get to. We're both going for two very different reasons. He thinks I'm there for backup, which is bullshit. Asher doesn't need backup with a bunch of high school punks, but there was no way I wasn't going. I know he's not going to look for his sister. He thinks Emily is fine and can take care of herself.

No, he's pissed that his new stepsister is at the party. One that a few days ago he was sure he was going to hate. Too bad that plan went to hell the moment he laid eyes on her. I'm not the only one with secrets around here.

Asher spent the last hour in my condo confessing to his dirty little sins that included a bit of blackmail. Hell, I thought I knew Asher better than anyone, but I did not see this one coming, and I've seen his new stepsister Molly a few times now. Only in passing when I'd dropped into talk business with Tomas Score while Asher has been away.

Asher's father and mine have been close and often work on deals together, and now Asher and I are about to embark on a new business venture. I've been over to the Score Family Estate a handful of times just in the last month to meet with Tomas, Asher's father, to discuss building a home for his new wife. It's what my family, the Silversteins, are known for. There isn't anything we can't build.

Asher has been hell-bent on hating his new stepmom, Grace, but she's sweet, and I've heard her daughter is too. Honestly, I'd never given Molly a second glance, but then again, Emily has always held my attention. Anytime I'm in the Score home, I'm trying to steal glances of her when she is there.

Molly is quiet and tends to blend into the background. I often forget she's in the room, and I think the girl prefers it that way. From what I've heard she doesn't think she belongs. It's understandable. Her mother was a nurse that busted her ass to afford their small apartment, and now she lives on the Score family estate, which is bigger than some small cities. I'm sure it's a bit overwhelming for her.

This girl I've barely noticed is the very reason I think Asher's life is about to change in ways he doesn't understand. I do, because I've been where he is for a while.

For Asher's whole life, he couldn't stand most women. He puts everything into his work. Not that I can blame the man. His mother is one fucked-up bitch, and that's not something I'd easily call someone. My own mom would kill me if she ever heard me utter those words about a female.

Asher's mother is what the word was made for. Some people have daddy issues, but I think Asher's mom Heidi gave him mommy issues. It's why he keeps all females at arm's length. Until now, it seems. If I had to guess, Molly is avoiding him at all costs, and it's driving him insane. He's gone from hiding from women that often throw themselves at him because of his last name to now chasing one. I'd laugh, but I don't need karma kicking me in the face right now.

"Are you just going to storm in there and toss her over your shoulder and storm back out?" I ask, giving my seatbelt a small tug to make sure it's on tight with how fast he's driving. Which I'm not complaining about; I'm actually thankful for it. I want to get there as quickly as we can.

Emily has turned into a social butterfly over the past few years, but I wasn't aware she'd been hitting the party scene. The girl is in every damn school club, and let's not forget cheerleading. That shit is torture.

There have been a few parties here and there, but they've been at family homes I knew and that had tight security. As in, I knew the security teams personally. Now the McDonald brothers are a different story. I went to school with a few of the older ones. They're all pieces of work, and Emily knows that, but still she's there. I know it's the end of the year blowout for the seniors. Graduation is days away, but I still don't like it. Not one fucking bit.

My phone goes off, and I already know who it is. It's Jericho giving me an alert on Emily. One I already know because she told her brother she was going to the party before she left the house. Irritation still fills me, but I know Jericho isn't a

fucking psychic. I just hate not knowing what she's doing. I have to hear it secondhand. It hadn't always been that way.

Once upon a time, Emily hung on to my every word. Then I went and fucked it up. What choice did I have? To this day, I still question what I did, but now all I can try to do is prove to her that things have changed.

Asher pulls straight up to the McDonald mansion, not caring that he's blocking in a ton of cars. He doesn't plan to be here long. That makes two of us.

The wait is over. Tick tock, Emily. Time's up. I don't care if her brother is my best friend. She may be his sister, but she's going to be mine.

I'm pretty sure I had one or two drinks too many at this point. I told myself I was celebrating graduation, but the reality is I'm in a shit mood. When my stepsister Molly said she was down to go to the McDonald party, I thought what the hell. I needed to get out of the house.

Molly is sweet, and we've slowly gotten closer. It's been hard with my schedule. I keep myself busy, and she tends to be shy. I get the sense she tries to stay out of the way. As for me, the busier I am, the less time I have to think. Forget idle hands; it's idle minds that will eat you alive.

My mood went south when I overheard my brother on the phone with his best friend Chase. I'm guessing they're hanging out and doing God knows what. They always hang out when my brother is in town. I never hear what they are up to, but a lot of men in this world are good at hiding their night lives. Some even carry NDAs on them in their back pockets. It's insane and fucked up.

When I was younger, they'd always let me tag along. Asher was never one to shy away from having his little sister around. In fact, I think he went out of his way to take me with him if it meant getting me out of the house and away from our mother. He's always been a good brother, but ever since our mother up and left, he's been around a lot less. I guess he thinks I don't need that protection anymore. Now he's been keeping his butt in Japan since Dad remarried.

He's being a dumbass about it. If he spent a few hours with Grace, he'd know that woman is not a gold digger and she and Dad are madly in love. So much at times I find myself jealous of it. It reminds me of how Chase's parents are. I always loved hanging out at the Silverstein home when I was younger. It was nice to see how a normal family functioned. I always took comfort in their normalcy.

His parents are the cookie cutter perfect parents. Julie, Chase's mom, always went out of her way to spend time with me. She taught me to cook and a million other things whenever I'd go over there with my brother when I was younger. She'd always tell me I was the daughter she never had. Chase is an only child. Not that his parents hadn't tried. They always call him their miracle baby.

Then Chase went and broke my heart. I hadn't only lost him that day I'd made my little confession to him—okay, maybe it wasn't little—but I'd lost his parents too. His mom meant so much to me. She was the mom I never had. Isn't that life, though? If I've learned anything, it's that everyone comes and goes. No one truly stays.

I mean, I know I have my father and brother, but Dad is now madly in love, and I want that for him. Asher avoids the family home as much as he possibly can. I keep busy so they don't worry over me, but somehow for being a person with a million friends and being involved in every school club and function actually possible, I've never been lonelier.

Even now I'm on a dance floor outside by the pool, the party is in full swing with people surrounding me, and there is still an emptiness inside of me that I can never fill. I know everyone here. I bet most, if not all, would call me a friend, but do any of them really know me?

The music changes to a softer song. I close my eyes and let my body sway. I couldn't get Molly into the pool or on the dance floor. I think when I mentioned dancing, she made up using the bathroom as an escape. She's mostly kept to herself since she came to Bradford Prep for her senior year. I don't think she had the time to really form bonds, or maybe it's more she didn't want to make friends.

“Emily!” My eyes fly open at the sound of my brother’s voice. I spin around to see him standing there with a pissed-off expression on his face.

“What?” I notice Chase standing behind him. If I thought my brother’s face looked pissed, then Chase’s is livid. Why are either of them here?

“Where is Molly?” Asher growls.

“She went to the bathroom.” I point up the stone walkway to the house that leads to the bottom level where part of the party has moved.

“Are you drunk?” Chase asks with an odd tone to his voice.

“Seriously?” my brother grits out.

“Go get Molly. I’ve got Emily,” Chase tells Asher, who is already taking off in the direction that Molly went.

“Got me? No, I don’t think so. But you could get me another drink.” I smirk.

“You’re in a bikini.” Chase points out the obvious.

“Yeah, it’s a pool party. How is it you run a billion-dollar company?” He ignores my jab.

“This your shit?” He points to a lounge chair. He doesn’t wait for a response before he’s grabbing up all my crap.

“The hell?! I’m not going anywhere. I’m dancing.”

“You motherfucker. Back up three feet.” He glares at someone over my shoulder. I glance to see Kevin standing there. He backs up five feet.

“I’m still staying,” I fire back. Why does he give a shit who is dancing with me? I’m a single girl.

“Fine.” He sits down on the lounge chair and stares at me. Tonight, he’s dressed down in jeans and a simple black shirt. You never know what you might get with him. Sometimes he’ll be coming from a job site and be covered in dirt with ripped jeans and boots, and others he’ll be in a custom suit.

Either way, he always looks hot as hell. Not only that, he's charming. At least he's the charming one between him and my brother, which I suppose isn't too hard. While Asher avoids small talk, Chase will engage with people.

"Is that Chase Silverstein?"

"Oh my God, it is." I roll my eyes as four girls start to surround him. Here we go. I brace myself for what I know is going to be them flirting and throwing themselves at him.

Of course, they know who he is. The Silverstein family is well known at Bradford Prep. They put in a new library for the school three years ago, and then they built a whole extra gym that was supplied with a ton of mats and equipment.

That was nice because it gave us a place to practice for cheerleading. A lot of times we'd have to find random spots, and they weren't always safe, such as the grassed-off part of the courtyard. The school might be called Bradford Prep, but the Silverstein family name is mounted on plaques throughout it.

As I watch the girls descend upon him, I change my mind. I think it might be time to leave. What might be worse than hearing Chase tell me that I was too young for him would be to see him actually show interest in someone who is my age. Then I'd know he was full of shit. Not that I don't think he is, but *more* full of it.

"Can I have my bag?" I wiggle through the circle of girls that have surrounded him and slip my sandals on.

"No."

"I need my purse so I can call for a ride." I drove, but since I've had a few drinks I'll leave my car overnight.

"I rode with Asher. I'll drive your car. I saw it parked out front. Where is whatever you wore over that?" He makes an annoyed face as he motions to my swimsuit.

"Maybe I came this way."

"You want to play, little girl?" He starts to pull his shirt off, and I know he's going to put it on me. I grab it to stop him. I

don't need all the girls fainting looking at him with no shirt.

"It's in my bag, and don't call me that," I grit out. I hate when he calls me a little girl. We both know why he does it: to remind me that I'm just some little girl while he's a man who would only ever want a woman. Each time he says it to me, it reminds me of the way he hurt me.

He reaches into my bag and pulls my dress out. "Don't you know that you don't go into girls' purses? It's a well-known rule."

"Don't have a lot of experience handling women's purses." I shake my head at him but put my flowy blue dress back on.

Blue, Chase's favorite color. I know because he once told me. A dark blue. The same as my eyes. He hadn't said that last part, but when I was a little girl, I told myself he loved blue because of my eyes. They aren't solid blue. They fade from light to dark. I got them from my mother. I actually got a lot of my looks from her. It's bittersweet because my mom might be ugly on the inside, but she's beautiful on the outside.

"Let's go." Chase still doesn't give me my purse back. In fact, he digs in it again to find my keys before he grabs me by the arm.

"Chase, don't leave."

"Emily, introduce us," I hear a few girls from my cheer team say as I'm being pulled away.

"Let go." I try to jerk my arm from his hold.

"Not happening."

"Hey—" I stop talking when he suddenly does release his hold on my arm, but it's to grab a boy I don't recognize. He's probably from another school.

"You have a staring problem."

"Not my fault her tits are out," the boy responds. I glance down to see I do have a nice amount of cleavage showing, having tugged too hard on my dress when I pulled it over my head.

“Hope you can swim.” Chase shoves the boy who is fully dressed in khakis and a pink polo shirt backwards right into the pool. “Actually, I hope you fucking can’t.”

We don’t get the chance to find out because Chase once again has me by the arm, pulling me around the side of the house toward the front to where I parked my car. I don’t try to break his hold on me again. I should, but part of me loves it, and I’m going to soak it in even if for only this short moment because I can’t remember the last time Chase touched me.

That little shit wasn't wrong. When did Emily get those tits? She is no longer a girl, but on some level she will always be *my* girl. When we were younger, it was a protectiveness I had over her. Hell, I could be more overbearing than Asher when it came to her.

Emily spent so much time at my house when Asher and I were in high school. At first, he would ask me if he could bring her, but then after a while, he always did it without a thought. She became just as much a little sister to me. I was sure I was trying to protect Emily from her own mother, but as time went on and she grew up, things started to change.

There was a moment in time I thought something was wrong with me. Girls in high school wanted to date or fool around, but it never interested me. I thought I was so involved in making sure I was learning all the ins and outs that I might need for taking over the Silverstein business that I didn't have time for any of that.

Then there were my parents. They were the epitome of a happy, healthy relationship. They were even high school sweethearts. I never missed the glint in my mom's eyes when she said Dad would only ever belong to her.

My father could be very possessive of her, but that was her way of showing her possessiveness. I wanted to be able to give that to my wife one day. Getting a front row seat to Asher's parents' marriage, I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't going to settle for anything less than what my parents had.

Then one day, my father pulled me to the side. I think prom was coming up or something. He told me not to take a date or maybe not to go at all. Honestly, prom hadn't been on my radar. But the words he said after that stuck with me.

“The greatest things in life are often the things that we wait for. That we cultivate and let grow. We must give them room to bloom because our shadow might not give them all the light they need, son, and I promise you that you don't want to look back and not know if they fully chose you because knowing they did is the greatest gift you'll ever receive in life, and it's not one that can be bought.”

At the time, I had no fucking clue what he was talking about, but when my father spoke, I always listened. Then two days later, Emily was standing in front of me with flour still smeared on her cheek from whatever she and my mom had been baking that afternoon, and she'd asked me about prom—if I was going and with who. She never gave me a chance to respond. All she said was, “Don't break my heart.”

She was so young then, and I realized that she had this crush on me, one that I was sure would be fleeting. She was too young to know what she was talking about. I told her so. That was the last day she ever came to my family home.

Pretty sure Mom didn't talk to me for a month after that. Dad's words still didn't make sense to me at first. Until Emily started to change and grow into a woman. Then I got it. I understood more of my overbearing protective ways of her. I think on some subconscious level, I hadn't even realized I knew one day she would be mine, and it all began to make sense.

“Why do you have to ruin everything?” she mutters when I open the passenger door of her car.

“I've never stopped you from going to other parties. But the McDonalds are different. Even the father is under investigation for some shady shit. This is not the place for you.”

“Whatever.” She drops into the car with a huff. I don't know if it's the drinks she's had tonight or what, but something is off. I'm used to her cold shoulder, but this is different. There are

no smiles lighting up her face or the normal bounce to her step.

“Are you hungry?” I ask when I slip into the driver’s seat and pull out and down the street.

“Am I hungry?” she repeats.

“You’ve been drinking. Some food might do you some good. Tomorrow is a big day for your father. Don’t want you to be hungover.”

“I’m not that drunk.” She folds her arms over her chest in a defensive gesture. I hate that I make her feel as if she has to protect herself from me. Emily is always on guard when I’m around. She has those walls up as high as she can get them. I don’t respond to her. Instead, I do the one thing I shouldn’t. I drive back toward my place in the city.

It’s not until I’m parking out front of the building that she asks where the hell we are. “I’ve got her door,” I tell the bellhop before he can try to open it for her. I toss him the keys and open the door for her. She glares up at me, so I lean in and unclick her seatbelt. “You’ll get out of the car, or I’ll make a scene.”

“Make a scene?”

“Yes, make a scene. I’ll toss you over my shoulder and carry you inside.”

“You can’t do that.” Her face turns to an adorable scrunch.

“You think someone will stop me?” She rolls her eyes. Emily is a Score; her family name holds weight, but I don’t think many know her from her face alone. She’s still too young to be drifting across the socialite scene. As for me, people know who I am with only a glance.

“You probably own the stupid building.” She ignores my offered hand and gets out on her own. “It’s ugly, by the way.” She drops her head back to look up at it. I snort a laugh.

“I don’t own the building. Only my unit. It is an eyesore,” I admit. It’s flashy and overdone, but for me, it’s in a good

location, and my new place wasn't ready yet. I take her hand and lead her inside.

"You live here?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes I crash at the parents'. You know how my mom can be." I go over to the private elevator and slide my key in. It's another reason I picked this place. It gives me some security and privacy.

"No, I don't know how your mom is anymore. I haven't seen her in a while." I can hear the hurt and anger in her voice. The elevator doors slide open. Emily turns her face away from me so that I can't see it.

