



PRINCE
WITH
BENEFITS
NICOLE SNOW

PRINCE WITH BENEFITS

A BILLIONAIRE ROYAL ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

ICE LIPS PRESS

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Note: This special edition includes the complete billionaire romance novel, Stepbrother Charming, as a special bonus. Prince With Benefits ends about halfway through. Enjoy!

DESCRIPTION

HE BOUGHT A WIFE. I BOUGHT INTO MAKE
BELIEVE...

ERIN

Cinderella had it easy. I'm lying to millions of people, and it's all Silas' fault.

Yes, *that* Silas. Billionaire. Prince. Scandals galore.
Downright royal bastard.

Everything that screams run. If only it weren't for his rock hard edges and wild tattoos, tempting anything female on all seven continents.

But I don't care about his looks. *Really.*

Our deal is simple. He needs a pretty little lie, a wife to cover up his dirty deeds. I need a fortune to buy the treatment that just might save my father's life.

Match made in hell? Totally, and I'm going to make it work.

No, I'm not stupid. I'm not getting played by this billionaire prince. Forget his banter, his charms, the rumors I've heard about his ridiculously over-sized...ego.

What's that phrase he teases me with - Prince with benefits? Not in a billion years.

Yes, I'll lie for him. But I swear, my panties are absolutely, positively *not* melting every time I imagine his kiss...

SILAS

It's almost perfect. An engagement with an American girl, desperate as she is beautiful. Anything goes with Erin, except one rule.

Her body's off limits. She's joking, right?

Charming any girl I want into my bed doesn't mean a thing when there's only one on my mind.

I want Miss Make Believe. My fake, sassy, sexy fiancée. She, who says 'no,' and makes me so obsessed I'm about to trade in my designer suit for a straitjacket.

I convinced her to wear my ring, easy. I'll get her clothes off next. Show her what the world's most infamous player does when he's on fire. Then I'll move on.

No more playing castle. I'll have my Princess with benefits on her knees, treating me like royalty...

TRIPPED UP (ERIN)

“Look, I know American reporters, and their little interns. I’ve worked with plenty. You think you can get away with anything as soon as the cameras roll, but let me remind you again. We have rules. No flash, no interruptions, and absolutely *no* unauthorized social media. His Highness keeps a very strict media presence, and it’s my privilege to enforce it.”

How I stopped myself from rolling my eyes at this pompous, self-absorbed bitch, I’ll never know.

Serena Hastings flips her long blonde hair back, giving me the stink eye one last time, before she moves through the gaggle of media and finally takes her seat.

Eyeballing the stage, I’m wondering if I made a huge mistake taking my summer off campus to come to Saint Moore.

It’s my father’s crowning career achievement, though. An interview with Prince Silas Erik Bearington the Third.

It isn’t hard to understand dad’s excitement. It’s taken his whole life to get here, and I’m just along for the ride. A very hellish, testing-my-patience-every-damned-day kind of ride.

From the brutal jet lag flying from LA across the Atlantic, to the correspondence dinners where I have to be on my best behavior to avoid embarrassing him, to the constant entourage around the palace who think they’re sent by God...sweet Jesus.

Now, I'm sitting here in these stupid heels that are *way* too tight, wishing for a miracle. What comes next dwarfs *everything*.

Don't worry, dad said. He told me he'd show me how it's done. I wanted to follow in his footsteps, didn't I?

When the lighting adjusts and a hot, narrow beam shines on my face, pulling sweat from my pores, I really have to wonder what the hell I've gotten myself into.

Of course, dad isn't even sweating before his interview with Prince Playboy himself begins. Yes, *that* Prince.

The twenty-something, six foot and then some giant who's scandalized several continents. The Prince who's brought the tabloids and dirty blogs more gossip than a hundred celebrity wardrobe malfunctions.

He, who my friends used to swoon over during late night truth-or-dare sessions in our freshmen year dorm, putting him at the top of most eligible celeb bachelors they'd love to have between the sheets. A man I've never been able to stand, much less crush on. A living argument against any country having kings and Queens in modern times, when all they're likely to get out of it are media scoundrels.

Prince Charming, Prince Skirt Chaser, Prince Hung, and a thousand other names.

The Prince, the bastard, the legend.

Silas.

"One minute, Mister Warwick!" the camera man shouts to my father as he climbs up onto the stage, taking one of the two empty chairs beneath the halo.

The other, with the gold and burgundy back, is reserved for the devil himself. I wonder if he's going to walk into this interview late, and throw my dad one more complication.

That would be just like him, wouldn't it? It's not like he takes this Prince thing seriously. It's just the world's biggest license to be a dick, to drink and fuck himself stupid every chance he gets. That's what the blogs have told me, anyway.

None of it fazes dad, ever the professional. He sits up there in his finest suit, his silver hair slicked back, the same prim smile on his lips that I've seen him use in a hundred interviews growing up.

Game time. It's the look that makes me wonder if I'm really cut out to follow in his footsteps. He's wearing the calm, measured, controlled mask I've tried to don before, and failed every time.

I don't have to wonder long because there's new commotion surging through the room. The door off to the side opens, and in walks four strong men in designer suits, the Bearington family crest pinned to their lapels in royal purple and gold. It's a double-headed eagle holding a crown.

A taller, younger, stronger man steps out between them. They part like water, making way for His Highness.

My heart skips a beat. It's him. For real.

Prince Silas, arriving in all his smug, unwavering, damnably sexy glory.

Okay, so maybe the SOB really is what they say in the looks department. If I had any doubt, it's blown to pieces, now that he's quickly stepping toward the stage, taking the five stairs up in two big strides.

My father stands respectfully, extending a hand. The Prince takes it, towering over him by nearly a whole foot, and dad isn't a short guy.

"Charmed, Mister Warwick." The Prince has that foreign, not-quite-English accent everybody in the kingdom does, except his is somehow thicker, more refined.

"It's my honor, Your Highness. I've been looking forward to this for a long time," dad says, nodding.

"Twenty seconds!" Another cameraman roars out, flinching for a second in the hopes that his interruption hasn't upset the Prince.

Based on what I've read, I don't think that's even possible. Nothing upsets him. He basks in every scandal and fresh jab

the media takes at him like they're triumphs.

They both take their seats across from each other. I can't believe they look so casual, like it's the most natural thing in the world, when there's so much on the line.

If dad pulls this off, he's going to be seen by billions over the next week. Serena, bitch that she is, has reminded us since day one that the Royal Press Corps is looking for a new American correspondent. And with rumors swirling about how much longer Queen Marina will continue to rule before passing the crown to her grandson, my father could be front and center at the Bearington's wild court for a very long time to come.

As for the Prince, it's his time to shine with something besides his dick. It's no secret the world's been holding its breath, waiting for him to shape up, and act like a statesman for one of the wealthiest countries in the world. A future King.

Saint Moore is virtually the last monarchy in Europe where the ruler is more than just a figurehead. For fifty years, Queen Marina has rallied her country to good causes and swayed more than a few votes in their parliament, even if she's been very respectful of democracy.

As for Prince Hung – who knows? He's taken his pleasure demonstrating all the things he'll do with modern day concubines throwing themselves at him. Not politics.

“Five...four...three...two...one...”

Cameras roll. Dad looks into the closest one confidently, and begins to speak.

“Welcome to this special edition of the Warwick Report, ladies and gentleman. Today, I'm coming to you from the Kingdom of Saint Moore, where I'm sitting down with a man who needs no introduction.” He pauses, three seconds, just long enough to let everybody tuning in remember the insanity that surrounds everything Silas. “Prince Silas Erik Bearington, heir to the island's throne, one of the most powerful, scandalized, and adventurous men in the world.”

“Tom, you flatter me too much,” Silas says, that wicked smirk above his chiseled jaw pointing up like pitchfork ends. “Let’s get it on, shall we?”

“Absolutely, Your Highness,” dad says. If he’s rattled at all by the Prince’s need to control the conversation, he doesn’t show it. “You’re recently back in the kingdom after completing your duty in the Royal Marines, serving in Afghanistan. Tell me, sir, how has that experience changed you? I think everyone was surprised to hear about a Bearington Prince flying into an active combat zone. Thankfully, on our side, this time.”

The Prince smiles. Smug as ever, but a little darkly.

“Yes, we always did like to play both sides, up until the Second World War. It’s been good for me, Tom. Reminds me why I’m really here, next in line to the crown, how fortunate I am to be born into this royal lineage. There’s pride in serving a man’s kingdom, and beyond. I’d never imagined Afghanistan until I stepped foot there. Some truly awful circumstances, just beyond our borders. Life and death. War. Poverty. Terrorism. A lot more exciting than who’s wearing last year’s style at the next big charity ball, I’m sure you can imagine. Also, a much bigger challenge for me, and I *love* those.”