As soon as the doors close, I gently grip her chin, turning her beautiful face toward me. Her hair is still damp from swimming, and her face is free of makeup. The sprinkles of freckles that cross her cheeks and nose are on full display. I've always loved them, but for some reason, she covers them up. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

"She misses you. Every time I see her, she asks me about you." Tears fill Emily's eyes. Fuck, that's not what I was going for. I wanted her to know that my mom still loves her and wishes she came around.

"I don't want to do this. Why are we here?" She steps back, causing my hand to fall away from her face. I let her. It takes everything in me not to reach for her, but she's been drinking, and I honestly don't trust myself right now.

“*Y*ou need food,” Chase says as we step off the elevator into his condo. I had no clue he lived here. I actually didn’t know where he lived. For some reason, I thought he’d still be at his family’s estate. The place is massive and has a few homes on it besides the main one.

The Silversteins have also built all kinds of different buildings not only in this city but across the States. I try not to think about Chase and where he lives, but now that I’m here I can’t help but peek around.

“Sure, I’ll eat.” I’m not that hungry, but curiosity wins out. “You cooking?”

“I can or I’ll order in.” I smile, knowing Chase knows how to cook because of his mom.

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

“I’ll whip something up.” I fight a yawn as I follow him through the empty living room. The place is updated and modern but really empty. In the living room, there is a sofa and a TV mounted on the wall.

Nothing hangs on any of the walls. It looks like a typical bachelor pad. A very expensive one but still. There are no personal touches anywhere.

“Has your mom been here?” I ask because I can’t imagine she has, considering how impersonal this place looks.

“You think I own a place my mom hasn’t been all up in?” Chase laughs again, making me smile. This feels too much like old times.

“And she’s okay with this?” I do a circle motion with my finger. “I can’t even say this place looks staged because even a staged condo would have more décor and furniture than this.”

“I suppose it’s what most call a bachelor pad. I don’t need much for now.” If I was hungry, that would have definitely soured my stomach. I take a closer look around and wonder how many women he’s brought back to this place.

It hurts. I’ve been in love with this man for as long as I can remember, and thinking of him with someone else kills me. I know it’s irrational, but I can’t stop the thoughts. I think more than anything I want someone to pick me first and stick it out.

My mind starts to torture me, wondering if he’s banged someone on that sofa or this kitchen island. This is what I always do. My mind always goes to the worst places.

“Bathroom?” I need a minute to get myself together. I will not turn into a needy mess in front of him.

“Use the one in the master. I don’t have the others stocked. It’s at the end of the hallway.” He points.

Being nosy, I peek into each door as I pass them. I find two empty bedrooms with absolutely nothing in them. Next is an office. I slip inside and know this is where Chase spends most of his time. I can smell him here. I walk around to his desk and pause when I see a picture frame. It’s of Asher, Chase, and me. It’s really the only personal touch I’ve seen in this place.

Not wanting to get caught looking at it, I put it down and head for the master to use the bathroom. Even his bedroom is plain with white sheets and pillows on the bed.

I open a few of the drawers in the bathroom, knowing what I’m looking for. Things that might belong to a woman. A hair tie or lip gloss. Something small that could easily be left behind, but Chase is rather clean. I come up empty.

When I exit the bathroom, my eyes go straight for the nightstand. I know the right side is his because a phone

charger is there along with a book and a notepad. A man's nightstand is the equivalent of a female's purse. It's off-limits to look inside if you're not the owner. I'm not sure if that holds true for men, but since Chase went through my purse, I'm calling fair game.

I pull the drawer open, expecting to see a box of condoms or something, but all that's there is a bag of Tootsie Rolls. A sweet treat that we both always loved. Asher would make fun of us and say it's old people candy, but Chase always had some in his pocket, and he'd pull one out and give it to me. It would be softer than normal from having been in his pocket, which made it even better.

"Find what you're looking for?"

"You know I love these." I snag one out of the drawer, playing it off as though I wasn't being nosy.

"You can peek around all you want, baby girl. I don't give a shit." The hell? Did he call me baby girl? It's always been *little girl*, which pisses me the hell off. Never before has he referred to me as baby girl. I have no clue what to make of that. Maybe I'm drunker than I realized.

"I was sure I'd find condoms, but this was a nice surprise." I pop one of the sweet treats in my mouth and leave the wrapper on the nightstand, knowing Chase tends to want things to be tidy.

"This isn't a fuck pad, Emily." His playfulness quickly fades away. "Food's ready."

"That was fast."

"Mom had some stuff I could heat up. I picked the lasagna. I know it's your favorite of hers." He puts his hand on my back to guide me out of the bedroom.

How does he remember that's my favorite? It's been years since I went over to his family home. But he's right: his mom's lasagna is my favorite. She always made it with only chopped hamburger meat and didn't add sausage like most people do.

"You don't have a table." I laugh when we pass the empty dining room.

“We never used the dining room.” No, at his home, they never did. Cooking was a part of the whole dinner process, and everyone ate at the giant kitchen island. Not everyone cooked, but they would still hang out while the others did. I always loved that they all enjoyed spending time with each other. It was nice to see a functional family, and it was a break when I was younger from my dysfunctional one.

“Two chairs.”

“Only two people.” He pulls one out for me. I sit, placing the napkin on my lap. I force myself to take a bite of the lasagna, but the second it hits my lips, so many memories come flying back to me of being back in his old home. In minutes, I have my plate cleaned. “You should stay the night. It’s late. We’ll drive your car home tomorrow, and I’ll have one of my drivers pick me up.”

“Stay the night here?” A squeak. “Your bedrooms are all empty, and I don’t know what’s happened on that sofa.” I point to the giant leather sectional. “Or your bed.”

Chase drops our dishes into the sink, making me jump at how hard they land. I wonder if they broke. “This isn’t a fuck pad.” I roll my eyes.

“Roll your eyes again, little girl, and you’ll regret it.” All the air leaves my lungs as an expression I’ve never seen before crosses Chase’s face. I want to push, but for some reason, I don’t.

“Okay, I’ll stay. I need to be home early—”

“For your dad’s party. I know.” Right, I’m sure he’ll be there. I can’t help but wonder if he’ll be bringing a date. I want to ask, but I don’t have the balls or the heart to. “My bed is big; we’ll share it,” he informs me before entering his closet. He comes out a second later wearing only a pair of sweatpants and hands me a shirt.

“Thanks.” I pull my dress off, my swimsuit still on underneath. I turn to give him my back as I slide the shirt on before I reach under and pull the strings to the top of the bikini

to loosen it and slide it off. I'll leave my bottoms on. When I turn back around, Chase is watching me.

"Get in the bed," he orders.

"What is with your mood? I don't even know why you showed up tonight, and now all this."

"Get in the fucking bed, Emily." Something tells me not to push again. Also, something else inside of me is getting off on this firm bossy side of Chase that's got a bit of an asshole edge to it. It's so unlike him. I love that I've made him be that way. That I pulled charming Chase out of character. Why I enjoy that so much, I have no idea.

I slip into the bed. A moment later, the lights go out, and I feel Chase get in on the other side. I'm sure there is no way I'm ever going to be able to fall asleep. Sleep never comes easy for me. My mind never stops, but for some reason within seconds, I'm out.

I suck in a deep breath. The smell of strawberries and something else I can't place fills my nose. It's all over her, making her seem fresher and more innocent than I already know she is. I try to think of the last time I was this close to her. It's been years. Some days it drives me insane, and others I am thankful because I don't fully trust myself.

That bikini she had on last night left nothing to the imagination. After seeing her in it, I'm not so sure how innocent she really is anymore. Don't get me wrong; I know without question that she's never been with a man. But I do think she knows the lure she has over men whether she wants to have it or not.

Emily and her mother have a lot of similarities when it comes to looks. That's where it ends, though. It's partly why I think her mother Heidi didn't care for her. She thought Emily stole the attention away from her. I think even at a young age Heidi knew her daughter was going to be far prettier than her, and that was saying a lot.

There were a few modeling agencies that poked around at one point, but I put that shit to an end quickly. If that was something she wanted to do, which I'm almost positive wasn't the case, it could wait. She needs to make that decision after high school. I don't care what the agencies say about girls getting started at a much younger age. It wasn't going to happen.

As closely as I keep an eye on Emily, I don't know what she wants in life. To me, she appears to be all over the place. Which can mean a lot of different things. I think she is trying to find her passion. That she doesn't quite know where she belongs. It's why she stays busy for the simple fact of staying busy. I know that one well because I do it myself. Nothing gets you through a day quicker than having a million things to do. That's what I've been doing. Checking off each day as they pass.

"Chase," she moans my name.

I've been itching to pull her into my arms since the second I slipped into the bed, but for once luck was on my side. It isn't long until she has her sweet little body wrapped around me.

This is what I've wanted for so long. I match her breathing, wanting to feel connected with her. I don't care if I sound like some sap or even pathetic. I'm past all that shit. More than that, I'm past all the bullshit keeping us apart.

Emily turned eighteen at the beginning of her senior year. She's months away from turning nineteen at this point, but I told myself I am waiting for her to be out of high school. That's only a few days away, but at this point, fuck it. I'm tired of being away from her. I can't do this anymore. It's hell.

I'm already going to have to work my way back into her life. She's built walls so thick and high that it's going to take me some time to get through them. But if I'm anything, it's patient. I'm ready to begin rebuilding her trust in me. I've come this far. I won't fail now. Not having her is not an option.

"Chase?" she whispers my name, and this time, her hand drifts up my bare chest. Suddenly it stills, letting me know she's starting to wake.

"It's me, baby girl." Her body relaxes a degree, but I keep rubbing my fingers up and down her back. I've never given much thought to my hands, but I can't help but wonder if she hates the roughness. I might spend a lot of time in my office, but I'm always checking in on job sites and often getting my hands dirty. I stop rubbing her for a second. Her skin is so delicate I don't want to blemish it.

“It feels good,” she mumbles. “Your hands. The roughness.” I know she’s awake, but I think it’s only partially because she never would have said that otherwise. She wouldn’t give me the satisfaction at this point, and I can’t say I blame her.

I close my eyes, taking in her words as I go back to caressing her. Even when we were younger, I could swear she knew what I was thinking. I’ve never believed in fate or coincidence, though my father swore by it, but I often swear Emily and I were destined to be together. How else could she know what’s running through my mind without me uttering a word?

“Chase,” she sighs my name. “Why am I here?” It’s the same question she asked last night. I guess I can only avoid it for so long, but I’m not sure how to broach this. For as smooth as I can be with people, when it comes to Emily, I’m a damn mess. I always say the wrong shit and fuck everything up. Usually, instead of making it better, I make it a thousand times worse.

“I wasn’t leaving you drunk at a party full of horny high school boys.” Her whole body goes still, and I know once again I’ve chosen the wrong words. She tries to get up, but I’m faster than her. I roll, pinning her beneath me.

The shirt I gave her to wear has ridden up, exposing her tiny bikini bottoms. My sweatpants are the only thing stopping my cock from thrusting home into her sweetness.

“I don’t need a babysitter.” She tries to growl at me, but she sounds more like an angry kitten than anything. My girl is always so sweet. Seeing the fire in her eyes has my cock jerking against her pussy. And it doesn’t go unnoticed by me how her bright blue eyes widened as if she’s surprised by my attraction to her.

“You think I was babysitting? No, I was making sure no little punk got near my girl.” Her mouth opens and then closes as she tries to process what I’ve laid out. It’s been a long time coming.

“I am not your girl,” she finally gets out, but there is no power behind her words. Her hands even go to my chest to give a weak shove. I grab both her wrists in one hand and pin them

above her head. I hadn't missed the flash of desire I'd seen in her eyes last night when I was bossing her ass around.

I wasn't completely shocked by her reaction. It turned me on too, especially when she did as I told her. Her just breathing turns me on; every single thing about her does it for me. What had taken me a little off guard was how much I found myself liking the domination. I had no idea that would be my thing, but with Emily, it is different.

I grew up with a strong mom and have a lot of women who work for Silverstein. Hell, I found most of them to be the best at their jobs if you could get them to go into building and contracting to begin with. They have a good eye and pay attention to detail.

I'm all for women empowerment, but with her, I find I want to take care of her. Cherish her and make her the center of my world, and I think she very much wants that too. Her problem is going to be admitting it. That's not the only hurdle we're facing, though. It's going to be hard for her to hand over the trust to someone to be that for her.

“Are you saying you're not my girl?”

She licks her lips, drawing my attention there. I know she doesn't have an answer. Not one she's willing to give yet, so I kiss her so she doesn't have to. She'll get there. Until then I'll give her what she needs.

As soon as our mouths connect, everything in my life finally slides into place. She wraps her arms around me, her lips parting so that I can take more without her having to ask for it. I do. If she opens any door, I'm going to walk right through it.

She moans into my mouth as her hips start to move. I push back down, grinding my cock against her pussy, making sure I hit her clit. I break the kiss, wanting to hear the sounds of her pleasure. I continue to trail my mouth down her jaw as I keep thrusting against her.

“Chase.” Her nails dig into my shoulders. She's close. Thank fuck because so am I. I latch on to her neck and suck as we both come together. My name pours past her lips over and

over as she clings to me. I groan, my mouth unable to leave her. She's so damn sweet.

Her own body goes lax, and her hands slide down off me. Finally, I lift my head to see the glazed look in her eyes. I swear her normally bright blue eyes are darker now. She looks sexy as fuck with her blond hair laid out on my pillow and her lips swollen from my kisses.

I open my mouth to tell her we're only getting started. I want her to come against my mouth this time, but I don't get the chance. I hear the alarm in my house click off followed by the sound of the front door opening. Shit.

Emily's eyes go wide. "If that is some girlfriend, I will kill you." Her mouth settles into a firm line. I know it's immature, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I love the jealousy she's displaying at the moment.

"Damn, sweetness. When did you go get claws?" She glares up at me, not finding any of this funny. It's not. There is only one person who has the ability to turn off my alarm and unlock my door. My mom.

"Chase." The second Emily hears my mom's voice, she tries to free her hands I still have pinned above her head.

"I have to hide," she whispers.

I free my hold on her before I slip off her to the side of the bed. I really don't want to get up right now. Not when I finally have her laid out in my bed. But there is no other choice at the moment.

"My days of hiding are over."

Emily sits up. "What does that mean?"

"You're about to find out." I reach out and dig my fingers into her hair to pull her toward me for a kiss. She melts into me.

She's my girl. Always has been. Always will be.

I will murder him.

That is the only thing I can think of as I stare into the mirror of the bathroom. I was sure I could put my dress back on and tell Chase's mom, Rebecca, that I had a bit too much to drink last night and Chase offered to pick me up from a party. That's a logical reason as to why I would be here. But as I stare at myself in the mirror, I know she's not going to buy that story.

I myself am having a hard time believing what happened, but it's all over me. My cheeks are still flushed, my lips swollen, and not to mention the freaking hickey on my neck! I would murder Chase, but I have to admit I kind of like having a reminder of him on my skin. It's absurd, but I can't help the way I feel. I run my fingers through my hair and wish I'd packed some makeup or something in my bag. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind since I was only going to a pool party.

I know staying hidden away in the bathroom is only a temporary thing. I'll have to come out eventually. Chase made it clear when he changed his sweatpants and pulled on a shirt, he'd be letting his mom know someone was here. I hadn't missed the wet spot on his sweatpants before he took them off. Out of curiosity, I head into his closet to find the discarded pants.

Am I really about to do this? It's too late. I've come this far. I'm already in his closet with his pants in my hand from out of

the laundry basket. I examine them. Okay, don't judge me, but I might even smell them. A gasp leaves me. He definitely came in them!

Why do I suddenly feel the need to do some victory dance? I'm mad at Chase. He's a jerkface who showed up at a party and made me leave. I'm an adult and can do whatever I want. I do have to admit that it was hot, though, when he scared that one guy from dancing with me and then shoved the other into the pool.

No, Emily, I chastise myself. *That is in no way okay*, I lie to myself. I'm really crossing some lines this morning with what is wrong and right. I'm going to blame it on those drinks I had last night. I don't have a headache or a sour stomach, so I'm guessing I'm not hungover. Pretty sure the only reason my stomach is turning right now is because I'm about to go face Rebecca. It's been a while since I've seen her, and I kind of feel bad for just dropping off the face of the earth. She was an important part of my life.

"Babe!" I hear Chase call. Did he really shout *babe* through the house?! Slowly, I creep down the hallway.

"You have a girl here?!" I hear Rebecca hiss at him. "You better be teasing me, Chase Landon Silverstein. We talked about this. You said you wouldn't be using this place as some shag pad."

"Shag pad?" Chase barks a laugh. I want to turn and flee back down the hallway. Chase must have some kind of reputation that his mother isn't happy about. "You scared her. Emily, come out here."

"Emily?" Rebecca gasps. I step out from the hallway and give a stupid wave. Rebecca stares at me, shocked. That makes two of us.

"Chase gave me a ride last night. I drank too much. You know. Graduation blowout party. It was really sweet of him." Rebecca folds her arms over her chest at my explanation. For a woman that is only a few inches over five feet with short, wavy reddish-brown hair and glasses, she somehow can come

off as very intimidating. She's not buying what I'm selling, which doesn't shock me.

"You want to try that again?" She lifts a brow.

"Okay. In all honesty, your son kidnapped me from a party while I was dancing. Then he tossed someone into a pool before he made me eat and put me to bed." I smirk, glaring over at Chase, thinking maybe he'll be in trouble too. *Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Mr. Bossy Man.*

"That sounds about right. Now when did you get the hickey?" I reach up and cover it up with my hand. I swear I can feel the embarrassment creeping up my neck. I'm gonna murder Chase when she leaves.

"That was me. A few minutes before you got here."

"Chase!" I shout. He did not say that to his mom.

"This isn't what you think." I rush to clear things up. "We woke up, and things got a bit out of hand."

"Well, I'm sorry I interrupted." She turns to Chase. I gape at both of them. "Will you two be going to the party together tonight?"

"No!" I can't stop shouting for some reason. "I have a date."

"If you do, he's a dead man walking," Chase says dryly. Rebecca laughs. She actually laughs. What is happening here?

"I should go. I was only dropping off your tux." She motions to a garment bag draped over the leather sofa. "I have a million things to get done before the party. I'm actually meeting up with Grace."

"Oh God, please don't tell her about any of this. Please," I start to beg.

"I won't. I know the two of you are starting to grow close. I want that to happen organically for you. I'd never get in the way of that." She walks over to me, wrapping me in a hug. When I smell her, I'm pulled back into her kitchen. The smell of powdered sugar and lemon engulfs me. It's impossible to smell lemon and not think of her. She uses it in so many recipes. She has a million lemon trees in her garden. "I've

missed you so much.” Tears fill my eyes. “I’ll see you tonight?” I nod.

I miss the words she used to always say when she hugged me, but that was years ago. That I was the daughter she never had. I wait until I hear the door close before I go in search of my shoes.

“I have to get out of here, Chase.”

“Breathe, baby girl.” Chase cups my cheek.

“Oh, it’s not *little girl* anymore? Remember? You said I was just a little girl.” I see irritation flash across his face, but he masks it quickly.

“You’re far from a little girl, Emily.”

“I have to get home. Today is a big day, not just for my dad but Grace too. I think she feels she has something to prove, and I want to be there to help her any way I can.” Plus, I need to get the heck away from him so that I can think clearly.

“You want her to feel like she belongs.”

“I do.” I nod.

“Does that hit close to home for you, Emily?”

“Don’t!” I snap. “You lost that connection with me to have those kinds of conversations.”

“Who do you have them with?”

“Take me home,” I demand. I’m not ready to give him any more than I already have.

“All right, you win this round.”

“What does that mean?” He steps closer, tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear. “Only that you win this round. Hopefully soon you’ll see we both can win.”

Emily has always stood out in a crowd. She is tall with thick blond hair and bright blue eyes and a body a lot of women would kill for. She has never been shy about what she wears. At school it's a typical uniform or that fucking cheerleading one. But more often than not, when she is out and about, she's always in jeans and an oversized sweater or shirt of some kind.

I've noticed over time that some of the male attention she gets bothers her. Tonight, however, she's not letting anything deter her. As much as I hate the pink strapless dress she's wearing that molds to her body, I'm happy that she's not trying to hide away. She shouldn't have to. If she wants to wear a bright, gorgeous dress she should be allowed to without being bothered. Lucky for her, I'm going to make sure that happens all while I enjoy the hell out of her dress. The daggers she's staring into me right now will do nothing to deter me.

Can't fault her for that, either. The Hancock sisters Charlotte and Samantha have zeroed in on Asher and me. A dull headache had started to form from their overpowering perfume until I spotted Emily and all I could think about was her sweet smell. Her dress is short, only coming to mid-thigh. It would be so easy to drop to my knees and push it up and bury my face between her legs.

She glides easily across the room, heading straight for her brother and me. Is she jealous? She has no reason to be, but that shit gives me hope, so I'll take it. The heels she has on make her taller than she already is. Still, she's a few inches

shorter than I am, but I love that I could wrap my arm around her and pull her into my side, and she'd fit perfectly.

"You're blocking the bar." Emily cuts in on whatever the Hancock sisters are going on about. She nudges between them to get to the bar. I don't try to hide my smile. She's in a mood, and I'm all for working her up. I love it when she's feisty, especially when it's not directed at me.

"Think you had enough last night," I say casually. She ignores me, but I see her button nose turn up in a small flare of annoyance. How does her ignoring me both turn me on and piss me off at the same time?

"You're breathtaking tonight, Molly," Asher tells his stepsister. Yeah, I keep calling her that to piss him off. It's been working all afternoon. I should probably stop poking the bear being I'm about to be poking his little sister *very* soon.

"What am I? Chopped liver?" Emily turns back around, handing Molly a glass of champagne.

"You look nice as well," Asher quickly tells his sister. Emily peeks over at me through her lashes. Is she waiting for me to comment on what she's wearing?

While it's breathtaking, I notice the hickey I put on her neck is covered up, and now I'm annoyed. The dress I could deal with. That, not so much. I think knowing I had a mark on her did something to calm the caveman that's come alive inside of me. It's the best I could do for the time being. I don't see her letting me put a ring on her finger anytime soon.

"You two still trying to land these bozos?" Emily asks the Hancock sisters, pointing her thumb over her shoulder at Chase and me.

"Emily." Samantha gives her a tight smile, but I can tell her head wants to explode. She is jealous. Emily isn't one to be rude. If anything, she is always sweet to everyone. I miss that sweetness. You don't know how much you crave and need it until she takes it from you.

Samantha wants to bite back, but she knows she is standing in the Score home and that wouldn't be a wise idea. Not that

Emily would run and tattle, but if word did get back to her father, things likely wouldn't go well.

Asher is also protective of his sister. Well, whenever his ass is actually around, that is. The more I think about how long he's been gone, the more pissed I get about it. He doesn't realize in his own escape he'd left Emily behind. He might have gotten their rotten mother out of the house, but Emily was still lost.

At least he told me tonight he has no plans of taking off again at the moment. Of course, when I'm about to make my move on his sister, he decided to stick around. It doesn't matter either way. Asher might be like a brother to me, but no one is stopping me on this one. I don't care what bridges I have to burn to get to her. Hell, I'll fucking light them all on fire while I'm still standing on them at this point.

"I thought you had better manners than that." Courtney tries to give Emily a small scolding.

"You're right. What was I thinking?" Emily puts her hand over her chest to feign that she cares. "One should be respectful to their elders." Both the sisters gasp. My girl really is in a mood tonight.

I can't wait to work it out of her. I also want to make it clear she has nothing to worry about when it comes to other women. I don't need that standing in my way. I've already got a tall enough wall to climb when it comes to her letting me back in. So, I'm going to make that line real fucking clear to her when I get the chance. I tried to last night a few times, but she wasn't having it.

Emily links her arm through Molly's, pulling her away from all of us. I want to follow her. I almost do, but Samantha steps in front of me, blocking my path.

"Are you really leaving tonight? I was hoping we could catch up. You know Daddy heard about your new solar thing." Asher looks so uncomfortable with how close she is to him.

"Solar thing." I bark a laugh. Solar thing is putting it lightly when it comes to the plans Asher and I have been making.

Courtney puffs out her bottom lip in a pout. It does nothing, but I can't help but picture Emily on her knees in front of me peering up through her lashes with a pout on her lips waiting to please me. Fuck me. My balls start to ache.

"I'm seeing someone," Asher blurts out. Well, shit. He's putting it right out there. I have no problem doing the same now that Emily is a full-grown adult. Asher is a very private person, where I might hire a plane to fly a banner over the city to let everyone know Emily Score is now off the market. We all have our own tactics, I suppose.

"Seeing someone?" Courtney's overdone bottom lip puffs out even more, which I didn't think was possible. I much prefer the natural puffiness I gave to Emily's mouth this morning. I glance around the room, trying to find my girl in her bright pink dress that makes her stand out. The heels help. Also me being 6'5", I can see over everyone without trying.

"Yes, I'm seeing someone. I won't be catching up with anyone." Asher tries to be stern, but he sounds a bit flustered.

I think he's lost sight of Molly in the crowd. I could point her out for him, but what would be the fun in that? Asher has spent his life avoiding women and at times being a bit rude. This is some karma coming for him. He only gets to use that mama excuse for so long.

"Who?" Courtney pushes, wanting more information. She either wants to spread the gossip or try to go after the girl. That's how these two work. Too bad for her the woman in question is about to be a Score and not because her mother married one.

"Yeah, who?" both sisters ask. Samantha tries to inch closer to me. I back up so far I hit the damn bar, not wanting even her clothing to touch me.

"You don't know her," Asher says dismissively.

"An outsider." Courtney's face falls. "Seriously, Ash? I thought—"

"I have no idea what you thought, but if it has anything to do with me and you being involved, you thought wrong. If you'll

excuse me.” Asher steps around her, leaving me to fend for myself which I’m sure he finds funny. I suppose I had it coming.

“Who is he seeing?” Courtney tries to push me for details.

“Not you.” Now it’s me that’s starting to lose my patience with them.

“Chase, when did you become so rude?” Samantha tries to scold me now.

“When you got in the way of someone I need.” They both give me a confused stare.

“Emily Score. She’s mine,” I tell them before they even get the chance to ask who that someone is. With that, I excuse myself.

Let the rumor mill begin. I smile. Once most men around here hear, they’ll steer clear of Emily for sure. I mean, most already do because of her father, but some still try to slip in there. Now they’ll know without a doubt that they don’t stand a chance.

No one ever did. She was always meant to be mine.

The way women throw themselves at Chase is sickening. I could no longer stand to watch it, so I made my way as far away from that situation as possible. If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that I'll never beg someone for their attention. I've been there and done that when it came to my mother, Heidi. Hell, at one point I'd done it to Chase too.

When I think back to that day when I admitted my feelings to him, I want to crawl into a hole and hide. The shock on his face is still burned into my brain all these years later. He'd shut me down so quickly. He tried to be nice about it, saying I was too young and had no clue what I wanted in life. I'm an adult now, and I still don't.

Why hadn't he shut down the Hancock sisters if he wasn't interested in them? Or maybe he is. That's pretty messed up considering he was dry humping me this morning. He'd also left a mark on my neck that might be hidden but I swear I can still feel it there.

Even though I'm standing on the other side of the room, the jealousy I have hasn't subsided. I will never in a million years give Chase the satisfaction of knowing that I'm annoyed at seeing those women fawning on him. But I can't help it. Pretty sure I gave myself away to a degree when I was rude to them.

I'm never rude to people, even when they deserve it. Though I can't find any guilt over it at the moment. The Hancock sisters pretend I don't exist, and when they do it's to get closer to my

brother. Good luck with that one, ladies. My brother is in deep with Molly. I could see it all over his face the second we'd stepped in the outside ballroom my stepmother Grace had created in the backyard.

We might be inside of a giant white tent, but you can't tell with the grand chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and the amount of flowers coating everything. Grace and my dad had a bit of a whirlwind romance. I wonder if this is her way of planning out a bit of the celebration of not only my father turning fifty but of the two of them as well.

I watch them on the dance floor as my father twirls her around. The man really is night and day compared to the way things had been with my mother. I'd heard small whispers from some of the staff that my mother had gotten worse after she had me. I'll never understand what she had against me being a girl.

One day when I get the chance to have children of my own, I hope one will be a little girl. I see the way Grace and Molly are together. They have this unspoken bond. I swear the two of them can have whole conversations in looks alone.

I made it a point to not see Chase's expression when we stepped into the room. My dress is a bit showier than I'd normally pick, but I'm a sucker for pink, and the thing fit perfectly. Then Grace went and gushed over how gorgeous I was in it. I was done for. I soak up any attention she gives me. Molly doesn't seem to mind. In fact, I've noticed a few times she's stepped back to let us have our moments. It only goes to show you how sweet Molly is.

"Ems!" Grace calls when she sees me standing off to the side of the dance floor. "Come." She ushers me over toward her and my father. "He wants to have a dance."

"You're beautiful, Emily. You don't look so much like my little girl anymore." He takes me by the hand so that we can dance. "But no matter what, you always will be. You know that, right?"

"I do, Dad." I give him a warm smile. Our relationship has become better since my mother has been out of the picture and since Grace entered our lives.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been a bit distracted.”

“Don’t.” I cut him off. “I love that you found Grace, and you do what you need to so we get to keep her.” I tease him, making him smile. He leans down and kisses me on my cheek.

I’ve always wondered if my appearance bothered him to a degree. I look so much like my mother. Sometimes I sense this wall that still lingers between us because of it. With Asher, it was different. While we might have both been oops babies, my father was about to leave Heidi when she got herself knocked up with me. I was a trap, to put it bluntly.

“I’m glad you like her. I think Asher is starting to come around.”

“I wouldn’t worry about Asher, Dad. He’s more than coming around.” I let out a small laugh. His brows come together. “He’s staying longer,” I quickly add before he can press the issue.

“He is? I thought he was leaving tonight.”

“Nope, we’re stuck with him for a bit longer.” That makes my father smile more.

“There are a lot of young suitors here giving you an awful lot of attention.”

“I don’t want their attention.”

“You know, Emily, if there is something you need to tell me, I want you to know I’m okay with whatever choices you make in your life. You’ll always be my daughter.” Oh God. Does he know about Chase? If he does, he seems okay with it. “If you’re interested in other girls, then you should pursue that.” I snort a laugh. That was so not the direction I thought he was going in.

“Dad, I love you. I’m not a lesbian, but thank you for letting me know whatever choice I make in life you’ll be at my side.”

“Always.” He gives me another kiss on the cheek.

“Go get your wife. There’s a suit over there talking to her.” I point my thumb over to where Grace is standing. My dad spins

around so quickly I burst into laughter. She's actually talking to three other women.

"That was mean."

"It was a little fun," I tease him. He shakes his head, making his way over toward Grace. I glance around the room and catch sight of my brother manhandling Molly out of the ballroom. The Score men really do go from zero to a hundred in three seconds. I was sure I'd never see the day my brother would fall for a woman. Let alone one I'm pretty sure he had plans to destroy until he laid eyes on her.

"You're dating Chase Silverstein!" Tamra pops up from out of nowhere.

"No."

"That's not what we heard," Gia adds. A group of girls start to surround me. The hell is going on here? Why would all these people suddenly think I'm dating Chase? Then it hits me: word must have gotten around that I left with him from the party.

"He told the Hancock sisters you and him are a thing." I wasn't expecting that, and for some reason, it both thrills and annoys me at the same time.

"We're not a thing." I roll my eyes. Does sharing orgasms count as a thing? If I go off this group of girls, the answer is no.

"Then why would he say that?" Bailey asks next.

"What is happening here? Why does everyone even care?" This is way bigger than it should be.

"Because he's promised to someone already."

My heart sinks. "What? To whom?" My eyes bounce around all the girls, waiting for one of them to answer, but none of them do.

"Emily, sweetheart. That dress on you is fire," Rebecca cuts in, making all the girls scatter.

"Fire?"

“Is that not the new term the younger generation is using when something looks incredible? I tried that TikTok, but all I get are food videos, and they use the word fire for a different reason.” God, I love her. This only makes me miss her more. I bet if we were still close, I would have made a dozen of those videos she’s seen.

“You look rather dazzling yourself.”