“Oh, yes,” dad says, returning the Prince’s smile. “They called you a hero in the press after Kandahar. Said you single-handedly thwarted a terrorist attack on an allied base, saving your own troops and dozens more from several different countries, including the United States. What really happened?”

“Please. The media embellishes everything. ” Silas shakes his head, waving it all away, pushing his stern hand through the air. The perfectly tailored gray suit he’s wearing fits him like a glove, exposing more of that powerful body each time he moves, even subtly. “I gave the orders, sure, as soon as I saw them creeping up on our base. Still took everyone in uniform that day to stop the attack, to swarm out and hit them at the right moment, before the suicide bomber could plow through the main gate and do God knows what.”

Dad straightens in his seat. I can tell by the look on his face that things are about to get serious. The tension in the palace room thickens, and even the ornate ceilings soaring into the air can't hold it.

God, I wish I'd picked different shoes. These heels are totally *strangling* me now.

"That's a very modest account for those who know you, Your Highness," dad says. "Some might say unnaturally modest. More like the kind of attitude a future King should have, rather than the playboy Prince."

"Look, Tom, we all know what's bound to happen one day. Truth is, any talk about it now is shoveling Her Majesty in her grave while she's still very much alive and kicking ass." Prince Silas pauses, the dimples in his cheeks deepening. He knows he's about to blow his carefully crafted tact.

Several people behind me suppress snickers. A woman coughs. I'm trying to pay attention to the interview, read dad's body language, to see how he's going to handle things if they take a nasty turn.

But damn, I can't take my eyes off Silas' face. Those deep blue eyes of his betray nothing, perfect royal compliments to his dark black hair, and a day's worth of shadowy stubble on his chin that probably makes every woman in the room wonder what it feels like against their skin.

Myself included. *Shamefully*.

"Certainly, Your Highness. We all hope Queen Marina will be around for another hundred years, but you and I both know what's realistic." Dad pauses, the confident smile on his face disappearing.

He swallows something hard in his throat. "Frankly, you have people in your own kingdom saying you may be the last Prince, and your grandmother could well be its final Queen. They want a referendum once she's gone. That could mean trouble in a time when royals are an endangered species all over Europe, and indeed, the world. Let me just come out and ask – are you trying to *save* the monarchy?"

“Really, Tom? You think my bloodline needs saving from a joke protest movement like Republic First?” Silas’ dark blue eyes storm angry, full of disbelief. “The Bearingtons have ruled this island for over a thousand years. We’ll do it again for a thousand more, when we can all drive across bridges to Scotland and Iceland. We’ve kept our people safe in war and guided them into the modern age with wealth, class, and good sense. I know that might be difficult for someone like you to understand, when your own government has barely been around for three hundred years.”

Dad’s chest swells as he quietly inhales a big breath. He sinks back in his chair, his hands tightly folded in his lap, staring at the Prince.

Oh, God. What’s going on? He isn’t...offended? No, too unprofessional.

But I’ve never seen him shaken in an interview like this. I can’t believe it’s happening because he’s face-to-face with this Royal Prick.

Prince Silas senses it, too. The tension in his face softens, and he looks at my father, cocking his head ever-so-slightly. “Tom, you’re just asking the tough questions, and I appreciate it. That’s why I agreed to this interview personally. Let’s move on, shall we? You’ve got plenty of ammo left, I’m sure. Ask me about the latest supermodel I’m bedding, or the hot new custom sports car I’ve added to my stable. I just broke in one of those things yesterday. We both know how history and politics gets damned boring.”

Silas has a huge grin on his face. I can’t tell if he’s joking, trying to ease the tension, or if he’s just in a mad rush to deflect more questions about the kingdom’s future.

Dad doesn’t give up that easily, even when his subject is getting pissed. I wonder if he’ll press on with the same questions, or circle back to them later, after he’s probed the bastard Prince a little more.

For the first time in my life, I’m not sure who’ll crack first.

He doesn't do either. Instead, he grabs the sides of his chair, his hands visibly shaking.

Jesus. Something's wrong.

Stiffening in my seat, I watch him lean forward, reaching for something that isn't there. The shadows shift around him, changing the bright light.

For the first time, I notice he's completely drenched in sweat, the collar around his jacket stained wet.

Time to panic. Several murmurs run through the crowd.

The Prince stands up at the same time I do, and he sees me, several rows behind the other journalists. Our eyes lock for one intense second. We share our confusion, dismay, and utter shock before dad rolls out of his chair and goes crashing down on the podium.

Everybody jumps out of their seat, searching for a better view, chattering away. Cameras snap, hyenas feasting on daddy's suffering. Several swarms of guards flood the stage, surrounding my father and the Prince, one carrying a small white box with a red cross on its side.

I can't see what's happening. My heart races, and I try to push forward, shuffling through the purple rope separating the media from the interview stage.

The kingdom's official cameras have got to be off by now. Even if they aren't, it's too late to worry about embarrassing myself or my dad any further, when he's up there seizing up, sick or dying or maybe both.

I don't bother with the tiny staircase. I move right past it before anybody can notice and haul me away. My hands clench the edge of the podium, and I pull myself up, cursing the skirt I'm wearing for tangling up when my leg finally gets enough leverage.

Somehow, I manage it, without getting yanked away by the guard. My eyes turn to dad and the little crowd hunched around him, barking orders back and forth in that rich, regal accent that's becoming chalkboard on my ears.

“Hurry, boys, hoist him up! Get this man the hell out of here. I want an ambulance out front in the next sixty seconds.”

No, I can't just stare. I have to move.

One step forward, and my fucking heel catches on the stage's edge, throwing me backward. It's a long enough fall to do some damage if I slip, so I throw my weight forward.

I don't know what's worse. The fact that my dad is having a stroke or a heart attack right in front of me, or that these stupid, *stupid* shoes are twisting my ankle, sending me crashing to the floor next to him.

There's no time to brace for impact. Next thing I know, I'm falling, face first into the podium's hard black surface. I wonder if I'll get to share a room at the hospital with dad when I break something.

But I don't hit the surface. Something catches me, yanks me back, saving me from hitting the floor.

Make that two big somethings.

Hands. Thick, strong, determined, and locked around me.

Blinking back the dizzying confusion, I open my eyes. Prince Silas' dark blue irises widen when they see my face.

Like my heart wasn't already beating a hundred miles an hour. I'm lost for words.

Any words.

He's holding me in his arms like we've just done the last move in a fiery dance. His fingers press into my skin, tense and surprised, but completely unshaken. In control.

What the hell does a woman say when she's literally been swept off her feet by one of the most powerful, handsome, and arrogant men in the world? A man I'd scoffed at every time he showed up in the tabloids or in clickbait on the web?

The Prince, the heir to the throne, who's probably laid the female population of a small country. The Prince, with those ridiculously deep, beautiful blue eyes that are always saying *fuck me*.

And right now, they're trained on me.

Me, Erin Warwick. Intern. Nobody. Damsel in distress.

She, with the worst heels in the world. Him, with the icy, dominating eyes a woman could lose herself in forever.

"That's my father!" I stammer, trying to explain, hoping I'm not about to get tasered and thrown to the floor when the royal guards catch up to me.

"Don't move, love," he says, never breaking eye contact. "Everything's going to be fine."

Easy for you to say, I want to tell him. But I can't find the words.

Everything starts spinning again. This time, it's got nothing to do with the crappy shoes. I'm on the verge of blacking out.

"Stay with me," Prince Silas growls, his fingers pressing harder in my skin.

Dad groans, several feet away, reminding me why I'm up here, mysteriously thrown into a Prince's arms by my own clumsiness in these God forsaken heels. They're starting to move him.

Wait, damn it – dad! I have to follow him. I have to –

I never get a chance to do anything. The guards I've been expecting surround us, but the Prince holds one hand up, telling them to stand down. His hands tighten on me one last time.

One on my shoulder. One against my lower back, holding me up, helping me back on my feet.

"See that she has a ride to the Royal hospital, and wherever she'd like to go after that," Silas snaps, looking away from me at last.

I'm barely able to stand on my own without collapsing again. Thankfully, I don't have to support my own weight for long.

"Right this way, madame."

Several guards tug sternly, but gently on my arms, leading me down the stairs, right behind the entourage that's ferrying dad away.

Just a few minutes later, I'm outside the palace, led down the hundred marble steps, and into one of the sleek black sedans below. A man sits next to me in the back. The driver stomps the gas as soon as my seat belt is on, without saying a word.

I'm grateful for the silence. I hate it, too, because it lets me think. Exactly what I can't afford to do just yet.

I won't let myself comprehend what a complete disaster this is until I know dad's going to be okay.



A COUPLE HOURS go by just waiting. Then, I'm in his room, staring at my father laying feebly in bed. It's a tiny, clean, white chamber. Sterile looking. Maybe just a little more stylish than the bland, depressing places I'd find back home in LA.