“I better. I was in the spa for five hours, and I’ll only get to enjoy it for another hour before my husband is pulling me out of here.”

“Not before cake, I hope.”

“He knows better than that.” She smirks. “How have you been? It was so nice seeing you today. I wish you’d come by more.”

“I’m sorry, things got—”

She grabs my hand. “I know, sweetheart, but that didn’t mean things had to change for us.” Her words hit me hard. She’s right.

“It was too hard.” A lump starts to form in my throat. I want to ask her about what the girls meant about Chase being promised to someone, but I don’t want to put her in a weird position.

Arranged marriages aren’t a thing, but they kind of are at times. It would make sense why Rebecca would be pissed that Chase would bring random girls back to his home with him if he has a bride that is soon to be announced.

A deep, rich, familiar chuckle reaches my ears. I peek over to see Chase speaking to a tall woman in a black dress that has a slit that goes all the way up her thigh. Her legs must be a mile long. I swear I’ve seen her before, but I can’t place it. She has to belong to a family I know, but seeing him with her laughing has my mind all muddled.

“I need to go check on Molly,” I lie to Rebecca. That’s the last thing I’m checking on. I already know what’s happening with her, but what I do need is air.

“But the cake,” Rebecca reminds me.

“I’ll be back.” It’s a lie, and I know it, but everything is too much. I’m happy for everyone. My father has Grace now, and my brother is with Molly. I’m not the odd one out, but for some reason, I’ve always thought I was.

I feel my phone vibrate from inside my small clutch. I open it to see a text from the last person I thought I’d ever hear from again.

My mother.

What game is she playing? It's been over a week since Emily has been in my bed. She's done everything she could think of to avoid me. So far, I'm letting her get away with it. School is wrapping up, and it's only fair I give her the space she deserves. If she only knew how long I've actually been chasing her, maybe she wouldn't keep avoiding me.

That doesn't stop me from texting her every day. Morning, noon, and night I'm lighting her phone up. She hardly responds, but every now and then I'll get an emoji. I used to hate when my workers responded with them, but with Emily, I'll take it. Even if it's the black heart one which I find to be my favorite because I know it's out of character for her. I take it as I'm getting to her.

She slipped right out of the party last weekend. I stepped back for a moment to let her have her dance with her father, and then she was surrounded by a group of girls. Emily has always been popular.

I suppose that's what happens when you're into half the activities a school has to offer. The other half she can't do because her schedule wouldn't allow it. Her face was one of shock as the girls spoke to her, and I'd wondered if gossip about who was dating who traveled that fast between the ladies. Thankfully, my mom stepped in to save her.

One second, my mom was talking to her while I chatted with Riley, and the next, Emily was gone. Riley has been on the

security team for my family for years. Her main task has always been to watch over Emily. I didn't only want a woman keeping an eye on her because I'm a jealous fuck but because I knew she could get into places other men couldn't. She blended well. Whenever something came up, her husband, Jericho, would fill in for her. He's madly in love with his wife, so that helped temper any of my emotions about another man trailing my woman.

Emily is a beautiful girl. Not only that, she comes from a *very* rich family. In my opinion, she should always have security. I've tried to not intrude too much, making it clear to Riley I only needed to know things that could potentially be a threat or piss me the hell off. I know it might be fucked up that I've kept boys away from Emily over the years. But she gave herself to me the day that she admitted her feelings for me.

At the time, I hadn't realized I'd done the same. I still thought I was playing some big brother role even if she was keeping me at arm's length. Thankfully, I wasn't out there banging random women, which had never been my thing. Asher was my best friend, and he didn't want women anywhere around us, and my mother would kill me. I didn't have a disdain for women the way Asher did, but I knew that I wanted what my parents have.

My phone vibrates across my desk. I grab it when I see Asher's name lighting up the screen. He's still in town, surprisingly. He also hasn't told anyone that he's banging his stepsister. I know, and I'm pretty sure Emily does too. She and Molly have been getting close. I know Asher has to get back to Japan at some point. I'm sure he's waiting for school to be out so he can take Molly with him. That's my guess, at least. I haven't been doing a lot of poking because I don't want him to do any poking back in my direction.

"What's up?" I ask when I answer, putting it on speaker so I can keep clearing the massive amount of emails I have in my inbox.

"Grace has been stealing money." Now that grabs my attention.

“No way. I’m not buying it.”

“Honestly, Chase, I don’t give a fuck. I only want it to stop before my father finds out.”

“Oh shit.” I groan, knowing where this might be going, and it’s a bad idea. A very bad one because I know he’s wrong.

“I’m going to give her a payout, but unlike Heidi, I don’t want her to leave.”

“So, you’re paying her to stay?” Does my best friend not understand he’s calling his woman’s mother a whore essentially? This is not going to go well for him if he does this.

“Something like that. I’ll confront her but not be confrontational.”

“Have you even done anything like this where you haven’t been confrontational?” The man really should have been a lawyer.

“I need it to go away. It’s stupid. She can spend what she wants and never burn through what we have. Maybe if she understands that she’ll stop with this side bullshit she’s pulling.”

“Asher, man.”

“I can’t lose her. You don’t understand. If her mom leaves, she could take Molly with her.” I understand more than he knows, but this is not the time for that conversation.

“Asher, that woman loves your father. I’d bet my life on it.”

“You might be right, but when people come from nothing, sometimes they get greedy or fearful they’ll lose it all.” I’m about to suggest that maybe he should rethink the whole prenup thing he’d made Grace and his father sign off on if he really believes this could be about that, but I think he’s got it all wrong, and I don’t get the chance. “Shit, I’ve got to go.” He ends the call before I can try and talk any sense into him.

My phone lights up again. This time it’s a text from Riley letting me know that Bradford High has let the seniors out early for their last day of school, and Emily is headed in the direction of her home with Molly in the car with her.

School is officially over. Time's up, baby girl.

“*H*ow are you feeling?” Molly asks me. The car ride has been silent up until this point.

“I’m fine.” I shrug one of my shoulders.

My mood might not be the greatest, but Molly, on the other hand, has had a smile pasted on her face since the night of my father’s birthday. I’m driving us back home. Asher has been picking her up after school, but the seniors were let out early with it being our last day. I offered her a ride even though I know my brother would have dropped whatever he’s doing to come get her. With Molly still being a bit shy about asking for what she wants, I figured it was better if I just gave her a lift home.

“Fine? Doesn’t that mean that you’re really not okay?” she pushes.

I think she’s still trying to put together where I’d gotten that hickey. Molly might have only been going to Bradford High for a year, but it is pretty common knowledge that I don’t date. I was far too busy. At least that’s what I always told myself. I know with the Score last name I can get into any college I want, but I often feel I have something to prove. Asher took over for my father like it was nothing. He’s been thriving for years.

“I have a lot on my mind is all,” I give, not wanting to be rude to her. I really am enjoying the bond Molly and I are forming, and I don’t want to mess that up because I’m in my own head about a lot of crap.

“You can talk to me about it if you want,” she offers, being the sweet Molly that she is. It’s kind of funny. Normally I’m peppering her with questions. How the tables have turned.

“How about we talk about what’s going on with you and my brother?” I smirk, changing the subject. Molly’s cheeks turn pink. “When are you two going to stop sneaking around?”

“I’ve been waiting.” She wrings her fingers together. If I’ve learned anything about Molly in the time I’ve gotten to know her, it’s that she doesn’t want to make waves.

She and her mom are a team. I bet it was hard for both of them with Grace being a single parent while putting herself through school and working. I think Molly grew up a bit faster than most kids do. Not that Grace meant for that to happen, but sometimes that’s what life hands you. It’s funny how even through everything they went through, they managed to come out of it with a strong bond. Yet, my own mother who didn’t have to want for anything couldn’t even be bothered to have a relationship with me.

“Waiting for what?” I try to draw it out of her.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m scared,” she finally admits.

“You think your mom will be upset?” I ask her, wanting her to open up to me some.

“I don’t know.” She worries her bottom lip between her teeth.

“I’ve never seen your mom ever be upset with you. She’s so sweet.” I’d kill for a mom like Molly’s. That woman would do anything for her daughter. The devotion is endless.

“I just don’t want to worry her or rock the boat. She’s so happy and in love.”

“I get it.” I glance over at her.

I’m always worried people will think I’m going to turn out like my mom. My father got stuck with her for more years than he wanted because of me. It’s why I try to be perfect at everything I do. I’m graduating at the top of my class. I was captain of my cheer team and the volleyball team. Everything I

did I put my all into so my dad and Asher didn't worry over me.

My phone goes off as we pull into the driveway. I put the car into park and check my messages.

"I've got to take care of something," I tell Molly.

"Okay. I'll see you later. Thanks for the ride." She slips out of the car, heading into the house.

Mom: Honey, please. Come and see me.

Chase: I miss you baby girl.

The whirl of emotions I have from seeing both texts is eating me alive. What are the freaking odds that both my mom and Chase have been texting me all week? I've made some small talk with my mom. She's been nice. Remorseful at times. Even told me she was proud of all that I've accomplished. But words can't change the past.

I know I should block her, but I can't bring myself to do it. The little girl inside of me still wants her love. What is happening? The two people I've longed for for so long, now want my attention, and honestly, all I want to do is run. I don't want to face any of it.

I respond to Chase first, my mood not a good one. Maybe this will get him to stop texting me. I've been holding back all week because honestly, I've been enjoying seeing his texts light up my screen each day.

Me: Why don't you focus on missing the gorgeous dark-haired woman?

Chase: Dark-haired woman?

His response is quick. I roll my eyes.

Me: The one you were at the bar with last week at my father's birthday party. Are there so many of them that you forget?

That last part is a dig. The truth is I want to know if that's the woman the other girls had been talking about when they said Chase was already promised to be married to someone.

Chase: There is only you. I want to see you.

I pull my lip gloss out of my bag and give my hair a nice fluff before I snap about ten pictures, picking the best one. I know this isn't what he means, but I'm enjoying this little back and forth we're having. He's chasing after me for some reason, and I'm not sure why. I hit send on the picture before I text my mom back, agreeing to meet her.

Twenty minutes later, I'm standing outside of a cute coffee and tea shop. I spot my mom the second I step inside. She rushes over to me, giving me air kisses on my cheeks. Her Chanel perfume fills up the space around us, overpowering the smell of coffee and buttery treats. She grips my shoulders, staring down at me.

I'm still in my school uniform, so I'm in flat shoes while she's in heels. I can't remember a time when she didn't wear them. Once I went into her closet wanting to play dress up and she'd lost her mind. I'd never made that mistake again.

"You're so gorgeous. Wow, you look just like me."

"Thanks." I give her the best smile I can muster, not sure what to do with that compliment. Was it for her or me?

"Come sit. I ordered us some tea." I glance toward the display of food in the glass cases. "Don't even think about it. You'll regret it later," she says before I can suggest getting something to eat. I didn't have lunch. They let us out right before. "So how are things?" she asks when I sit down.

"They're great." I think that should be my answer. I have my pick of colleges with a new chapter in my life. Great doesn't sound right, but I don't know what else to say.

"Your father remarried." Oh no. Here we go. I hope this is not what this is about.

"Yes, to a woman named Grace. They're good together. He's happy." Her lips purse, but she hides it quickly. I don't understand her. I didn't think she wanted to be with my father, so why would she care? "How about you? Are you happy? Is there a special someone in your life?"

"There is a special someone. To be honest with you, Emily, I've been working on myself and well, that special someone is

you. I want us to try to get close again.” I open and then close my mouth. I’m not sure how to respond. I pick up the tea to stall my response. “I know you have your pick of colleges, but have you thought about Université PSL?”

“In Paris?” No, I hadn’t thought of that one. A few girls from Bradford are going there. I’d filled out an application the same as I did for a ton of colleges and gotten into them all. That Score name can do just about anything.

“I thought it might be a good place for us to start over.”

“I really don’t know what to say to all of this.” I thought we would take this whole getting reacquainted with one another thing slowly but obviously that’s not her train of thought.

“How about you think about it but keep it between us for now. Your brother can be—”

“Your son, Mom,” I correct her. She gives a stiff nod.

“I know he’s my son. I miss him too, but I think we still need some time.”

“I’ll think about it,” I give. Paris doesn’t sound terrible, but I wouldn’t be picking it because of my mom fully. It would be a fresh start. To get out of the social scene that can dominate here in the States. Especially if Chase is going to be getting married. I really don’t want to be around for any of that.

“We could do a quick trip. A girls’ weekend. Give it a test run.” Mom is all smiles. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her smile this much in my life, but it’s been a long time since I saw her. I know I need to be careful with her, but I can’t help but to begin to soften a bit. If she really wants to try to repair our relationship, I should at least be open to the idea.

“All right,” I agree. A longer weekend away might be nice. It will give me a chance to clear my head.

“I’ll make the arrangements and text you all the details.” Mom stands, giving me another one of her strange air kisses. I don’t know why it bothers me, but it does. I watch her leave the little shop before I go up and order myself a real drink and grab a slice of lemon pound cake before heading back to my own car.

As I start to get in, I swear I spot the same woman from the other night at my father's birthday. She jogs by in workout gear. I shake it off, thinking I'm crazy. When I get into my car, I smile when I see Chase has been blowing up my phone.

What if I did give in to him too? What would it hurt to allow myself one night of fun? I could work him out of my system and then truly let him go.

“*W*hat do you mean you don’t know who she was with?” I try to keep the irritation out of my voice. I’m starting to unravel, and I know it. It’s getting hard to do my job. Thankfully, I have a solid team around me to pick up my slack.

I had no clue that the distance I’d kept from Emily over the years helped keep me together. Now that I can taste how close she is, everything inside of me is changing. The waiting is eating me alive at this point. I’ve always been protective and jealous over others who got her attention. Even a bit obsessive, but this is something else altogether.

“Sir, it was only a blond woman. They had tea and hugged and left.” Okay, that’s not too bad. Still doesn’t stop my jealousy. Why can’t she be having tea with me? I’ll take her little ass to London and get her the best damn tea of her life. I make myself calm down before I do something irrational. I’m sure she went out with a friend. She did get out early today. “The woman seemed older, but it was hard to tell and still keep my distance.”

Of course. I’d told her that after I got Emily’s last text to not get too close. Emily had noticed me talking to Riley. Is that why she’d up and disappeared from the party the other night? This hot and cold game she is playing with me is driving me insane.

“Thanks. Just let me know where she’s headed.” I’m guessing home. She stopped responding to my texts. Either she was

being a brat to me, which is deserved, or she'd put her phone away while she hung out with this friend.

"Sir, I actually think she's headed to your place." I push back from my chair to stand up. It slams into the bookcase behind it. Not that I keep shit on it, so nothing falls off. I don't keep anything around here but bare necessities. This place isn't home. Wherever my forever starts with Emily will be my home.

"Are you sure?" I glance down at myself like a sixteen-year-old boy about to go on a date, wanting to make sure I look okay. I'm in jeans and a simple black shirt.

"Yeah, I'm more than sure."

"All right." I end the call quickly to call downstairs and tell them to not only let her in but to scan her through the private elevator.

I want to go down and meet her myself, but that would give away that I knew she was on her way here. I doublecheck my texts to see if she mentioned coming here, but there is only the last text I'd sent her. I want Emily to know that I haven't been pushing her away, I've only been waiting, but I also don't want to freak her the hell out because I've become some psycho stalker. This is a very fine line I'm walking right now.

Before I know it, I'm pacing in front of my entryway. What if this is it? Has she come to terms with what is happening between us? That it's now time for us to be together. A knock sounds on my door finally. She barely gets one knock on the door and I'm swinging it open.

Her eyes widen in surprise, probably shocked at how fast I answered the door. Of course, she's in that goddamn fucking uniform. This will be the last day she ever wears that thing unless it's in the privacy of our own home.

"Baby girl, is everything okay?" I ask. She's been avoiding me, and now here she is right in front of me.

"Yes." The next thing I know, she's in my arms. Her mouth is on mine. "You better be alone in here," she says between kisses.

“Refer to this place as a fuck pad again and I’ll spank your ass.”

She licks her lips. “Can’t it be that for a little bit?”

My cock goes painfully hard. “I’m not going to fuck you our first time, Emily.”

“Then do whatever it is that you are going to do,” she challenges me. This girl is going to kill me. At least it will be a good death. My hands grip her ass under her skirt as I carry her back toward the master bedroom. I can’t wait another second to have her. I kiss her the whole way, needing to taste her. It’s been over a week. I had no idea someone could crave a taste this way.

When we make it to the bedroom, I put her on her feet before I sit on the bed. “Strip,” I order her.

“Seriously?” Her cheeks start to flush.

“Slowly,” I add. “You have no idea how many times I’ve jacked off to you in this uniform.” I undo my jeans and shift them down enough that I can free my cock. “Now I get to see it in person.”

“Chase,” she whispers my name so sweetly it makes my cock jerk in my hand.

“Don’t get shy on me now.” She licks her lips.

“You really touch yourself and think of me?” She pulls her top off. She’s got on a soft petal blue bra underneath.

“Every fucking day.”

“Lies.” She pulls at the zipper on the side of her skirt. It falls to her feet, revealing the matching panties. Holy fuck. I squeeze my cock hard so that I don’t come too soon. A strangled sound comes from deep in my throat. Her lips part as those eyes of hers widen again.

Good, maybe she’s starting to get what she does to me and the control she’s testing. “Why would I lie about fucking my hand to thoughts of you? I’ve had a lot of time to think of ways to fuck you. Where I could come on you.” She swallows,

realizing she might have bitten off more than she could chew, but Emily is always up for a challenge.

She reaches behind her and unsnaps her bra, letting it hit the floor, leaving her only in her light blue panties, knee-high socks, and the sexy as hell little black boots that have a small heel with a buckle that goes over the top. She's every man's wet dream, and she's all mine.

I motion for her to come to me. I spread my thighs, making room for her so I can reach down and undo the buckles of the shoes. She braces her hands on my shoulders to step out of them.

"Socks stay," I tell her as I hook my fingers into her panties and slip them down her long legs. "Fucking hell. You're going to unman me."

"What does that mean?" She stares down at me, not understanding.

"It means I'm going to come before I get inside of you."

"Is that bad? I thought men wanted to come." She drops to her knees in front of me.

"Emily," I warn. I'm holding on by a very fucking thin thread here.

"I just want to touch it. I've never touched one before." I groan, closing my eyes as I let her have her way. Her soft hand wraps around my cock, and it's the greatest pleasure I've ever felt in my life. I continue to allow her to stroke me. My eyes fly open when I feel her mouth wrap around the head of my cock. I dig my fingers into her soft blond hair. Her bright blue eyes peer up at me, and I know what she's asking me without words. "Baby girl, anything you do to my cock is going to blow my mind. I'm already about to lose my shit."

"You know me." She licks the head of my cock. "I strive to be the best at everything I do."

"Mission fucking accomplished." She smirks before she wraps her whole mouth around my cock, sucking me in as deeply as she can. As much as I'm loving every second of this, I don't want this to go down this way. No way is she showing up here

and giving me a blow job and getting me off before I get my mouth on her pussy first.

If this was two weeks from now, maybe that would be the case. With her ignoring all my text messages, it could be a nice little punishment for her, but right now I'm trying to prove to her I'm the only lover that she'll ever crave. That I'm her forever.

When she takes me all the way to the back of her throat and then hollows out her cheeks, I know I have to get her mouth off me. I'm not going to last much longer if she keeps this up.

In one quick movement, I lift her from the floor, my cock slipping free from her mouth before I pin her to the bed. I'm damn thankful I took a shower when I got home from the jobsite. Every shower I take ends up in a jack-off session with her name on my lips. If not for that shower an hour ago, I would've already blown my load. It also helps that after she sent me that selfie of herself, I had to once again take matters into my own hands.

"Hey, I wasn't done." She tries to huff.

"Baby girl, you're about to learn real quick that while I love your sassy mouth outside this room, when I've got my hands on you, I'm in charge. You got that?" My tone is firm. Typically, I'm laid-back, even at work, until I'm pushed, but nobody can fucking push me the way Emily can.

"How do you want me?" She spreads her hands above her head. I know this is part show. She is pretending to be who she thinks she should be. Some seductress. I don't know what game she is playing with me right now, but I really don't give a flying fuck. In the end, I'll win, and she will be mine.

"Trust me, you'll know because I'll put your little ass there or tell you." I stand from the bed to strip off the rest of my clothes. "Thighs spread," I order.

Her breathing grows heavy. She's not used to this side of me, but when those legs start to spread and I see how fucking wet she is, I know she's loving every second of it.

That makes two of us.

I thought I was coming here with all the control. All week Chase has been up in my inbox, so to me, I had the power. It was a silly thought, and truthfully, I don't even want the power. Not here. He's right. When we're in his bedroom, I love how bossy and demanding he is. Chase is normally so laid-back. So much so that at times it would drive me insane when I'd be trying to get his attention.

It takes everything in me not to be bashful as I spread myself open for him. Cheerleading, volleyball, and even dance has kept me in shape over the years. I guess the one plus to giving in to this one night of lust and need I have for Chase is that he's going to get to see me in this body.

I never loved cheer or any of the sports I did for school. The only thing I ever did that was outside of trying to get into a good school, not only because of my father's name, was riding horses, which is something you could do competitively; but that was mine, and I wasn't going to turn it into anything other than my passion. Something I truly loved to do because I wanted to. It was never an obligation.

From here on out, I'm not going to be spending days running laps and doing drills. I'm sure I'll put on some weight, but when I see my stepsister Molly, I don't think that's a bad thing. I've heard her huff about some of the weight she gained since moving into our home. I think her curves look amazing, but not all men feel the same. The woman I saw Chase with at my father's event was more than in shape.

“Stay with me.” Suddenly Chase is over me. His hand grips my chin. “You get lost in that head of yours. Stay with me right now. You do that for me, baby girl.” I lick my lips, still tasting him here. I nod my head. That was the whole point of coming here. I need to forget about everything else and take this night. It’s been years in the making for me.

“Chase, I’ve always been with you. More than I want to admit.”

“Baby, don’t say that to me.” He drops his forehead to mine. “You have no idea the thoughts I’ve had about you.” His mouth comes down on mine, taking my breath away.

How long has Chase wanted me? I know I am younger than him. Hell, I’m his best friend’s little sister, but in my mind as a little girl, I’d see his parents and think that would be Chase and me one day, but that was unrealistic. They are closer in age. Chase went on with his life while I still had to grow up, but now I’m all grown up, and the man can’t keep his hands off me.

He breaks the kiss, his mouth traveling down my body. “Give me a hickey again and see what happens.”

“I’ll do whatever I want to this body. That’s the rule here.” I want to tell him to shove it up his ass, but all that comes out of me is a whimper of need. Yes, here I let go. There is nothing else other than him and me at this moment. It’s the most freeing experience I’ve ever felt in my life.

His hands cup my breasts, pushing them together as he gives each of them attention. Small moans leave me. I had no clue my breasts could be so sensitive, or maybe it’s just Chase. He makes everything inside of me feel like so much more.

I watch as his mouth descends down my stomach. He pauses and places a few soft kisses there. He mutters something low that I can’t hear before his mouth is between my thighs.

“You always keep yourself bare.” He runs his mouth across the top of my mound, causing goosebumps to break out along my skin.

“Yes, for cheer and when I wear swimsuits.” A lot of girls at school ran out and got tattoos when they turned eighteen. But not me.

I went and got laser treatment. I don’t know why—I just prefer to be bare—but now I suddenly feel a bit self-conscious. The first and only time I told Chase how I felt about him, he said I was too young. I’m sure this, along with the knee socks, aren’t helping that matter. But then again, he was the one to tell me to keep them on.

I try to close my legs, but it’s pointless. Chase’s broad shoulders have my thighs spread wide as he takes in every inch of my sex.

“Are you trying to take my pussy from me?”

“Your pussy?” I sit up on my elbows. He suddenly smacks the side of my thigh. I gasp in surprise.

“Rules, little girl.” I glare at him but keep my lips sealed because fuck that was hot. I want him to think I’m mad, but I’m betting how wet I am is telling him the truth about how I feel about all of this. “I love you fucking bare. I get to see every inch of what’s mine.”

Again, I want to run my mouth, but he takes a long lick down the seam of my sex, his tongue flattening out against my clit. My hips buck off the bed, but he quickly pins them down so that I can’t move them again as he dives in.

His mouth feels as though it’s everywhere. The sensation is indescribable. I never imagined it would be like this. It’s both overwhelming and incredible at the same time. My senses are on overload. My first orgasm hits me fast. I’m already so worked up, and seeing Chase’s face buried between my thighs is enough to get me off. I cry out his name, my fingers digging into the bedspread.

He doesn’t stop; he keeps going, but this time he thrusts one of his fingers inside of me and soon after another. I rock my hips some. Not much with how he has them pinned down, but my body is working on its own accord now. I want more of him, to

feel him over me, thrusting in and out of me. Making me his in every way.

The two fingers inside of me feel tight. I had my mouth around his cock, and it's way bigger than two fingers. His tongue laps at my clit as his fingers hit a sensitive spot inside of me. I orgasm again, this time so hard a gush of wetness leaves me.

I put my hands over my eyes as I moan, experiencing the greatest pleasure of my life while also being mortified at the same time. What the hell just happened? Chase doesn't seem to notice or care because he's still going to town on me, licking up every drop as he works another finger inside of me.

"Chase." I drop my hands from my face, shaking my head no. I'm not sure I can take any more. I might be shaking my head no, but those words are not crossing my lips.

"I've got you." My sex flutters. Those words might be as powerful to me as *I love you*, but he doesn't know that. He's pushing my body toward a third orgasm which I didn't even imagine was possible. I honestly thought it was some myth men made up. Right as he's about to prove me wrong and I sense another pressing down on me, Chase moves. His fingers slip out of me as his mouth leaves me too.

Then he's kissing me. I moan and wiggle against him. I was so close to coming again. It was right there. "Chase, please," I start to beg, needing release.

"I'm sorry," he says before he kisses me again. Sorry as in he's not going to let me get off.

Then understanding hits me. His cock slides inside my opening, and he pushes all the way inside of me. I cry out against his mouth. He never stops kissing me. It's not a sharp pain I have but more of this sensation of being so full.

His mouth leaves mine, and he kisses me everywhere he can reach while keeping his cock still inside of me. That pleasure starts to build again, but this time, it's different. I want something harder, deeper. I need it. I need him.

"Baby girl."

"Yes." I grip his shoulders as I try to lift my hips.

“You need more of me.” He gives me a smirk.

“Shut up and fuck me.” His whole body stills over me.

“Say it right, or I’ll pull out and just jack off onto you.” He did not say that to me. I’m appalled, but my body isn’t because I say what he wants me to. It’s what I actually wanted to say to begin with but was too chicken.

“Make love to me, Chase.”

“Anything for my girl.” He pulls out and thrusts back in. There is no pain this time. I wrap my legs around him as he starts to pick up speed. He presses down with each thrust so he grinds against my clit at the same time.

“Oh, I ah—” I can’t find words. He thrusts even deeper, triggering my whole body to explode with pleasure. He buries himself all the way inside as he comes with me. I can feel his release inside of me. It should freak me the hell out, but damn does it feel so right.

With Chase, everything has always felt so right my whole life. But why is it that we can’t ever get it right together?

CHASE

I'm on cloud nine. Emily is in my bed. I don't know if she wore me out or I wore her out. The girl has stamina, that's for damn sure. I'd carried her to the bathroom knowing she might be tender. It didn't take her but a soft smile to get me into the tub with her. The next thing I knew, the girl was on top of me with my cock inside of her.

Emily can be such a conundrum at times. She goes after so many things in her life that she thinks she needs, but when it comes to other things, she can shy away easily. That's why I know when the sun comes to a full rise and she wakes, I might have a whole other Emily on my hands. One that's in a panic about what we did.

Not only that, the mention of a condom was never brought up, and I know the first time she was in my condo, she was snooping to see if I had any. I don't. There was no need. Who jacks off with a fucking condom on?

I'd bet my life all those years ago after I'd shut her down that she vowed to herself that she was done with me. I mean, she was barely a teenage girl telling me that she loved me, and one day she wanted me to be her husband and wouldn't be happy if I took some other girl to prom. Hell, she never came back to the Silverstein estate after that. I don't think she knows how much that not only hurt me, but it killed my mom too.

I was still a teenage boy confused as fuck. I'd made promises to myself years before that I wasn't going to be like a lot of the

men that run in the circles of our world. I wanted what my parents had. I wasn't chasing after any girl. There was no prom date in mind.

The idea of the woman who would be my wife one day was still fuzzy in my mind. Until Emily started to grow up. Of course, that all came after I fucking broke her heart, but what the hell was I supposed to tell her back then? To me, she was still the young girl I was extremely protective of.

I suppose maybe in the back of my mind there were some signs. I'd always remember her birthday or events happening in her life. I'd go out of my way to celebrate in some way with her. Besides my parents, school, and Asher, she was always at the forefront of my mind for as long as I could remember. Then it all began to change.

My attention goes to my phone on the nightstand. The phone is face down, but I can see the screen is lit. Either someone is calling or texting. I watch it as it continues to light up over and over again. I know Emily told her father she was staying out with a friend last night, so it can't be related to that. Besides, would they call me if they couldn't find Emily? Not like it's been a few days or something crazy.

Thinking something must be wrong, I reach over and grab it to see who might be calling. Asher's name lights up my screen. I see a bunch of missed calls from him. The fuck is going on? Worried something happened to someone, I answer it.

"Hey," I try to whisper.

"I fucked up."

"You don't say." Pretty sure I told him he was going to do that yesterday if he didn't watch himself.

"She heard me talking to her mom."

"It's not Grace." Whatever this mess is, whether it be some kind of money laundering by an accountant or some shit, I know it's not Grace. I've always found myself to be good at reading people. Tomas could go broke and Grace would stay. She'd go right back into nursing. It was my understanding that

Tomas had to talk her into quitting, saying he wanted to travel the world with her.

“It’s someone.”

“It is,” I agree.

“What time is it?” Emily mumbles.

“You got a chick in your bed?”

“How about you worry about your own personal life,” I clip back. Emily glares at me before she rolls to the other side of the bed. I want to make a grab for her, but she’s too damn quick, and I’m afraid she’ll give me lip, and then Asher will know who I do have in my bed.

“I need some help here.”

“We use the same firms.” I sit up to lean against the headboard, watching Emily venture into the bathroom. “Honestly, I think you need to bring in the feds. Bank footage and shit is going to need to be pulled, and while you could do that in a few calls, you need to do this right so that it can be handled in the proper way.”

“You’re right.” I take a breath. “I love her. I have to fix this.”

“Then you’ll fix it and make it up to her.” I’m one to talk. That’s what I’m doing at this very moment.

“All right, I’m going to call my sister. Maybe she can talk to Molly. They’ve gotten close.” I don’t get a chance to say goodbye before he’s ending the call. Emily comes walking out of the bathroom in one of my shirts. She’s a goddamn vision.

“My brother is a dumbass.” She’s got her phone in her hand. I’m guessing she’s gotten some messages from Molly. “That who you were talking to?” She puts her hands on her hips. She’s annoyed.

“Hey.” I hold my hands up. “I told his ass Grace and Molly were good people, and whatever he was thinking that he was wrong.”

Emily shakes her head. “Not why I’m mad, Chase. You didn’t want him to know, did you? That I was in your bed. Can’t let

this little secret get out.” Something flashes in her eyes. I can’t place it, but I know it stems from something deeper than her brother knowing about us. I don’t give a fuck if Asher knows. I just didn’t think that was the moment to let that cat out of the bag. His plate is still pretty damn full.

“The fuck?” I’m out of the bed. She holds her hands out in front of her.

“We’re not doing this right now. I have a sister who is a mess, and I need to get to her. Whatever this is can wait.”

“This is?” I repeat through gritted teeth. I try to reason with myself. Emily knows the family that Grace and Molly have started to create in her home is being threatened, and she wants to try and fix it. She is so used to people running that I’m sure she thinks Grace and Molly might do the same, but I don’t take Grace for a runner. If anything, she’ll be the one to stitch them back together once they figure out what caused it.