Nobody ever said the kingdom didn't have a great medical system. Its reforms and upgrades were personally encouraged by Her Majesty, whose reign has always turned a lot of attention to her subjects' health and wellness.

That's what the Wikipedia article says, anyway, something I lazily gloss over while I wait for dad to wake up.

His hand feels so cold in mine. Whatever they've given him, he's out like a light.

It's early morning the next day, and I haven't slept a wink. We're both waiting for the initial test results to come in.

They've checked his heart, done several x-rays, and determined there's no need for immediate surgery. I'm not sure if that's good news, or a sign there's something worse lurking in his system. Something much harder to fix.

Morning light drifts over us, somber as it is bright. I'm starting to drift off myself, when dad finally groans. He sits up while my grip tightens on his hand, easing him awake.

“Christ. Feels like I got hit by a damned freight train. How long was I out, Erin?”

I shrug. “All night. It’s early morning now.”

Dad reaches up, running a shaky hand across his face. About a second later, his eyes stretch huge, and suddenly his fingers tangle around mine.

“The interview – shit!” He pauses, like it takes the full horror several seconds to set in. “I blew it, didn’t I? Jesus Christ.”

“Don’t think about that now, daddy!” I lean in, stroking his fingers, kissing him softly on the forehead. “You need to get some more rest. There’ll be plenty of time to sort out what happened later with the palace, I’m sure.”

I hate having to lie to him.

He knows damn well nobody gets second chances in this business after a meltdown like that.

Maybe the Warwick name will salvage his career, carrying him to new prospects. But as far as I’m concerned, we probably won’t hear a word from the royals, except when they’re going to send us on our merry way with impersonal wishes for good health.

“Fuck.” Dad slumps back in his bed, pulling his hand from mine. The IV in his arm stretches as he rubs his eyes.

My heart sinks like a stone. He isn’t really...crying...is he?

Oh, God.

“Dad, no,” I say gently, wondering if there’s any combination of words to ease the dagger cutting through him. “Work doesn’t matter. You have to get well. That’s the only thing worth worrying about right now. Whatever else is on your mind, forget it. Don’t let it take over. Turn it off. You’re a smart man. You’ll bounce back from this...all of it. You’ve got more experience and connections than anybody else in this business. The world won’t end just because you need a little time off, I promise. Dad, I –“

“Erin...” he cuts in, a defeated expression turning his face gray. “Shut up.”

I do.

Hell, I don't know what else to do. I've never seen him like this.

His rudeness hurts, but I try not to let it get to me. Standing up, I walk toward the window, staring out into the early sunrise.

The hospital overlooks a ragged shore, where the wind sends foamy waves crashing against the rocks. My hands become fists at my sides, and the only thing that keeps running through my mind is that I have to forgive him.

He isn't in his right mind.

He's hurting.

We don't even know what's wrong.

I won't let myself cry – not even when I hear him gently snoring again after a couple minutes pass.

Holding in tears is worse than anger. They sting my eyes, my soul, make me question everything about why I'm standing in this foreign hospital after watching my father's career self-destruct, waiting to find out how much longer we need to stay here before we jet back to the States, completely humiliated.

There's a TV in the corner. It's been muted since the moment I stepped in, and now the early morning programs are starting. I see two prim reporters at their desks, smiling, going through the latest news on the continent.

Another bailout coming in the Eurozone. Something about nuclear security in Belgium, and then a thirty second segment on military drills near the Russian border.

Then another headline. The one that twists the knot in my belly and the rock in my throat at once without mercy.

**BOMBSHELL INTERVIEW! PRINCE GOES FROM
HOT WATER TO HERO!**

Turning nervously to make sure dad's still asleep, I look up at the screen, that anger in my eyes beginning to pour out in hot, salty streams down my cheeks.

I see it all again.

The painful look on dad's face before he rolled out of his chair, collapsing in front of the Prince.

The swarm of security and paramedics. Panic. Commotion.

A flash of myself jumping onto the stage, my hair a mess, lunging to save myself from toppling off the ledge. I'm less than a foot from planting the ground face first when Prince Silas grabs me, jerks me up, straight into his arms.

Jesus, it looks even more picture perfect seeing it in the third person, like something from a movie. They didn't bother capturing anything after that, the long, awkward stare between us, how I gazed into his deep blue eyes.

The footage cuts off. I storm over to the TV, lean up on my tippy toes, careful not to let these overly tight heels screw me over again. I punch the off button, without bothering to give the other dramas and kids shows from Saint Moore and Europe a chance to take the edge off.

I'm pissed. Hurt. Worried.

Scared.

There's another chair in the corner, and that's where I park my unsettled ass for what seems like the next hour. I wish to God I hadn't flipped on that stupid program.

I should be thinking about dad, brushing off his outburst.

Instead, I'm thinking about the Prince. The first and last time I'll ever be close to him. The way he held me – firm, but gentle. Almost like a decent man should.

Sure, the media was eating up the drama, recasting it as a heroic spectacle.

I wasn't fooled. Even utter bastards can be gentleman in the right time, right place.

Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if Silas drove off the second we were gone, straight to his little mistresses. Maybe that flashy club for royalty and multimillionaires he owns, the one I've read about on the trashy blogs, hosting parties for the most eligible supermodels in Europe.

His own private hunting grounds for sex.

My hand reaches for my phone. I'm about to pull it up, and read more gossip about Prince Not-So-Charming for reasons I don't even understand, when the door pops open. The noise wakes dad, and he groans, sitting up in bed while the visitor enters.

A tall man in a white coat with salt and pepper hair steps in. "Ah, you must be Miss Warwick, I presume. So glad you're here so I can update you both on the news. I'm Doctor Jameson."

The physician rounds the bed, standing next to dad, and begins pulling something from a manila folder. I'm studying his face. It isn't hard to notice the complete lack of any pleasantries or warmth.

He's serious business. And serious is never good when it comes to medicine.

"Mister Warwick, there's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to come out with it. We've found a shadow near your pancreas in scans."

My ears start ringing, and his voice fades out. *A shadow? A shadow?! What the hell does that mean?*

"Shadow?" My dad repeats, just as confused as me.

The doctor holds up three x-rays on a sheet, and begins going through them, pointing at the areas in question.

"Yes, an unusual growth, of sorts. Not benign. We'll know for certain once your labs come back. Regardless, it's something we'll need to deal with shortly." The doctor pauses, straightens his spectacles, before he goes on. "Regrettably, it's near a nerve cluster that's likely to cause intense nausea and a shock to the system that stresses the heart. That's why you had the attack yesterday. The good news is, it's fully operable. I'm

recommending surgery soon, once you decide whether you'd like to have it done here in Saint Moore, or back home."

"Home," dad says, without a second's hesitation. "Don't want to spend a second longer on this damned island than I really need to."

Doctor Jameson's face tightens. Dad gives him a sour look and mutters an apology.

"It's okay. He's been under a lot of stress," I say weakly, looking at the physician.

"Yes, yes, I understand. Well, the two of you ought to talk things over and try your very best to remain calm. We'll have more news for you this evening. Assuming this isn't anything to *really* be concerned about beyond the surgery, we can have it done in under a week, wherever you choose. The Warwick Report can be back on the air in no time at all."

"No, I'm taking time off," dad snaps, his eyes going dark. "Whatever the outlook here."

I want to reach out, squeeze his shoulder, but I know him too well. He's always been so high strung, the sort of man who has zero tolerance for failure.

"And if there's more to worry about?" I ask, fighting to ignore the sickly feeling building deep in my stomach.

"We'll deal with that scenario when it's on the table." He collects the x-rays and shoves them back in his folder. "I have some other business to attend to. Rest assured, Miss Warwick, your father is getting the very best care here. Not just because it's our duty, but because His Highness himself has requested extra attention to detail."

"The Prince?" I squeak, doing a double take. "Why?"

"I don't know. He didn't divulge any further details, madame. He's requested nothing but the best to handle your father's case by name. Since I'm at the top of this field available at the royal medical center, well, here I am. Suffice it to say, His Highness cares very greatly about all his guests, and he's deeply sorry for the trouble your father ran into the other day."

“Trouble my ass.” Dad snorts, tips his nose up, and rolls over, facing away from both of us. “He can’t possibly be more sorry than I am. Believe me.”

“If you’ll excuse me...” Doctor Jameson looks at the door awkwardly.

I nod, and he’s gone without another word.

As soon as he’s out, I take the chair next to the bed. Dad never turns around to face me, drifting off yet again after a few minutes.

I don’t know if I should be grateful he’s getting his rest, or worried about his dark attitude.

Just now, my own exhaustion catches up to me. Turning in the chair, I tuck my head against the back, and close my eyes.

Prince Silas Bearington, and fact that he might know me by name, is the last thing on my mind.