“Chase, I know we’re in the bedroom, but I have to go.” I drop my head. It takes everything inside of me to nod. She takes no time getting dressed. She puts her skirt back on but leaves my shirt on before putting on her shoes. She tries to leave, but I snag her around the wrist and pull her back to me and kiss her with everything I have. She needs to know this is far from over.

I dig my fingers into her hair. She always tastes so damn sweet even when she’s pissed. That’s my girl, though. Sweetness is always close to the surface even when she’s mad. It’s who she is. Where she got that from in her family, I have no idea, but it’s all her.

“Last night,” she breathes when we finally break the kiss.

“We’ll talk about it later.” That’s a whole long conversation we need to have. A confession on my part really.

“Okay,” she agrees before I finally release my hold on her.

I last about ten minutes before I’m getting dressed and heading over to the Score estate. The faster I can clean up Asher’s mess, the faster I can get my girl back.

EMILY

“Emily.” Grace hugs me when I walk in the door. She takes a step back, her eyes roaming up and down me, but she doesn’t comment on my clothing or the fact that my hair is a mess. I’m sure my lips are swollen too. I can feel they are fuller. There is something so erotic about still having lingering touches and marks of Chase on me.

“She’s in her room. Things got a little—”

“I know.” I grab her hand. “It’s bullshit, and I want you to know I don’t believe any of it.” Her face softens.

“Asher is, well...” I trail off, not wanting to say anything bad about my brother but also wanting to give her something.

“Honey, no. I understand. He’s got some demons. I understand that. It’s just when his demons start to haunt my Molly that I get a bit irritated.” Of course, Grace would still see the good in Asher, even after what he accused her of. It doesn’t surprise me at all.

“You’re too nice.” I shake my head. “We don’t deserve you. I think what you meant to say is that you get fucking pissed when it affects Molly.”

“No, I don’t.” The way she stares at me, it’s like she’s staring into my soul. “Just irritated, but if we love each other, we’ll work through all this. Everyone expresses their trauma in different ways, and I don’t want to speak ill of your mother, but she’s left a mark on both of you. That’s her doing, but

Asher can't let that trauma bleed onto the people who are trying to love him. We need to heal it."

"Damn, Grace, that's deep for nine a.m.," I try to tease. She gives me a half smile.

"You want to go talk to her? I think it might help."

"Yeah, she's been texting me."

"As much as I hate what has happened, I love that you two are getting close." She kisses the top of my head. "Go make our girl feel better." Warmth blooms in my chest at her words. *Our girl*. "Emily." I pause to glance back at her. "You're our girl too." I give her a warm smile before I head up to Emily's room, Grace's words bouncing around inside of my head.

I knock on the door. "I told you to go away!" Molly shouts.

"It's me," I say through the door.

"Oh." I hear some shuffling, and a moment later, the lock pops and she opens the door. Her eyes are red-rimmed, but she gives me the same glance-over her mom did when I walked in the door. "Who did this?" She motions to my appearance.

"I'm here to talk about you."

"No, you're here to cheer me up, so spill."

"You sneaky brat." I laugh, letting myself into her room. She flips the lock quickly behind her. "I'm shocked he hasn't worked his way into your room."

"Think my mom scared him."

"She does have that way about her. Scary and sweet at the same time. It's really an art."

"It is." Molly plops down on her bed. "You first, then me." I chew on my bottom lip.

Last night was supposed to be a one-night thing. Do I really want people to know? I have a level of guilt about it too. I'm still not sure about the whole thing about Chase being promised to some other woman. His mom's comment about him not having random girls at his condo aligned with that so it had me leaning toward that being the truth.

“I slept with Chase,” I blurt out. She only nods. “Seriously. A nod?”

“I mean, it’s not that shocking. Not with the way he can’t keep his eyes off you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Because he’s a protective older brother type and he’s always watching out for me. That’s all.”

“Really, you and Asher think about banging it out?”

“Molly!” I shout. “You did not just say that.”

“Only proving a point. Who is he protecting you from in your own home?” I shrug.

“Whatever, I told you, now you tell me what all went down.” She’d given me the CliffsNotes over text, but I want details. “He called Chase freaking out this morning and not about the money stuff.”

“Still, we had a deal,” Molly hisses.

I raise my brows. “A deal?”

“I mean kind of.” Her cheeks start to turn pink. “I let him have his way with me, and he’d be nice to my mom.”

“This is some weird blackmail that I don’t think was blackmail at all.”

“It was blackmail,” she insists.

“As in blackmail he makes me do it so I don’t have to say I want it?” I smirk. Those cheeks turn even pinker. “Babe, we’ve shared some books. I think I know a bit of your taste.”

“Those are only books!”

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” She elbows me in the side. “Damn, when did you get all violent?”

“It was a nudge. Did I really hurt you?”

“I’m teasing you. Where is my brother?” I ask. She shrugs. “You know this isn’t over, right? Whatever this is, he’ll figure

it out and fix it. Then he'll come for you. Asher is one of the most determined men I've ever known, and I've never known him to give up on something he cares about." I sigh. "Love is more powerful than anything, it will make you do crazy things."

I should know. I gave Chase my virginity last night, and now I'm going on a random trip with my birth mother I should hate. She'd sent me a text saying we'd be leaving tonight.

"Like try and give my mom millions to never leave your father."

"What was that even? Like a reverse prenup?" I laugh. It's not funny, but I can't help myself. Molly at least smiles at my joke. "He got scared. Thought if your mom left, she'd take you with her. It's fucked up but sweet in an Asher way. I mean, he's got mommy issues."

"He's not the only one with issues," she whispers. I grab her hand, knowing she's right. She lost her father at a young age. Now she's in a world she doesn't think she belongs.

"Do you hear that?" I ask, swearing I heard a shout echoing down the hallway. Being the nosy person I am, I'm out of the bedroom following the sounds. Molly is hot on my heels. We both stop at the top of the stairs to see Asher and Chase about to brawl. They both are ready for a fight.

"You're fucking my sister!" Asher shouts.

"Yo, man. You're fucking your stepsister."

"Ohhh burn!" I laugh, that is, until Asher lunges for Chase.

"Oh God! What do we do?" Molly grabs my arm.

"We let them fight it out. I once watched them fight over the fact that Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wizard of Oz* was really the witch of the East and likely more evil than her sister the Wicked Witch of the West."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean she let a house just drop on her own sister then stole her shoes. Then had this weird dancing army which I think was in a trance. I mean, you're only my stepsister, and I'm not

going to let someone drop a house on you and then steal your shoes.” I glance down at Molly’s feet. “Okay maybe those shoes, but that would be a favor really.”

“Emily! Focus!” She points down at Chase and Asher going at it still. Her brother got in a few good swings, but now they’re on the ground rolling around.

“Asher Score, you stop it right this second!” Molly shouts in a tone that even has me standing up straighter. Dad and Grace come rushing into the foyer. Asher actually stops at Molly’s command.

“Tell him to bark like a dog,” I whisper.

“Emily,” Molly hisses at me again.

“I just wanted to see what kind of trance-like powers you might have, Glinda.”

“Both of you into the kitchen. Now!” Grace orders them.

“He’s sleeping with my sister,” Asher growls.

“I think you should be worried about me never sleeping with you again!” Molly shouts from the top of the stairs. Damn, when did this girl get so feisty? She must be really pissed. I don’t miss how my father’s eyebrows raised at Asher’s comment.

“He’s banging his stepsister.” Chase being Chase takes a jab back at Asher.

“Say I’m banging her one more time and I’ll bang your head into this fucking marble floor.”

“Enough. Both of you into the kitchen so I can clean you up. You might need a stitch,” Grace tells one of them. I’m not sure which. Chase’s lip is cut, and Asher has a gash over his eye.

“Family drama.” I sigh. Molly gives me a look like I’ve lost my mind but then bursts into laughter.

Mission accomplished. For the moment at least.

CHASE

“Let me check it,” Grace says to Asher. He snags her wrist before she can try and lift the bandage from above his brow. The two of us have been sulking in the study for the past few hours.

“I’m really sorry,” he tells her.

“I know, honey. You’re more like your father than you know. You try to protect your family, but sometimes it ends up hurting them.”

“I’ll earn her forgiveness. I’m in love with her.”

Grace pulls the bandage up from over his eyebrow to check it. She actually put two butterfly strips on it. “Molly is easy to love.” Grace always smiles when speaking of her daughter. I hate that this is something Emily never got, but I’m sure Grace is giving her some of that motherly love if she’s giving it to Asher, who’s been an utter asshole to her. “She’ll forgive you, but please, Asher, be careful. Molly is full of sweetness. Fix your mess and then get her back.”

Asher doesn’t look like he wants to agree. He wants to march upstairs and demand Molly forgive him now, but he chooses the wise path and nods, agreeing to her mother’s wishes.

He still, however, shoots another glare at me. Tomas is sitting behind his desk watching this all play out. I think it’s a lot for a man who thought he finally got his happily ever after. For years, he lived in hell with his ex and now, right when he thinks he’s about to have it all, it starts to slip between his fingers.

“And, you,” Grace points to her husband, “everything is going to be fine. You’re going to get yourself all worked up. You’ve got twelve years on me. I need you to remain youthful.” She smirks at him.

That’s right. I forgot that there is a big age gap between Grace and Tomas. She actually looks much younger than she is. I think it’s why they get a few looks and people assume the whole sugar daddy thing, but that’s when men go for girls in their early twenties at his age. Tomas was looking for love, and he found it. Hell, he brought it home with him, and now this house is bursting at the seams with it, and not necessarily in the best way.

“When are you going to yell at him?” Asher motions to me. I run my tongue across my split lip. I have to admit it felt good to get some aggression out. We both needed it. It’s been a few years since we’ve come to blows. Normally we did it on a mat with gloves but not every time.

I don’t know how he knew, but the second I stepped into the house, his ass was on me, questioning me about his sister. Maybe he saw her come in or caught more of her voice than I realized when we were on the phone. He could have put things together because it wasn’t normal for him to call and there be a woman in my bed.

Either way, the shit was coming out at some point. “What is it you want me to say, son? You’ve been in Japan while Chase has been here keeping an eye on her.”

“He’s supposed to be. He’s my best friend.” Asher tries to get up from his seat, but Grace puts her hand on his shoulder, and he keeps his ass put. I want to laugh. It was a week ago he wanted nothing to do with his stepmom, and now he’s doing whatever she tells him.

“Asher, you’re not stupid,” Tomas says, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his desk. Asher goes quiet for a long moment, and I know what he’s doing. He’s playing back the past in his mind. He drops his head and takes a deep breath.

“We really failed her,” Asher finally says. I know he’s talking to Tomas and not me. “I might have gotten Mom out of her

life, but really, have I been the best brother I could have been? Sure, I threw money at shit. Spoke to her about surface shit.” Tomas nods in agreement, knowing he’s done the same.

“But you know, don’t you, Chase? I bet you know everything,” Tomas asks.

“I do. I know her SAT scores, the way she takes her coffee. That she has a special pair of socks she wears when she plays volleyball. I know how many of those games they won and how many points she scored. I know more than I think you want me to.” Tomas leans back in his chair, and I know I’ve really shown more of my cards than maybe I should have. I could go on for days about the things I know about Emily. Even more so after last night.

“You sound in love.” Grace smiles over at me.

“I’ve always loved Emily in some way. Been protective over her. It just changed over this last year a lot. I didn’t understand it fully till this last year when I realized she was about to take the next step in her life, and it scared the hell out of me that I wouldn’t be a part of whatever that was. That she might be leaving.”

“She will be turning the page soon. I’m just not sure where her story is going,” Tomas says with a long sigh.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, honey.” Grace walks around the desk to sit in Tomas’s lap. “I’m not sure what Molly has planned, either.”

“She—” Asher tries to speak, but Grace holds her hand up to stop him.

“Even before you showed up, Asher. She’s been a bit lost.”

“It’s because she feels like she doesn’t belong,” Asher says. “And she doesn’t. She’s so much better than everyone in our world.”

“That she is,” Tomas agrees. Grace leans in and kisses Tomas on his cheek. For the first time today, I actually see a partial smile pull at Asher’s mouth. He’s getting it. His father’s in love. This is what he wanted. For his family to be happy.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell them that Emily pretends to fit in. Everything she does is because she thinks it's what is expected of her. Whatever will cause the least amount of waves and make people proud of her. There is a lingering fear that everyone looks at her as if she's her mother. It's shitty, but some do, but Asher doesn't get that because this world is full of fucked-up double standards.

I see it, though. When it comes to Emily, I see everything.

I stare out the window at the Eiffel Tower and wonder if I'd love this view more if Chase was at my side. I'd taken the coward's way out. I even tried to get Molly to come with me. When my mother called me about heading to Paris, I was hesitant with everything going on. I'd given her a small run-down but more to do with Chase than anything. She didn't have the right to know about Molly and Asher.

If she wanted to know them, she'd have to do that on her own. When I mentioned it to Molly about coming, I told her she could just say we were friends from school, but Molly being Molly wanted some time away. Her way of dealing is thinking and reading while keeping to herself. Mine is to keep moving.

What had gotten me to pack a bag and head for the private airport was when my mother confirmed the rumors I'd been hearing. Chase is promised and committed to marry another woman and has been for almost a year. My mother might not live in the same city or even state as I do, but the world of the wealthy can be small at times, and rumors are always floating around.

It killed me that he could do this. Part of me wants to rage at Chase that he'd make love to me as he called it, all while knowing his mother was planning a wedding. I couldn't bring myself to ask who the woman was. I don't want to know. Our families run in the same circles, so I know it will only be a matter of time before I do. I've been in Paris for weeks now. The escape hasn't been what I thought it would be. I think it

might be time to head home and face whatever happens. I can't hide out here forever. Plus, I miss Molly a ton.

I walk over to the nightstand in my hotel room and pull my phone off the charger to call her. I've been keeping in touch with her, but it's not the same being so far away. All I told my dad was I needed some time and I was going with a friend to check out the possibility of Université PSL. I begged him not to tell anyone with the exception of Grace, of course. They have the kind of marriage where they wouldn't keep secrets from one another.

"Hey," Molly answers the call sounding more depressed than normal.

"What's going on?"

"I think I caught a bug or something. I keep throwing up." A bug isn't what pops into my head when she tells me she's been throwing up. I reach down and touch my own stomach. When was the last time I had a period? I have felt a bit off the past few days. But I couldn't be. There is no way. Could I?

"Do you think it could be something else besides a stomach flu?" I suggest, wanting to see if she has even thought about the fact that she could be pregnant. Hell, I could be, for all I know.

"He went back to Japan," she mutters, changing the subject flat-out. I let her because I really don't want to go there either. I am, however, surprised Asher left for even a day. "He's back now though. But he was gone for a whole week! I should have gone somewhere." I want to laugh because Asher would've found her in seconds if she tried to take a trip somewhere. It would be pointless.

"He must have been wrapping things up, Molly. You two are far from over. The man is already back. That says something. He's got a whole team trying to figure out what's going on with the family accounts, and I swear on my life he doesn't think it's Grace anymore." I know my brother messed up, but he's a good guy, and I hope Molly gives him a second chance. I know without a doubt he'll make this up to her.

“I know.” She lets out a little huff. “The man has been utterly sweet to her.”

“Jealous of your own mom?” I tease.

“Of course not. It’s just, ahh—I don’t know.” Molly wants his attention, but she won’t let him give it to her.

The girl is holding strong. Molly thinks she’s so shy and reserved, but that girl has more strength than I do. If Chase walked in here and put his hands on me, I’d melt, even knowing how wrong it would be. That’s why me being in Paris is a good thing.

“I think you do know,” I respond.

I only do because I see it in myself. I want the same thing. Both Molly and I have been in this lost space. We might go about things in different ways, but our paths end in the same place. We want love. A family of our own.

Of course, we have a family now, but we’re picturing the whole husband and kids thing, maybe a cat that hates our husbands and a dog that is protective of us all. Even more than that, when I dream of those things, I think about Molly being on that same track with me. I just think she’s going to get her forever a lot sooner than I am. It’s a matter of days before Asher has her back under him.