I DON’T HAVE a clue how long I’m asleep. It seems like evening by the time I’m awakened by a light tap on the shoulder.

Looking up, I see Doctor Jameson standing over me, his face more grim than before. “Miss Warwick, could I speak to you outside for a moment, please?”

“Of course,” I say, looking down at dad, still fast asleep in his nest of tubes and bedding.

I follow him out and watch as he closes the door gently behind us. We’re alone in the long corridor, where it’s eerily quiet. I take one look at his face and know I’m about to get bombed.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” My heart moves ten times faster than my lips, pure adrenaline in every pulse.

“Your father’s growth is cancerous, Miss Warwick. A rare, aggressive cancer. Very difficult to eradicate in this area. Something I’ve never seen.” He pauses, as if he needs to stoke his bedside manner, to prevent cold scientific fascination from taking over. “I’m very sorry.”

That's it then. Cancer.

What was that word he used again? *Aggressive?*

I'm devastated.

Or else, I should be. The weird thing is, I just feel numb, standing there underneath the bright white lights overhead while the doctor waits for some kind of reaction.

"How does this change things?" I ask softly.

"He'll need additional treatment, of course. If it were up to me, I'd recommend a full round of chemotherapy immediately after surgery, a regimen we call..."

I'm listening, but all the terminology washes over me. So does the pain, the disappointment, the sad realization our nightmare isn't over. I thought the worst was behind us when dad collapsed during his interview, and I fell into the royal bad boy's arms.

No, it's only beginning. I couldn't be more wrong.

"Let me assure you once again, Miss Warwick, your father is more than welcome to make full use of our facilities and expertise. We have plenty of experience working with American insurance. But just between you and me..." He pauses, looking around, and leans in when he's sure nobody else is around. "I told you this is rare. We have our own research wing, yes, and we're doing well, all things considered. However...we can't make miracles happen. If it were me, I'd go abroad. Opt for something more experimental. Only the best of the best."

Experimental? Abroad? Obviously, he's used to dealing with billionaire royals who never think twice about their finances. Even more obvious he doesn't have as much experience working with insurance as he let on.

Despite his success, daddy isn't a rich man.

He's done well as a journalist, sure. He's comfortable. But his last divorce took him to the cleaners not so long ago.

He barely has the money for globe trekking and time off if he wants to keep his condo. Let alone for things like

experimental treatments abroad.

“I don’t know if we can afford it,” I say, trying to stop the anger from creeping into my voice.

Doctor Jameson cocks his head, quickly scratching his nose. He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

I still can’t believe it. How a perfectly normal trip, the highlight of dad’s career, has turned into *this*.

“Well, you certainly don’t have to decide now, Miss Warwick,” the doctor says reassuringly. “You have time – a little time – before any difficult decisions need to be made. Know that they *do* need to be decided in a timely manner, though. As soon as you’re able, if I’m frank. The quicker you move against this sort of the thing, the better his chances.”

God. The people on this island all seem to have a way with being ‘frank.’ They’re too honest, everybody from Prince Playboy to his subjects, and always in that haughty not-quite-English accent that makes me want to slap them across the face.

You can’t get angry, I tell myself. For dad’s sake.

“I understand,” I lie, right before a new worry takes over. “Should I tell him the news?”

“No, no, that’s my responsibility,” he says, surprise flashing in his eyes. “We’ll let him rest awhile longer. I’ll make the rounds later today, and inform him when he’s awake. Better to get the shock out of the way so both of you can begin running through your options in earnest. I’ll bring you more details about the experimental option, if you’d like. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

You have no idea. I’d love to excuse you, Doctor Dick, and this whole stupid, pompous island.

I’d love to excuse my father’s cancer, his heartbreak, and these brutal heels still attached to my feet.

Raw emotion paralyzes me while he disappears down the hallway, leaving me alone.

Slumping against the wall, I try to hang onto the anger, the frustration. It's the only thing that's stopping me from breaking down into an ugly crying fit right here.

That's twice as hard to hold back when I realize just how achingly alone I'm about to be. More lonely than I've ever been in my entire life once dad starts to go through treatment.

Not to mention if it doesn't work. If, God forbid...

No, I won't let myself think the rest.

I won't let myself cry.

I definitely won't let the scream I'm holding in out, even though it's tearing me to pieces.

Several people walk past, nurses holding charts, slinging medical jargon back and forth. It's just another day for them, and why shouldn't it be?

They belong in this twisted fairytale kingdom where even the Prince is bad when he isn't playing hero for the cameras.

I want to go home. I want to help dad get well. And then, I never want to hear about Saint Moore or any of the royal assholes running this place ever again.

They've brought nothing but terrible luck into our lives.

When I finally force myself to move, retreating to his room, my right foot is so numb it almost drags across the floor. My heel catches, and I barely stop myself from tripping yet again.

I have to be more careful. I definitely need to pick some better shoes.

There's no Prince waiting for me if I stumble again. And there damned sure isn't a glass slipper at the end of all this suffering. There's no reward, no magic, except my father's survival.

I'll do anything to make sure he's got a fighting chance.

GROWN UP (SILAS)

The women in this club don't fuck around.

When they know I'm watching, they go all in, shaking their tits and asses off. Too bad for them, I'm barely paying attention tonight.

I can't stop thinking about the American girl with the chestnut hair, the mahogany eyes, the hips so round I wanted to smack them when they caught my hand, just to see how they'd bounce.

Of course, even I'm not a big enough bastard to give a girl a spanking after her father's having a fit in front of her.

My eyes scan the drunken sluts on the dance floor beneath my private balcony. At least half the two dozen or so girls out there know this place is crawling with cameras I can access anytime. Whenever I'm not looking down on them behind the tinted window like a god.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel like one. Comes with the territory when you're born a Prince, heir to a fifteen hundred year old throne, entitled to virtually any prime pussy in the realm, plus a hundred countries over.

They're desperate to please. Delusional. So fucking fake I can practically taste silicon every time I glance at their basketball sized tits.

Their dreams aren't a mystery to me. They think they're next in line to audition for Princess and future Queen. Every one of them out there, from the redhead with the double D's, to the blonde with the perfect ivory skin, thinks she's Cinderella. Think I'm going to drop to my royal knees and propose the morning after my cock fits their magic pussy like a glove.

Doesn't work out that way. Never has, and never will.

Sure, I'm a bastard and a heartbreaker. Took me my first few flings to make peace with that, and most nights I don't give it a second thought. I let my dick lead me on like a magnet to whatever I'm in the mood for, then have my personal valet escort them out of my chamber the next morning, with a free ride home and a bouquet of roses.

The girls who try to show their faces around this club again wind up banned. The ones who try to get close to me in public get a stern talk with my bodyguards.

Most of them listen. Every so often, they go out ugly. Crying, screaming, wailing my name and threatening to sue me penniless from the rooftops.

Every so often, when I see those scenes, I question if it's really worth it. Mostly, I laugh, because I've got ten more girls ready to polish my royal scepter for every one who has a conniption fit.

For all my power, wealth, and women, I'm not free. I play by rules most people will never understand.

I've been bound to God, Queen, and country since the day I drew my first breath. If I had to add one more principal, it'd be *one and done*.

Tonight, for some fucking reason, I'm not feeling it. I can't even settle on a girl who looks enough like Little Miss Warwick.

Why the hell am I fantasizing about an American girl who probably doesn't have a million to her name? Especially after her father went for the throat, before he just went down cold?

I'm still wondering when there's a knock on my door. I turn around, cup my hand across my mouth, and yell like always.

"You already know it's open."

Victor steps in. My personal valet is about ten years older than me, pushing forty, a transplant to Saint Moore from a distinguished Russian family. He steps up to me, that prim and proper smile on his face, the same one I've seen a thousand times before he's about to drop a load of horseshit in my lap.

"Pardon the interruption, Your Highness. I'm here to tell you that Her Majesty has requested an audience." He steps aside, making way for me to pass, wanting me to walk with him this instant.

I take my damned time. Sip my thousand Euro glass of scotch slowly, letting the liquid fire bathe my stomach and plate my veins in gold.

"Yeah? What's grandma doing up at this hour? She's usually turned in before nine."

Victor clears his throat. "It seems she's heard about what happened during the interview yesterday. It's been all over the press, sire. She's very eagerly awaiting your company so she can discuss –"

"My fucking image, right?" I smile and wink at him, draining the last of my scotch. "Come on, Vic. I already know."

Pausing, I sigh. Victor shifts uncomfortably. I've busted his balls a million times by now, and he always takes it like a champ, even if he's never sure exactly what to say.

"I hope she realizes I'm trying, Vic. It's not like I gave the guy a stroke when he was lobbing his questions. Didn't have anything to do with the hero shot either. That was all the daughter, racing up there and falling straight into my arms. Don't tell me what the blogs say – I didn't engineer a damned thing."