“You do know, don’t you?” she says in understanding. It’s crazy how close we’ve gotten. Out of everyone in my family, she’s the closest to me at this point. “How are things with you?” She drops her voice. “Everything going okay with your mother?”

“Honestly, I have no clue. One second she’s sweet and the next she can be snippy. Then she disappears at times. I get she has a life here, but I’m only staying for a few weeks. The point is for us to get to know each other again. How can we do that if she’s never here?”

“But she is different, right?”

“I don’t know. I think? I was so young when everything was going on. Sometimes I’m not sure if my memories are my own or stories I’ve overheard. I can tell you she’s not a mom. A

mother maybe but not like Grace. Grace is a mom in every sense of the word. I think it's hard for Heidi to play that role."

"Play that role?" Molly repeats. There are more things I could tell her that have me second-guessing my mother, but I don't want to go there. So, I switch the subject the same way she did when I questioned her about her sickness.

"Anything going on with Chase?"

"You mean besides him showing up here every day under the pretense of going over details about the house he's building for Mom and Dad?" I smile when she calls them Mom and Dad for both of us. I love that she's starting to get comfortable.

"You think he's there fishing for information about me?" I ask.

I'm not stupid. I dropped my phone and bought a new one. The Silverstein name holds as much weight as the Score name. If Chase wanted, he could strongarm his way into getting information from people he shouldn't be able to. But I too have money and know how to partially cover my trail.

"Oh, I know he is. He tried to get some information from me. Then Dad set him straight." Finally, I hear a smile in her voice.

"Really? How?"

"Said you needed some time. You just finished school. That he should give you a moment to breathe. He'd waited this long; he could wait a bit longer." He's been waiting for me? What, to bang me before he got married? I don't understand this. Chase is charming and never a straight-out asshole unless it's deserved.

This doesn't sound like him, but maybe I don't know him like I thought I did. I'd built him up in my head as a young girl. As I got older, I kept my distance. He'd seemed to do the same. But when we were close, it felt so easy and natural. Like I did still know him.

"This is so stupid. Why is he worried about me?! He's engaged to another woman."

"Yeah, I've poked around about that with some of the staff, and they don't know info on it. They said they've never heard

of him even dating.” Molly has made it a point to be close with everyone that works at our home, and no one knows more secrets than the staff. “I finally broke and asked my mom, and she gave me this cryptic response that I need to leave that subject alone.” That’s interesting. I wonder why Grace would say that?

“The hell?” I mutter. The only reason I can think of is that Grace and Chase’s mom have gotten close since she married my dad. If anyone would know about a wedding Rebecca is planning, it would be Grace!

“Come home. I miss you. Let’s pick a school together. Is Paris kickass? Should we go there?”

“Nah.” I mean, it was nice, but I don’t think Molly’s French would be up to par, plus I honestly don’t think she wants to go to college.

It’s not for everyone, but I think she might feel a sense of pressure because she knows it will get her out of the house to give Mom and Dad their own space. She might not want to admit it yet, but her plans are going to be wrapped up in Asher. That means she will be staying close to home. As for me, I don’t think Paris is for me. I don’t see myself wanting to live so close to Heidi. I feel strange even calling her Mom at this point.

“Shit,” I mumble when I hear a door in the hotel suite open. “I’ve got to go. I’ll text you later.”

“Later,” Molly says before ending the call.

I learned early to keep talk of Grace and Molly off the table, but Heidi is always bringing them up. At times I think she is jealous. But what’s been worse is that her attitude has also changed towards Asher and my dad. It’s shifted a lot. There is this underlying hatred I’m starting to notice, and I think she’s trying to lure me to her side with some of her sob stories. I find most, if not all of them, hard to believe.

When I step out of my room into the suite, I see Heidi and she’s clearly distressed. Her eyes are wild as she holds bags in her hands. Which is strange. She’d normally have someone

else bring them to the room for her. Heidi can't do much for herself. I have no clue how she ever thought she could have kids and take care of them.

"Date go bad?" I ask. She's been on a bunch of those lately.

I had no interest when she tried to add me to one of those apps. I actually think it's a bit risky with the amount of money our family name carries. I don't mean because we're in another country. Though part of whatever deal Heidi took in the divorce, she had lost the last name Score. I suppose some might not know but still. She screams money. She doesn't even try to hide it.

"They're trying to ruin me!" She drops the bags to the floor. "They hate us! You don't understand, and now they know we're close, and they're going to make up lies to rip us apart like they did before!"

"What are you talking about?" Her pupils are so big I wonder if she's on coke. A few girls at school did it.

"Tomas and Asher!" she screeches.

"They don't know I'm with you."

"Oh, they do, and now it begins. They are trying to say I've been stealing from them. That..." She goes off on a tangent, but my mind starts to click things into place. It was her.

"You brought me here so that I'd save you, didn't you?" I cut her off, not hearing most of what she said. "You knew if anyone could get Asher or Dad to not press charges for whatever you've done, it would be because I asked them not to. You used me. You haven't changed one bit."

"You'd let them do this to your own mother!" she screams at me. Her words trigger me. Flashes of her throwing fits when I was little flip through my mind one after another. The way she looked at me. She hated me. I think she still does. I've noticed the small comments here and there that she makes. This is all fake.

"You're not my mother." I shake my head. "Grace has been more of a mom to me than you. Hell, Rebecca was too." A

lump forms in my throat. I don't want to cry in front of her. She doesn't deserve my tears.

"I'm not your mother?" She lets out a hysterical laugh. "How about we talk about how Tomas Score isn't even your biological father." Her words are like a punch to the gut. I don't want to believe her, but her face is so smug it's hard not to.

"Interpol. Open up!" a male voice shouts, banging on the door.

"I'm all you have. You can't let them do this to me," Heidi starts to beg. The door explodes inward as five people in blue coats and hats rush in and go straight for her. She tries to fight them, but it doesn't work. It's hard to hear what they are saying over her screaming. It only takes a few seconds before they have her in cuffs, leading her out of the room. One of the men stays behind.

"Emily Score?" he asks.

I nod my head. "What's happening?"

"We're extraditing your mother—"

"Please don't call her that."

The man gives me a sympathetic look. "She's going back to the States where we'll be handing her over to the FBI."

"Does my family know I'm with her?" Wouldn't they have given me a heads-up if they did? Oh God, do they think I'm a part of this? I'm not even a Score, according to my mother.

"No one knows. We did facial recognition, but it will be in the report we turn over."

I nod. "Thanks? I think," I mutter. Not sure what else to say.

"Am I free to go?"

"You are, but we'd be more than happy to escort you back to the States if you wish." Of course. He still thinks my father is Tomas Score.

"It's fine. I'll catch my own flight." He nods as he pulls out a card, handing it to me before he heads back out the broken door.

I drop down to my knees, my whole body numb. I thought I was lost before. Now I don't even know who I am anymore.

CHASE

I don't think I've ever been so pissed in my whole fucking life. The past three weeks have been the hardest of my life, but I was doing what Tomas asked. I thought it was the right thing to do. Emily could go and clear her mind. The only problem was he wouldn't tell me where she was. He'd simply said "Europe and with a girlfriend."

Fine, it gave me time to put final touches on the house I'd been building for us. There is a reason my condo is so bare. It's not home. Not the one we'd share. I built it on the other end of the Silverstein land near the pond I know she loves. I thought she'd enjoy being close to my parents. She and Molly are growing a bond too, and our place isn't far from the Score estate.

My resolve started to crumble over time. I'm used to having some sort of tab on her. At first, I couldn't find much. I even pushed Molly, who acted like I was no better than the scum on the bottom of her shoe. That sent all kinds of red flags up for me. Molly is sweet to everyone. It's in her nature. The only anger I've ever witnessed from her was when she was shouting at Asher.

The more I thought and put things together, the more I realized she ran to get away from me. She had doubts. Ones I put there. I hate that, but I'll spend my life proving to her I'm never going anywhere. I'm the one person she can always count on. Hell, I was when she didn't even know it.

There was no reason for her to drop off the map when it came to me. Or for her to disconnect her phone and so on. I will say she isn't terrible at hiding her tracks, but when I finally cracked, I had my team start going through all the flights that left out of the area on private planes that night. A name popped up, and I knew.

Heidi Rowe. Her fucking mother. I'd bet my life Tomas has no clue the friend Emily is with is her mother. Asher definitely doesn't know. He'd lose his mind. I didn't need anyone to start digging on anything when I saw her name. I knew who'd been stealing funds from the Score family. I also knew there was only one reason Heidi would try to slither her way back into Emily's life: to protect herself from the wrath that Asher will bring down on her.

I don't knock as I enter the Score home, coming in through the main entrance. Grace and Tomas are making their way out of his office.

"Where is Asher?" I ask, not bothering with hellos. I don't have the time.

"What's wrong?" Tomas asks.

"Asher!" I shout. I barely bellow the words and he's already rounding the corner to come down the stairs. He has Molly's hand in his. I guess those two made up. Must be fucking nice.

"Emily is with her mom," Molly blurts out. "I didn't know. I'm sorry." Her eyes fill with tears. "I'm pregnant too!" The truths just pour from her like she can't hold on to them anymore. Could Emily be pregnant? I push that thought from my mind. One thing at a time. I need to get my girl back.

"Pregnant," Grace whispers. She doesn't actually seem shocked.

"I was coming to tell you. Molly can't get her on the phone. Interpol was picking Heidi up to bring her back to the States to face a slew of charges."

"Emily is on a plane on her way back here now," I inform them all.

“Oh, thank God,” Molly sighs. Tomas’s expression is unreadable. The man really can’t free himself of this parasite of a human he has for an ex-wife.

“She is going to try to use Emily so I won’t press charges,” Asher says what I was also thinking. He runs his hand down his face, already knowing he doesn’t know what he’s going to do.

“She booked a private flight to take her to Hawaii. Little does she know her plane is coming here.” Asher’s brows lift in surprise. Her running days are over. I’m not doing this anymore. Emily is mine.

“Maybe she needs to go to Hawaii. Then she doesn’t have to deal with what her mother has done to her or you for that matter.” Molly’s tone has turned tart. The anger I’ve felt from her recently is coming through again.

“Then I’ll take her to Hawaii, but if one more person tries to get in the way of her and me, there is going to be a fucking problem.” Asher and Tomas hold up their hands in clear indication they aren’t going to step in the way. Molly, however, is still pissed.

“Oh, so your fiancée isn’t going to get in the way?” Molly hisses. Grace’s face pales. She opens her mouth and then closes it.

“She thinks I’m engaged?” I shout. That explains a whole lot. A few of the things she said run through my mind. Fuck me.

“It’s not a secret you’re promised to someone. Your own mom has been saying it. So I’ve heard,” Molly keeps going. Grace cringes but speaks up.

“She has been, but it’s how she keeps requests away from families that reach out about you dating their daughter, plus Rebecca believes it to be true. I’m sure it doesn’t help the rumors because she’s been planning some things as well for the engagement party and bridal party for you. Might be a wedding date picked too.” Of course, she has been planning. I want to kiss and choke my mother right now.

“It’s Emily,” I respond. Molly’s mouth falls open. Grace clearly knows this. She nods her head in agreement. That would explain why Tomas was really calm about the idea of Emily and me.

“But the woman at the bar with the—”

I cut Molly off. “Security. She and her husband work for me.” My phone goes off. I pull it out to see Emily’s plane is about to land. “Everyone stay here. I’ll be back shortly. There are a few other things that need to be addressed or I would just take Emily home with me.”

“What?” Asher asks, wanting a heads-up. The man hates surprises.

“I read the reports from the arrest.” My eyes swing over to Tomas. “Heidi told Emily that she isn’t yours.”

“She’s mine!” Tomas grits out without missing a beat. “I admit I could have been a better father, and I will be, but Emily is *my daughter*.”

“You know that for a fact?” I toss back.

“She’s my sister,” Asher adds.

“It doesn’t matter if a drop of the DNA inside of Emily is mine. Both she and Molly are my daughters. Period.” A smile pulls at Molly’s lips.

“Good, because I have a feeling I’m about to bring home a woman who thinks she’s lost,” I say before I turn to leave. It doesn’t take me long to get to the private airport. Emily’s bags are already coming off as I pull up.

“This is not Hawaii,” I hear her say to one of the airport workers, making me smile.

Then she sees me. The second her eyes lock with mine from the top of stairs of the plane, she bursts into tears. I rush up the stairs and wrap her in my arms. She buries her face in my neck as she sobs.

“Sweetheart, you’re killing me here.” I motion for one of the men to take the driver’s seat of my Land Rover as I get into the back seat with Emily in my lap. “Baby, listen. It’s you.

You're who the rumor is about. I'm promised to you. My mom has been saying that shit forever."

She slowly lifts her head. "It doesn't matter. I don't even belong in this world. I'm not a Score. I have no—"

I cut her off, covering her mouth with a kiss. It's been too long since I tasted her, and I'm not going to let her spew that bullshit.

She moans into my mouth and clings to me tighter. I don't know how long we kiss, but it's long enough that we're parked back out front of her family's estate, and the driver has left us for privacy.

"You know my mother couldn't care less if you are a Score or not, Emily. She'd be hurt if she heard you say that."

Her bottom lip trembles, knowing I'm right. "I know, it's just a lot to take in. I have no clue who I am. Where I belong. I try to do everything right, and everything is wrong."

"You're not a Score." I agree with her on that. "You're a Silverstein, and where you belong is with me. As for who you are, that is something that comes in time and changes as life happens. Right now, who do you want to be?"

"Your wife," she whispers.

"Then we go from there."

"That simple?" She gives me a half smile.

"Yes, it's that simple. If you let me, I'll give you everything you could ever want. You don't have to be perfect for me. You already are. I'll always think you're perfect."

"I love you."

"I love you too." I lean in and kiss my girl. "It might have been rough getting us here, but we're finally here, and that's all that matters now." She turns in my lap to straddle me.

"I like it a bit rough." She smirks. There's my girl.

"Emily." I groan, grabbing her hips. Her family is inside waiting for us. "You took my virginity and then ghosted me.

I've had blue balls for weeks." Her pink lips that are still swollen from our kisses form a perfect O shape.

"No, you can't—"

"I'm not a liar, and you know that. I told you I always wanted what my parents had. Now I get to have it."

"If I give it to you," she sasses.

"Oh, you'll give it to me." I pull her in closer so her pussy rubs against my cock. A small moan leaves her. "You'll give me it all because you already own all of me."

EPILOGUE

“Chase.” I whisper my husband’s name.

“Babe, if you want to wake me up, sit on my face.” I start to giggle, but the next thing I know he grips my ass, pulling me up the bed. I grab the headboard as my knees straddle his face.

I let out a moan as Chase goes to town. I try to rock my hips, but I get a smack to the ass before he grips me so I can’t move an inch. Of course, I’m sitting on his face and he’s still in control. Though it’s the bedroom, so it’s his rules.

Chase’s body knows my body all too well. He also knows how excited I am about today and why I was lying on top of him whispering his name to wake him up. His tongue does its magic, and in no time I’m orgasming. I throw my head back and cry out his name.

In my haze of pleasure, it takes me a moment to realize my husband has positioned me on all fours and thrust all the way inside of me. I glance over my shoulder at him. Chase licks his lips, tasting me still on him as he slides in and out of me.

His hand skims over my small baby bump, and between my legs his fingers find my clit. “Chase,” I moan, about to go off again already.

“I’m with you, sweetness.” He groans, thrusting fully inside of me before he stills. Warmth blooms throughout my body as his fingers take me over the edge again. My knees start to give out, but Chase’s arm wraps around my center to pull me into his side so that he’s spooning me from behind.

“You have to put the turkey in,” I remind him.

“I already put something in the oven.” I elbow him. He grunts pretending it actually hurts. “I’ll go put the turkey in. Do your thing.” He kisses me before slipping from the bed. He puts on some sweatpants in case he runs into any of our little ones. Everyone should still be asleep, but you never know.