Yeah, the jackal's daughter, I think to myself. His very sweet, very pure, very fuckable daughter.

“You know you have my trust, Your Highness,” Vic says, respectful as ever. But his eyes don’t agree with his voice.

“Stop looking at me like that. Look, if it wasn’t for that fairy tale embrace when I caught her, they’d be throwing a lot more shit in our faces right about now. Grandmom has to understand that, doesn’t she?”

Victor straightens, folding his hands across his lap. “It’s certainly not my place to say, sire. I have a car waiting to take you to the palace. At your convenience, of course.”

Convenience my ass. I let my glass drop loudly on the wooden stand in the corner. Then I grab my gray jacket, the one with the purple and gold lapel. It’s shaped like our national symbol, the double-headed eagle holding the crown jewels in his talons.

I’m wishing I could summon that mythical SOB to swoop down for a day or two, and give the chattering class something else to fixate on instead of Prince Playboy’s latest antics.

Victor moves behind me, a subtle offer to help me slip my jacket on, as if I’m too damned drunk to do it myself.

I step forward angrily, out of his reach. I’m sober, and I’m damned sure old enough to dress myself. I haven’t let the attendants anywhere near my body since I was eight years old. Mom was still around then, able to order her servants to have me up and dressed by nine o’clock sharp every day.

“I’m ready. Let’s get this over with.”

“Right behind you, Your Highness.” He really is. Vic trails me like a loyal, if annoying dog the whole way out, radioing to my entourage for the usual security checks before we reach our ride.

This isn’t the way I wanted my night off to go. I wanted to forget today’s circus.

The pussy and scotch will have to wait. Duty calls, as long as my veins are soaked in royal blood.

A jet black luxury SUV waits on the curb. There’s one brief glimpse at the subjects lined up near the entrance,

waiting to get in. The bouncers have orders to pat them down thoroughly, making sure the girls who pass my looks test also aren't packing anything nasty like drugs or weapons.

The palace was scandalized enough when Victor found a joint in my room after my twentieth birthday party. He told me he'd keep it to himself, but I knew who had his true loyalty: the unbearably perfect, larger-than-life woman I'm on my way to see right now.

Hell, I stopped smoking completely after that. Nothing's worth risking another week at rehab in the lowlands. Sure, the scenery is gorgeous, but it doesn't make up for the distinct shortage of women, booze, and bright, shiny lights.

All the things engraved on my heart and soul.

It's a short hop to through the capital to our royal palace. The light nighttime traffic clears the streets when they see my motorcade coming. Outside, I watch the people sitting off to the side in their cars, a few stragglers waiting on the streets.

They wave. They put their hands over their hearts. Every so often, they shoot me the middle finger.

This division in the kingdom is what it's all about, what's gotten Her Majesty so nervous.

Grandmom wants me to shape up before she croaks, and the people are looking at King Silas. We both know Prince Hung will be done for then, but his memory will live on.

They'll be forced to decide whether they want me wearing the crown, or if they're going to use their votes to abolish centuries of wealth, guts, and glory.

"Right this way, Your Highness." A man opens the door for me.

I step out, moving quickly through the line of guards to the back entrance. The lights in the palace are always so subdued; soft, gold, and otherworldly. It smells like a damned museum, and the décor matches one, too.

Whether I'm a lock for the throne one day or not, I can't imagine living here again. I'm walking swiftly down the long

hallway, portraits of our ancestors towering down at me, glaring.

I can recognize my face in some of theirs. We all share the same vibrant blue eyes. I won't be caught dead in their furry robes and heavy gold jewelry, outside formal ceremonies, but it never fails to creep me out how easily I'd look exactly like my ancestors with just a change in wardrobe.

Victor leads me to the big three hundred year old door with palace scenery hand carved into it, stopping in front of it.

Great.

It's the royal reception hall, a place she must've chosen to really make her damned point. It takes two men just to open the heavy door, revealing the chandelier, the amber and gold walls, and the huge fireplace inside.

The whole atmosphere takes on a different quality. Like it's somehow absorbed a piece of the royalty, billionaires, and Presidents who have stepped inside it across the centuries. Creaking, yawning, and ominous, the big doors smack the walls when they finally come to rest.

There, on her burgundy chair in the center, sits Her Majesty. Grandmom looks like a living ornament, holding up her monocle with one white gloved hand, her evening crown perched in her thick white wig.

"Come in," she says simply, the only person left alive who can take that commanding tone with me.

I step inside and wait for the doors to close, taking the leather chair she motions to, perfectly positioned several feet away from her.

"How are you this evening, Your Majesty?" I ask, pretending I give a shit.

"Unwell. Have you seen what's been going through the news today?" She knows I have, but it's not really a question.

It's an early warning before her claws really come out and she tears into me for fucking up the throne's reputation yet again.

Her valet, Patricia, walks up like it's all been rehearsed, and gently pushes a tabloid into the Queen's hand. "Special issue, Your Majesty."

"Swept off her feet! Shocking new conquest for Prince Silas after American girl falls into his arms?" Hearing her reading the headline sounds...ridiculous.

Christ. I want to bust out laughing, but thinking about the Warwick girl helps me hold it in. The tabloid shows my hand on her ass – that perfect ass – the girl's chocolate eyes beaming into mine like she can't wait to taste my lips.

"Come on, we both know what happened," I say, straightening up in my seat, hoping like hell I can stop thinking about that precious ass so I won't have to hide an erection from my royal grandmother. "It'll burn itself out like it always does. You know how these things work, Your Majesty. They'll be onto something else next week."

"I only know one thing," she says sternly, giving me that sour look I know so well, lowering her monocle. "This – *this*, Silas – has got to stop."

Her white gloved hand crumples the tabloid in half and slaps it against her knee. It barely makes a sound against the thick, flowing fabric she wears.

"I'm all over it. Victor told me this morning that they're being treated at the royal hospital. I ordered the very best for them. Way more than that jackass really deserves after his line of questioning."

Jackass? *Shit.*

I know I've slipped up in her presence – again – but I act like it doesn't faze me. Honestly, why the hell should it?

A little course language is the least of grandmom's worries, judging by the anger tugging at the lines on her face, a look that could give the Medusa a run for her snakes.

"You, Prince, are not on top of anything. Nothing that truly matters, anyway," she says, glaring. "Perhaps you're on top of your drinks, your parties, your greedy little tarts who don't

have a drop of royal blood in their veins. Let me be perfectly clear, grandson – I’ve had it with the drama.”

Her Majesty stands up, folds her arms, and twists that invisible dagger she just put through my guts deep. I’m taken aback. She’s been cold and pissed off before, but never like this.

This isn’t grandmom talking to me. This is Queen Marina Bearington the Fifth, preserver of the kingdom, holder of billions in wealth and millions of hearts.

“What are you saying? You don’t think I’m sick to death of this shit myself?” I’m shaking my head. “I don’t understand, Your Majesty. We’ve seen these storms a hundred times, and this is just one more. We’ll wait for it to blow over.”

“Look at you, Silas. You’re all grown up. Some days, I tell myself, I should’ve seen this coming.” She pauses, narrowing her eyes. “Your father would’ve been just as big a disgrace, if I may be frank. He was off with his mistress on that yacht when it sank in the Mediterranean, taking him to his grave. You, I’m afraid, are heading down the same ugly path.”

The whole damned floor drops out beneath me. She’s *never* mentioned the accident since the funeral. Never breathed a word about the wicked rumors everybody in the kingdom knows are probably true.

My old man was a player, too. Like father, like son.

He would’ve been next in line to inherit the crown, saving me from all this, if only he hadn’t sailed into a once in a hundred year storm off the Greek islands.

“Your Majesty...grandmother...” I’m trying like hell to find my words. “I haven’t disgraced anything. I haven’t even had a chance to fill your huge crown. Why do you think I sat there like a good little boy through the interview, while Warwick took his shots? I’m trying to shape up, embrace all the pomp and duty you’ve groomed me for. Really.”

“Really?” she repeats, questioning me, slowly descending the three steps leading up to her secondary throne. “Silas, I’m

entering my ninth decade in this world. You ought to know by now I'm not a fool."

Goddamn. When we're on the same level, she's a lot shorter, barely coming up to my chest. But those deep blue Bearington eyes rip through me, one with her aura, making me feel like I'm only half her size.

"You'll do better," she says, ordering me with a tone she never uses, not even with the servants. "You must. I don't have much time for your embarrassments anymore. I ran out of patience ages ago."

Patience? She really wants to talk about shit?

Mine is shot to hell.

I cock my head, trying my damndest to return the death stare, without letting the warm buzz from the scotch muddle my words.

"What do you think I'm doing, Your fucking Majesty? I mean, really? *Really?* You think I'm some overgrown kid who's acting out? I must be enjoying this, yes, ruining our dynasty? You want me to admit it – is that it?"

Maybe a small part of me loves self-destruction. Subconsciously. If the crown goes to hell, all these ugly worries go too.

But I won't let that happen. I'm pulling out every stop to reshape myself in the eyes of the people, and she thinks I'm jerking everyone off.

"Fuck," I growl, running a hand across my face.

She doesn't even flinch. Over in the corner, Patricia stirs, one hand on the phone in her pocket, ready to summon the guards if she needs to.

It's the first time in months I've dropped F-bombs in the Queen's presence. It's the first time I can remember being this pissed, because I've actually tried. I'm standing there, wishing I could rip that stupid silver tiara off her head and throw it into the fire crackling behind her.

Everybody in Saint Moore worships the ground this woman walks on.

I don't.

I can't.

I've been her round peg since the day my father died, and she's been jamming me into a square hole I'll never fit through. I don't understand why she won't stop trying.

It isn't good enough that I become King. No, I have to carry on her water-to-wine routine, acting like a saint sent to Earth, adored by millions I'll never truly relate to.

I have to pretend it's vital to preserve this crown, when we could just as easily step down, ride off into the sunset with all our wealth, and let go of this medieval bullshit for the sake of prestige.

"Don't you dare take that tone with me again, Silas," she snaps, stopping when we're less than a foot apart. "I want you to listen, grandson, and listen good. You don't get to destroy fifteen centuries of tradition, wisdom, and grace. God knows this family has had its share of scoundrels and rakes going backward through the ages. We've survived them all. We'll survive you, too, because you're bigger than your antics."

Oh, fuck. Here comes the pep talk, where she tries to remind me I'm born for this, bound to a destiny I never chose.

"Let me guess, you want me to straighten up, fly right, and start acting more like you? Everything I've promised for the last four years, yeah?"

"Act, yes. *Act*. I want more than talk, Silas. I'd like you to honor your family and your kingdom," she says, one more remark that puts me on guard. "Your mother was a wonderful woman. Out of her element with royal life, certainly, but she had a graceful heart. Look to her example."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. She's laid the guilt trip on thick before, but she's never stooped to using my dead mother.

I want to pivot and walk the fuck out. Too bad that's a breach of protocol even I can't bring myself to do, not when

I've been raised to believe it's like slapping my own grandmother across the face.

"What's mom got to do with any of this, Your Majesty?" I say quietly, letting the last of my buzz wash over me.

"If you won't act for me, for this bloodline, or for this country, then please do it for her. I'm asking you to consider it seriously, Silas. I know full well by now I can't *make* you do anything. All the titles and power in the world can't do much for a man with your stubbornness."

"How about specifics? How the hell can I prove to you I'm already serious? Every time I try, the bastards in the press turn it into the butt of another joke. I can't control that, and you know it, Your Majesty."

She pauses. Thinking.

Damn. Have I stumped the Queen?

"You need a calming influence, something to prove that you're mature," she says slowly, turning her head, studying my reaction for what comes next. "A woman, Silas. Not another whore you'll have for one night and never look at again. Find yourself a wife."

I think I blink before my eyes pop out, but I can't say for sure. I can't even feel my face when her words sink in, anchor, and drag me down with them.

"Jesus. You're asking me to get married? Just like that?" I snort, turning around. "Surviving bombings in Kandahar was easier than that."

"I never said it would be easy. I'm giving you a difficult, but effective alternative, son. The people never loved your father, Silas. They loved your mother...loved her almost as much as they adore me. If they can't learn to respect you, then maybe they'll respect your family, your children. I can't save you anymore. I've already accepted that." She pauses, a sad glaze coming over those eyes I know so well. "I can only save the family, the office, and the crown. Everything I'm bound by God, oath, and blood to salvage."

I want to ask why the fuck she's talking from both sides of her mouth. Telling me I need to shape up, but acting like I'm beyond redemption.

And marriage? She's talking crazy. I wonder if she's going senile.

One thing's for sure – I've had my royal limit tonight.

“Are we done here?” I growl, the only words I can get past my numb lips.

“You're dismissed. Think about everything I've said. Please.”

I can't. Not now. Maybe not ever.

My head dips in the shortest, angriest bow I've ever thrown her way. Then I spin so hard my designer shoes squeak loudly on the delicate tile, probably leaving a streak.

I don't care. I have to get the hell away from this place, this asylum I've always hated, the world's most opulent freak show.

It takes half my body strength to shove the heavy doors open. I'm not waiting for the guards. Victor doesn't say a word to me on the way back to my car.

He knows when to keep his damn mouth shut, and this is definitely one of those times.

I want to get back to the palace with a few new bottles at my side. I want tits in my face and tight, hot pussy sliding up and down my cock, draining this venom from my system.

Mostly, I just want to get out the latest orders to my entourage. Tell them I'm tired, pissed, and not to be disturbed with any business, official or petty, until past noon tomorrow.



SLEEP WON'T COME, no matter how many times I flop down on my Egyptian cotton sheets and shut my eyes.

Only thing worse than the anger throbbing in my temples is that ache in my balls. The one that's been there since I

grabbed Little Miss Warwick's ass, looked into her dark brown eyes, and wondered how they'd roll with her riding my cock.

I need to shake this. I'm going for a walk.

I'm drunk, staggering downstairs from my VIP room, sometime around two A.M. Half the girls have left, disappointed I haven't made my appearance, several of them taking off with the bodyguards changing over their shifts.

All I need is one.

One pussy to take the edge off.

One pussy to remind me I can make a woman sing like nobody else.

One hot, sweet pussy to claim for the night, have my way with, and never see again.

"Silas!" A voice rings out behind me. The only one that's ever gotten away with calling me that name, without putting Prince or Your Highness in front.

The last fucking voice I want to hear tonight.

I stop dead in my tracks, halfway to the bar. That's all the time she needs to jump me, throw her arms around me, and spin herself around until we're face-to-face.

"Get out of here, Serena. I'm not in the mood," I growl. Inwardly, I cringe.

I don't have to wonder what this woman's eyes look like when they're rolling back in her head. There's no mystery here. Last winter, I fucked my press secretary, a two week tryst in the mountains north of Bearington City. I was home for a couple weeks on leave from the Marines, and I was desperate for the only pussy still in season.

I remember exactly how she screams. How she twitches and calls out my name, over and over when I'm between her legs, bringing her off for the fifth time in one night.

I remember that I'm *one and done*, and the fact that I fucked this girl more than once, violating my own cardinal

rule, is the reason I'm standing here looking into her desperate, hurt face.

"Jesus. You're drunk again, aren't you?" she says with a sigh, slowly taking her hands off me.

I start walking again, without saying anything. Already know it isn't going to stop her from trotting after me. Her heels scrape the floor, catching up after about ten seconds.

"Silas, you don't have to do this to yourself. You can drop the lonely, broody act when I'm around. Talk to me!"

I don't slow down or say anything until I'm at the bar. At least out here, she'll have to talk business, keeping up the pretense that she's never been anything more than my damned press secretary.

"You've got business for me that can't wait until morning, or what? I don't recall scheduling an appointment at this ungodly hour." I reach out for the fresh glass of scotch the bartender has laid out for me without asking. We have a special understanding between us, one that lets him read my mind when it comes to spirits.

"Actually, yes," she says, flipping her light blonde hair back.

I turn and stare at her. If she's trying to be flirty, she's out of her fucking mind.

And business? She can't be serious. That's the last thing I want in the middle of the night, when I can't decide if my cock is throbbing worse than my head.

I was simmering before, but now I'm pissed.

She's staring at me like a puppy waiting to throw her a bone.

"I wasn't serious. You think I'm really going to sit here and talk about my goddamned image at two o'clock in the morning, half blasted out of my mind?" I snap, draining my shot in one pull, and then putting down my glass for a new one.

“I think you will, yes, because I want you to consider something new. New idea, all mine. Strictly off the record, Your Highness.” She adds my title almost as an afterthought, purely because the bartender is eyeballing her. “I haven’t vetted it yet with any of my staff.”

“You’ve got less than a minute,” I tell her, picking up my glass, focusing on how the light hits the scotch on the rocks. Everything glows like gold and crystal coming together.

“You have an image problem. You’ve been defined, sire, boxed in by the press. There’s a dozen playboy jabs every time they say hero. Doesn’t matter. Whether you’re doing something wonderful, like you did today for that girl and her father, or something...a bit less noble, everybody sees a playboy.”

Yeah, they do. I barely stop myself from snorting and rolling my eyes.

They see the truth, I want to tell her, taking another long drink instead.

The player behind the medals and money is the whole reason I’ve got at least a dozen girls lined up here every night, offering themselves to me like I’m able to give them the universe.

In the bedroom, I do. I give them a few glorious hours they’ll remember until the day they die, pounding them halfway to heaven with the biggest cock they’re ever going to take.

And then I move onto the next. *One and done*.