I’m so excited that I’m hosting Thanksgiving this year. Grace did one, but normally Molly and I switch back and forth. I might be biased, but I think my home is the best for hosting. This place was built with a family in mind. The top floor has all the bedrooms. There are a total of seven, but if you stand in the center of the house on the first floor you can look up and see all the doors to the second-floor bedrooms.

The master is on the main level that has a nursery attached to it. At least that’s what it will keep being until Chase and I decide we’re done having kids. We’re already on our third. We made sure to have some space between them, wanting to make sure each got the attention they needed. It’s helpful that they have two sets of grandparents that are very hands-on.

Plus, Molly and I will meet up and just let them run themselves wild in the pool or down in the game room. Some days I’m exhausted, but every day I go to bed with a smile on my face. I have the family I always wanted.

I asked my dad if he wanted to do a paternity test. He said no unless there was some health reason, which there hasn’t been. I’m his daughter, and that’s the end of it. I think with Grace coming into our lives and the shit Heidi pulled, it really woke my father up to the life he’d been living.

For so long he was scared of getting hurt, so he kept everyone at arm’s length. Even his children. Goes to show you what a good woman can do to a man. That woman is an angel, and we’re all blessed to have her in our lives. I even call her Mom now, and Molly calls Tomas Dad.

I also call Chase’s parents Mom and Dad, but that wasn’t too much of a stretch. When I was younger, I was always around them. I knew I missed them, but I hadn’t realized how much until they were fully back in my life and we were planning

weddings and doing normal family things. In a messed-up way, Heidi did have a small part in all of this. I'll never let her back into our lives, even when she's done with her stint in prison. A small part of me thanks her in a way, but I'll never say that out loud. She's already gotten more than she should have from this family.

Knowing Chase has started getting the turkey ready, I take my time getting myself together. I still enjoy getting dolled up from time to time for my man. I put waves in my hair and do some light makeup before I pull on a dress that shows off my small baby bump. Our first two babies were girls, and I took forever to show. That's not the case with this little guy. I'm not even four months along, and I look almost six. He's going to be his father's size.

"Hey, you two look pretty," I tell my girls when I walk out of the bedroom. They're sitting at the kitchen island eating donuts. Powdered sugar covers their hands and faces.

"It's Thanksgiving," Chase says before I can question the donuts, but I wasn't going to. This kitchen is about to be in full use, and breakfast is not on that list.

"It is. How are my little turkeys?"

"Daddy braided my hair," Ella says. "He's getting as good as you, Mom."

"I think he's been watching YouTube videos or something. Trying to give me a run for my money."

"I brushed mine" is all Elsa mutters. She's not a morning person.

"Well, it's a bit wild, but that suits you," I tease my oldest.

"I'll fix it later." She shoves a donut into her mouth.

"Pull it back, honey, if you want to help us in the kitchen today."

"Nope, she's with us," Chase says.

"Football!" Elsa shouts, perking up instantly.

Elsa and Ella start bickering over football. Ella thinks it's stupid and lists her reasons while Elsa defends her favorite sport.

"Why do you do this to me?" Chase comes up behind me, brushing my hair off one shoulder. He kisses my neck.

"You'd better not," I hiss. I still don't let him live that hickey down. Oh, he still gives them to me, just not in places that are so noticeable.

"You tempt me, sweetness."

"Then make sure you save lots of room for dessert." I turn in his arms.

"I've always got room for dessert when it comes to you." He kisses me. Both the girls groan and call us gross. The doorbell goes off, interrupting us. Our family is already arriving. No one is ever late around here. If anything, we're early and stay late. I love it. I also love that this family keeps getting bigger and bigger. "If you think I'm waiting until tonight to have you again, you've lost your mind."

"Chase," I warn.

"I'll have a little taste later. No one will have to know. It'll be our little secret." He smirks.

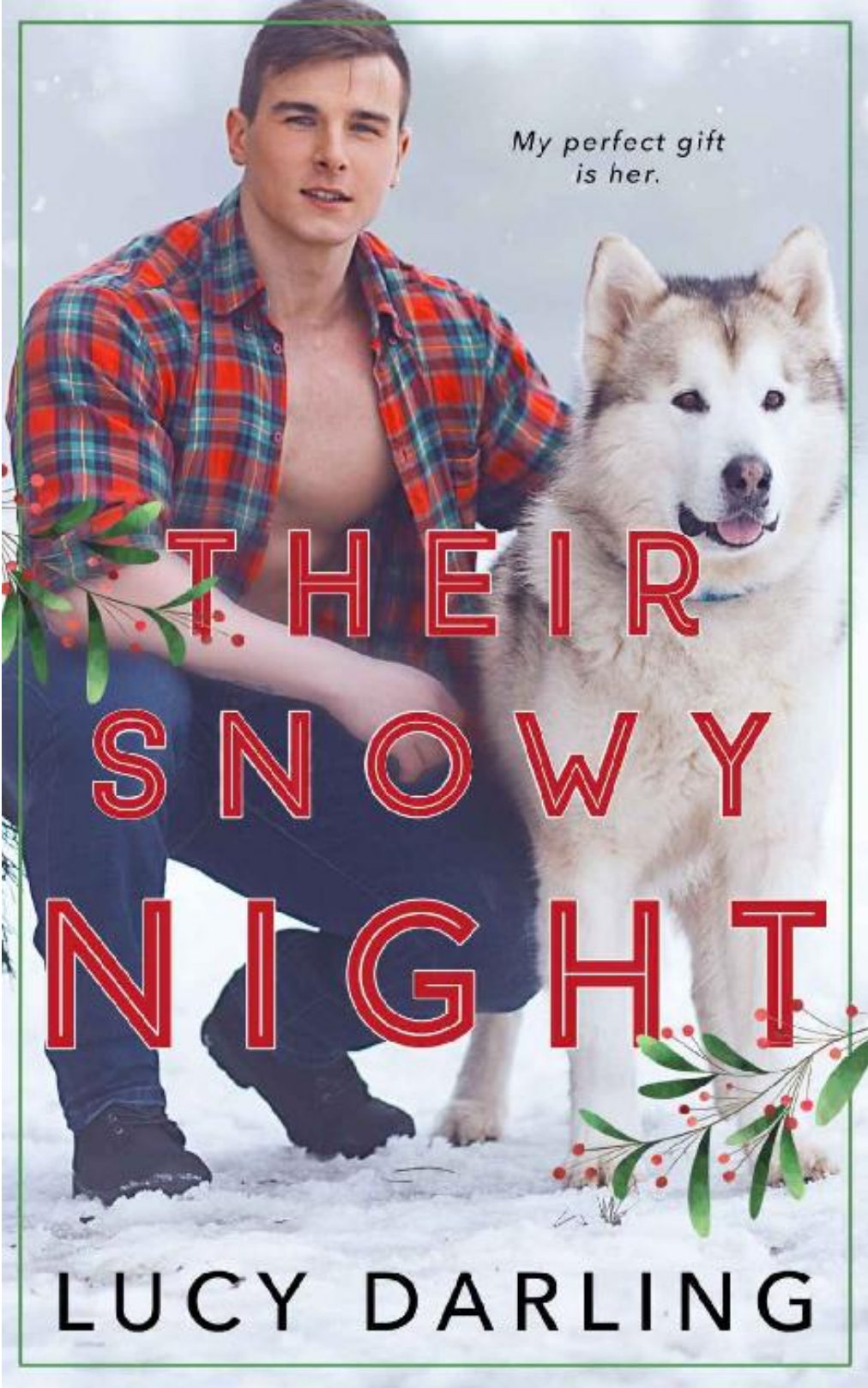
Yes, our *sweetest secret*. One of many.



I hope you loved Emily and Chase's story. Curious about Molly and Asher? Read their story, [Sweetest Obsession](#), available now.

Want more of Lucy Darling? Keep scrolling to get a peek of [Their Snowy Night](#) available now.

Join my newsletter to know when Lucy Darling books are released. [CLICK HERE](#).

A man with short brown hair, wearing a red and green plaid shirt over a bare chest and dark pants, is crouching in the snow. Next to him is a large, fluffy husky dog with white and grey fur, looking towards the camera. The background is a soft, snowy landscape with falling snow. The entire scene is framed by a thin green border.

*My perfect gift
is her.*

THEIR
SNOWY
NIGHT

LUCY DARLING

THEIR SNOWY NIGHT

Law enforcement has never really been my cup of tea—especially since I hacked the FBI when I was only a teenager. That all changes the moment I see Marley. She's the deputy in the small snowy town I just moved to, and I can't get enough of her. So much so that I lure her out to my place every chance I get.

This time though I do it ahead of a monster snowstorm. In a very mysterious and has-nothing-to-do-with-me turn of events, her tires end up slashed, so now she has to ride out the storm in my warm, cozy house. I have all her favorite things, and I intend to tempt her right into my bed. But when she finds out the lengths I've gone to just to get her in my grasp, will she decide I deserve coal in my stocking instead of the gift of her love?

CHAPTER 1

SAINT

A smirk pulls at my lips when I read the weather report. A terrible plan is starting to form in my mind. One that involves an adorably tiny town deputy.

“What’s wrong with your face?” Mick asks, sounding confused by his own question. “Are you smiling?”

“Fuck off.” I click out of the weather report giving my attention back to Trudy and Mick on my computer screen. “Finish with your updates.” I lean back in my chair, my thoughts already drifting back to Deputy Hudson, my plan rapidly growing by the second.

“We did.” They both speak at the same time.

“Your new place doesn’t count as a vacation home if you’re always there and always working,” Trudy informs me. Things change sometimes or don’t go as you thought they would. Normally I hate that, but this time I am enjoying the change.

I bought a cabin out in Winter Falls as a getaway. My own home back in the city has become overrun with my own damn company. There are people always coming and going. What had started as a small security firm has now turned into a hugely successful, ever-growing company.

“You’re the one that said I should get out of the office more,” I remind her.

Trudy has been my right hand since I opened Secure Assists years ago after I’d retired from the FBI. By retire, I mean I finally got out from under their thumb. I was seventeen when

they'd gotten their hands on me after I'd hacked into a few of their so-called untouchable databases.

To a seventeen-year-old punk kid, it sounded like a challenge. I really didn't have a choice in the matter, to be honest. It was either go to work for them or spend a big chunk of my young life in jail. I'd stayed working with them for five years. I'd learned a lot and made some good contacts along the way. I still do some freelance work for them. The only difference now is it costs them a fuck ton of money for my services.

"Do you ever plan to come back here? It's almost Christmas," Mick asks.

"No, he had me send a bunch of Christmas decorations out there." Trudy answers for me.

"Christmas decorations? As in you're decorating?" I should be offended at the look of pure shock on his face, but I'm not. I was never one to decorate or even celebrate the holidays. To me, they were just another day. That was until I laid eyes on my little deputy.

"How about you two mind your own business?"

"You are my business." Trudy pushes her glasses up her nose.

"If we're done here," I say as I close out their screens, ending the call.

I stand from my desk, heading into the entryway to inspect all the crap I'd requested and Trudy sent for me. In true Trudy fashion, she went above and beyond what I'd asked for. All the boxes fill up the whole entryway. I'm not sure what the hell I was thinking with this.

I'd gotten my cabin out in the middle of nowhere for solitude. Now here I am having my assistant send me a bunch of shit to try and attract someone's attention. Not just someone; I'm trying to lure Deputy Hudson with all of her holiday cheer.

I've learned a lot about my little deputy since I moved here. I may have taken some liberties with getting that information, but I knew I needed every advantage I could get when it came to her. I mean what's the use of being a good hacker if you can't use it to your benefit?

Through my digging, I found out that she's been in the position for six months. It doesn't look as if she's had any formal training. Her education background showed she has a degree in social work. After poking around a bit, I also discovered she is single. Which is perfect, since she's meant to be mine.

I need to get started on getting this place in tip top shape. That way the only thing left to do is figure out how to lure my little deputy here. It shouldn't be hard, to be honest. I mean, she has to come and check things out if I put in a call. And since she's the newbie, I know she's the one they'll send if I call. So I'm not really worried about getting her here, but keeping her once she is here. But things are looking up for me. The impending snowstorm is just the thing I need to help me.

A growl leaves me when my alarm for the front gate goes off. I pull out my phone and see it's my food delivery. I hit the code, letting the gate swing open for the kid. I pop the locks on my front door and watch him pull down my driveway.

"Mr. Brooks." He waves as he gets out of his truck. "I got it all!" He rushes around to the back of his truck, almost busting his ass in the process. The snow is already coming down in thick layers.

As much as I don't enjoy having people over, Arthur has been more than helpful. Especially when it came to getting me as much information as he could on Marley. I can hack into a lot of things, but finding out my girl's favorite things to eat was a bit harder.

"I bought all the Reese's candy in the store. Even cleared out the two gas stations while I was at it," he says as he makes his way over to the front porch, setting down his first round of bags. I lean down and open a few of them. Inside are bags and bags of candy. Any kind of Reese's candy you could think of.

"What's with all the candy?"

"They're her favorite, so I got them all. Unfortunately for everyone else, there's not one Reese's cup left in this town. Apparently, she prefers the tree-shaped ones." He reaches into

the bag and pulls one out. It doesn't look like anything special to me. I snatch it from his hand.

"I wasn't going to eat it."

"Get the rest of the bags." I pull out my wallet and hand over a couple hundreds for a tip.

"I got other stuff she loves too. She's a big baker." I pull out another hundred and hand it over. "Thanks, man."

"Leave it all and go," I say before I turn to head back inside. I hear him ask about coffee, but the door closes in time to cut him off. Nice kid but way too chatty.

With the way the snow is already coming down, I know I better go ahead and make my call. What should I complain about tonight?

Bear comes strolling into the room, sniffing at all the boxes. He came with the house. I hadn't known that when I'd bought the place, but he's been roaming around since I moved in. I let him in during the last bad storm. I planned to take him to a shelter, but every time I get Marley out here, her face always lights up when she sees him. So that means he stays.

It has nothing to do with me knowing what it's like not to be wanted. I wouldn't wish that life on anyone.

"You want me to get Marley out here?" His ears perk up, hearing her name. "Get your puppy dog face on. I'm going to need your help." I scratch the top of the giant mutt's head that I have entirely too much in common with before I pull out my phone.

"Winter Falls Police Department. This is Sally, how may I help you?"

"This is Saint Brooks out on Highway C."

"We know where you are, Saint." Of course they do. I call often enough. "I'll send Deputy Hudson over. Careful, she's in a mood." She doesn't even ask what my problem is. That donation I've made to the sheriff's next election is really paying off in my favor.

“In a mood?” I find myself asking. Mostly her mood is cheerful. Even when I’m being an asshole.

“You’ll see,” she says before she hangs up on me.

I make my way back outside to grab the bags Arthur left. I’m surprised to see how much snow has accumulated within the few minutes I was inside. Worry fills me, thinking about my little deputy driving around in this type of weather.

I do the only rational thing to put myself at ease. I go into my office and pull up her cruiser and track her location. I see she’s at the gas station. I click away, pulling up the connection to her radio and listening to Sally tell her that I’d called in.

“Seriously? I was about to head home.”

“He’s not far from you. Head home after. Everyone in Winter Falls is supposed to be off the streets by nightfall.”

“He’s lucky he’s got a handsome dog,” Marley responds to Sally. Bear lifts his head, hearing Marley’s voice, and lets out a bark. I glare at my own dog, jealousy filling me when I think about the amount of attention he’s about to get.

I remind myself all that matters is that she gets here. I’ll have all her attention soon enough. Hopefully forever.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ALSO BY LUCY DARLING

Meant to Love

Meant to Be

Love on the Line

Love Forever

Love in the Mix

Love Undefeated

Love You Always

Belong to Me

Return to Me

Never Let Go

Never Been Kissed

Stalking His Claim

Stalking His Bride

Forever Her Cowboy

Always His Cowgirl

Only Her

Only Tonight

His Forever Girl

His Forever Love

Home for the Holidays

Coming Home For Her

209 Wedding Lane

831 Marriage Lane

Just One Look

You Are Mine

Beauty and the Outcast

Beauty and the Gentleman

Struck Love

Pure Gold

Pure Temptation

Pure Love

Only Christmas

Their Snowy Night

Beauty and the Billionaire

Only Forever

Only Sunshine

Sweetest Obsession