“What’s your point?” I say, my eyes running up and down her trim, skinny body. She’s not a bad looking girl, but damn, she’s nothing like the models I’ve had night after night.

Nothing like the curves I felt on that American broad today.

“It’s not too late to break the mold. *We* can force the media to redefine you. It’s worked for other royals and men in your class for ages. You’ve heard about Prince Lukov on the Baltic,

right? A year ago he was just a womanizer, a drunk, a man they said had ties to the Russian mob...”

“Please.” I quietly balk at the comparison, sipping my scotch. “I don’t have skeletons like Lukov in my closet.”

“Of course not, Your Highness. All I’m saying is, look what at the reports about him now. Loving husband. Family man. He’s only a year into his marriage, and with the royal baby, nobody remembers the old Prince Lukov.” She pauses, seeing the skepticism in my eyes. “Or that Sterner kid, the billionaire in the States. He married his stepsister, for God’s sake, but nobody cares about that scandal. They just see charity, family, the handsome married man.”

“And? I’m not shoving a ring on anybody’s finger, or adopting a kid tomorrow, Serena.”

She smiles nervously, and leans in, just far enough so her leg touches mine. “Even a public courtship could go a long way, sire. A kiss for the cameras with a steady lady, stepping out of your cars with her at the next palace functions, having her come to dinner with you and the Queen. I think –“

“No.”

I only say it once. But I’m thinking *no, no, fuck no* to all that crazy.

No, no, no, goddammit, because I’ve heard the same thing tonight. It can’t be coincidence.

I don’t know what kind of game her and grandmom are playing, but they’re hitting me from every side. Trying to push this marriage scheme.

It doesn’t take much to see right through her. She clams up when I give her the heavy look, knocking back the last of my scotch.

“Silas, look, I’m not saying you need to get engaged to the love your life. It doesn’t even have to be real. You can use me.”

Don’t have a clue how I stop myself from choking on the booze. *Shit.*

I'm staring to see what's going on here. Grandmom's using the stick, and Serena, she must be the carrot.

And does she seem...warmer? I'm used to the stone cold bitch barking orders at the press corps and corralling reporters. Not this soft, smiling stranger I've only met a few times when she shared my bed.

I wonder how many she had down here before me to put her up to this. And she's still talking, trying to convince me with words she can't be crazy enough to believe.

"Use me," she says again, words that would be sexy if they were coming from anybody else. "I'll do anything you want. We'll be perfect when in front of the cameras, and what a story it'll make! The Prince and his secretary. Can you see the headlines now? If they think you've found love, that you're starting to settle down, all those playboy stories vanish. Poof."

She snaps her fingers. Smiling like mad. There's crazy eyes, and then there's hers.

I realize I'm sitting in front of a lunatic, drunker than a highland beach skunk.

I'm already feeling my hangover. The buzz burns through me, hotter than hell, completely overwhelming the desire to fuck that drove me down here.

Or is it all this asinine conversation?

"I knew you were desperate, Serena. I understood, and I cut you a break after everything that happened because it was my own damned fault. Still, this has got to be your stupidest idea yet." I lean in, ignoring the twitch in her green pupils, so different from the way I made them shake six months ago. "Next time you decide to bother me this time of night, it better be good. Not because you want to talk about a fucking fantasy."

I stand up, anxious to get upstairs to my suite. She reaches out, catches my wrist with both her hands, clutching at me like a mouse in a storm.

"Silas, we *can't* be through."

“Babe, we never started. If you want to keep the position you’ve got without stirring up any crazy questions, you’ll forget last winter. Everything. You’ll remind yourself you’re nothing but the royal press secretary, assigned to the Prince, and nothing more. Even if I entertained your fucked up suggestion for more than two seconds, there’s no way I’d ever make you my...what? My pretend girlfriend? My fiancée? My wife?”

Raw anger is the only thing that suppresses the savage laugh in my throat. Her eyes are soft, sad, maybe a little scared. Time to go, before I pull the trigger that sends fire straight through her heart.

I turn around and walk, praying she isn’t stupid enough to follow. This time, she stays put. I can hear one of the bodyguards shuffle over just before I get into the elevator, and see him whisper something into her ear.

They hand out warnings like candy whenever I need to be alone. And the bitch has gotten to me, yeah, just enough for the guards to sense it, step in, warn her not to follow me. She’ll listen, if she wants to keep doing anything in a royal capacity.

The elevator door closes, taking me back to my private level.

I’ve forgotten about the pussy I came down for. I’m finally ready to crash, and forget this brutal day.

Nobody ever said being Prince was easy.



I’M EATING a late brunch the next day, wondering why I can’t stop thinking about Serena’s idiotic suggestion.

Maybe it’s because the damned thing is...well, not so stupid after all.

Anything involving her would be a disaster, of course. But stepping out, finding a girl I can use to play pretend, just to get the media jackals and grandmom off my ass...no, that’s not insane.

I've always been a fan of making my problems disappear overnight. When I see an opportunity, I don't let go.

Right now, a big, fat one is staring me right in the face. I can practically see it now.

Just a few minutes of playing pretty with my fake love a week. Maybe a dinner or two, just to keep up appearances, and keep her on good terms.

That's all I want. All I need to pull this off before I go back to drinking, whoring, doing whatever I damned well please.

My hero shine didn't last long when I left the service and Afghanistan, no matter what the nicer boys in the press try to say. Not like it suited me anyway.

I'd rather do scandal than play hero a thousand times over. Hero is a role I don't understand, and never will. It's dangerously detached from reality.

No, fuck hero. Afghanistan taught me life is short, more than anything else, and I'd better make the most of every day in case there's not another.

Hero's something I'll never understand. A suit that won't ever fit.

That's for grandmom, with her pomp, her tradition, her endless charity balls. Me, I know exactly what I am.

I just need to dial it back enough to prevent the Bearington crown from falling into the streets instead of my hands once grandmom's done.

I need a girl to play the part, to give me a new image. An actress, that's what I'm after.

Preferably, a girl who doesn't know a thing about who I really am, and who won't think twice about upsetting the whole arrangement because she starts to get attached.

Smiling, I sip my coffee, tasting all the sweet notes of the Hawaiian plantation it's imported from, just for me. Truthfully, everything seems bright and decadent and beautiful today.

It's glorious, because I woke up with my head straight, instead of a hangover. And it's only going to get better, damn it, because I have a plan.

I'm finishing up my goose eggs and coffee when Victor knocks. "You know it's open!"

He comes in, a somber look on his face, very much back to being my personal servant instead of my chaperon for Her Majesty.

"Your Highness, I heard about Miss Hastings and her chat last night with you in the club. I'm deeply sorry, particularly because I'm the one who's warned her about inappropriate discussions before. If you'd like me to discharge her from her position immediately, I certainly would have no qualms."

"No. It's my fault for bringing her to bed. She's crushing like a stupid schoolgirl," I tell him, owning up to it, as much as the bitch annoys me. "She's doing her job, giving me ideas to iron out my image. As long as she's doing that, she ought to keep what she's earned. She'll get over the rest of it, I'm sure, she's a professional at heart. Don't let her go, Vic. Just...keep her the hell away from me for awhile. Please."

"Understood, sire," he says, the look on his face telling me that's going to be easier said than done. "Is there a reason you've called me up here?"

"Yeah. I've been thinking about the Warwicks, wondering how they're doing."

Victor narrows his eyes. Probably wondering what I'm really up to.

Screw him. He doesn't need to know. Not until it becomes absolutely necessary to spell everything out. Not a day sooner, because I know he'll try to talk me out of it, if he even gets a hint of what I'm after.

"If you're certain, Your Highness, it would be my pleasure to find out and relay the message for you."

"I'd like that. I'd also like to know exactly what's wrong with her father, and what their finances look like."

Victor blinks. “Prince, I can find out the details of his condition without issue. The financial arrangements might be another matter. As you know, they’re both foreign nationals, and the kingdom has no agreement in place with the United States to look so closely at their private details.”

“Give me a damned break.” Shaking my head, I fold my arms and glare at him. “No more games, Vic. You know as well as anybody that they’ve had special agents checking over the island’s bank accounts forever. Trying to catch the rich assholes who tried to use our banks as a conduit to Switzerland to avoid their taxes. It was all over the news, just a year or two ago.”

“That’s true, Your Highness, but I don’t see how American nosiness has anything to do with –“

“No buts. I’m not asking you to comb through the personal accounts of anybody at the US embassy. I’m just asking for the financials on the Warwicks. Two journalists nobody’s going to start an international incident over. Can we do that?”

I wait tensely for the answer, and it better be *yes*. Vic hesitates.

Finally, he bows his head slightly. “Of course, sire. Anything you wish. I’ll have to file a request with the intelligence office. You know how these things go. Hopefully, they’ll process it promptly, and pass along something I can give to you by late tonight.”

“Make it happen. Mark it high priority, or whatever. I want that file.” Dismissing him with a wave of the hand, I stand up and head to the shower.

This bathroom is bigger than most people’s homes. I’ve taken a couple dozen girls underneath the mock waterfall and the marble benches. Just last week, I fucked a brunette with fake tits here, pressing her against the wall, stretching her hair so tight in my hand the water sprayed her in the face when my cock took her over the edge. She took it without complaining, all for me.

Fuck. My dick wakes at the memory, pulses next to my belly button when I lather fine soap and water across every rock hard inch of me.

They all love it, this body.

The eagle tattoo crisscrossing my chest, wings spread wide, eyes set like a bird about to tear any lesser man's eyeballs out. The mad, dark stripes going up my arms, tapered like the royal flourish.

I'm a living tapestry. Something the press has always screamed about when they've caught little flashes of my tattoos sticking out my collar, or coming out the cufflinks near my wrists.

A million men would laugh all over the continent if I came out on the front pages shirtless.

Their wives would get wet, guaranteed, imagining what this wild, royal, unforgiving body could do to them.

And their nasty little fantasies about me – every last one of them – would be right.

I've got nasty on the brain, too. I grab my cock, all ten inches, and start stroking it like a demon.

It isn't that nameless brunette I fucked last week in this shower I'm thinking about. Isn't even the supermodel from Poland I sent home with a sore pussy several weeks further back, the one who's shared beds with half the billionaires and royals left in Europe.

I'm thinking about the girl I'm going to pretend to love.

Erin, Little Miss Warwick, with her soft American accent and hips begging to be wrapped around a good man's waist. Too bad for her there's nothing good about me.

I'll fill her anyway, fuck her, take her in ways she's never seen with those sweet, innocent eyes.

I want to corrupt her. Bad.

Even more than I want to use her to get my personal bullshit off my back, once and for all.

Christ, I'm a bastard.

Doesn't stop me from leaning into the wall, grunting like a bull, when I finally bring myself off, thinking about how she'd convulse on every inch of me.

I'm straining for precious breath by the end of it. Then I finish washing up, a sour frown pulling at my lips.

"Fuck you for thinking this'll be easy," I tell myself, staring into my own ripped reflection while I towel off.

I'm sure she'll take the offer, when I find her weakness, and throw it in her face. They always say yes to me, every woman who isn't related by blood, or wearing a thousand year old crown on her head.

No? That's a word I can't imagine.

Erin's going to be the perfect cure for all my woes. If only I can go several months without sinking my dick into her, making things complicated.

She'll either save me from the vultures who won't stop picking at me and the entire royal line, or else.

Yeah...or else she'll ignite the biggest scandal the monarchy has ever seen.

By the time I've got the towel wrapped around my waist and I step up to the huge mirrors to comb my hair, I'm smiling.

Whatever else I am, I love a challenge. I love a high. I'm the richest, most famous adrenaline junkie in the world.

Prince Hung is officially on the prowl, and he never comes home empty handed.

This whole wicked situation promises excitement. Sexual, emotional, scandalous, glorious excitement.

And that irresistible risk is the reason she's in my sights. I'm making Erin Warwick the hottest fake Princess the world's ever seen.

MAKE BELIEVE (ERIN)

I'm downstairs in the lobby, waiting in line to check out. Dad's finally well enough to travel, and we're about to get the red eye flight home.

It's going on midnight. Honestly, I can't wait to get the hell out of here, to leave behind this miserable, evil island that's shattered both our dreams and given us nothing but tragedy.

"Checking out," I say, stepping up to the counter.

The man behind the computer nods politely, takes my card and info, and begins typing away. Just before I think he's about to print out a receipt, he frowns, deep lines crossing his forehead.

"Miss Erin Warwick, right? Hmm. I'm terribly sorry, I can't process this request."

I blink in surprise, wondering what kind of new complication is about to bite us in the ass. "Huh? What're you talking about?"

"There's a hold on your account, madame. VIP request, you understand, from someone in the government. I need you to step outside near the front, Miss Warwick."

The government? I resist the urge to turn around, wondering if I'm about to be arrested and detained.

Anger takes over. My fist comes down, banging loudly on the wood. "I don't have time for this crap. My father's

upstairs, very sick, and we can't be late for our flight. I have to get home. If there's some kind of hangup processing his credit card, just bill us later."

"No, no, nothing like that," he says, slowly looking through me like I'm a ghost. "I need you to step outside and meet with the party waiting for you. Please."

He talks like a mouse. Practically begging me to do what he says. A chill runs up my back, and I slowly turn, sensing the five big men in their perfect suits before I even see them, standing next to the door.

"Are you done yet? You've scared the poor man enough," a voice that shouldn't be here says.

It's a voice I recognize. Regal, cocky, and completely in love with his own power.

No way. It can't be him...can it?

Oh, but it is. Prince Silas steps out from behind the guards like he's here for a stay, and annoyed with me for holding him up.

"There's the lady I'm looking for. Hello again, Erin," he says, that trademark smile forming dimples on his handsome face.

"Prince Silas?" Total shock rips through my core as he closes the distance between us, grabs my hand, and pulls me forward.

"My driver's waiting for us. If you'll come along kindly, there's something I need to talk to you about."

He's pulled me through the door, and I'm halfway down the stairs when I start to completely lose it.

"No, no! I can't go now. I have a flight to catch soon. I need to get my father to the airport..."

"Nonsense. I'll make sure he's personally helped to the gate by my aides."

"I *need* to be on that plane, Your Highness." I bite my tongue when I use his title. I say it the same way I want to call

him a *jackass* to his stupid, smug, mysterious face. “What’s this all about? Have I done something wrong?”

He doesn’t tell me until I’m in the car, plopped back in the wide leather seat with him. It’s a big SUV, and the back feels a lot like a limo, with a cool black interior and more leg room than any vehicle should have.

“You’ll be fine. My promise, love.”

Love? Is he fucking kidding me?

“I really don’t think so. It’s going to take at least an hour to get through security. I ought to be bringing dad down right now, heading for the gate.”

He laughs. Chuckles in a rich, deep tone like I’ve just told him a dirty joke. He’s shaking his head when my heart beats mad, and my fingers twitch, ready to slap that wicked smile off his face.

I don’t care if it’ll get me detained and cause an international incident. If he doesn’t stop, it’ll be worth it, I swear.

“What’s so damned funny?” I say, glaring at him.

“You’re so procedural, aren’t you? It’s like you don’t realize you’re riding with the second most powerful person in the whole kingdom. Do you really think I can’t bypass the usual red tape, love? Get you and dear old dad a private jet back to the States the instant I snap my fingers?”

He holds his hand out and the cabin echoes with a loud *snap*.

I can’t take this anymore. I grab him with both hands, shoving his arm as hard as I can. I keep going, reaching forward, falling into his chest while I try to slap him with both my palms. The momentum from the SUV lurching around a tight turn only helps me topple into him.

I grit my teeth. Prince or not, he’s being a royal asshole, and I’m nobody’s doormat. Nobody’s – not even to the man who has everything.

“Hey, hey! Easy, now,” he says, dangerously cool, getting a hold on me. Calmer than he should be, considering I’ve just assaulted his majestic, princely ass. “Don’t hurt yourself, love.”

I look up, the deep blue gems in his face swallowing me up. That’s when I realize he’s gotten me under control with no more effort than if he’d picked up a kitten. He’s overwhelmed me. Holding both my hands behind my head, sternly but gently, a skill he probably learned overseas in uniform.

“This can’t be easy for you,” he whispers. “You’ve every right to be pissed, to lash out. I get that. I’ve practically kidnapped you.”

“Yeah, you have,” I say, feeling my muscles go slack. There’s something vaguely gratifying about hearing him admit it. “You’d better start talking to me, Your Highness. Told you, I have a plane to catch, and I’m going to scream bloody murder if it leaves without me.”

Folding my arms, I look away from him, settling back in my seat. Everything outside is whipping by us. The SUV is flying through the capital, with men on motorcycles all around us. The royals must have a special pass to drive through the city like a bat out of hell, faster than any emergency vehicle I’ve ever seen.

“It won’t. I’ll see that it’s personally grounded by my orders. I’ll have the fucking captain hold the door open for you, with a pillow, a blanket, and a martini in hand. Or are you more of a wine girl?”

Slowly, I turn to him, disgust twisting my face. He’s wearing that smirk again – the one that would almost be sexy if it wasn’t for smugness. We must be staring at each other for about three brutal seconds before he winks.

“Hold tight, Erin. We’re almost to the castle. Then I’ll be more than happy to fill you in on why I’m so eager to sit down with you.”

No. I want to know now. I really do, and that’s what I want to tell him, but the huge, imposing vista appearing through the

window behind him puts me at a loss for words.

He wasn't joking around when he said *castle*. It's got to be Lucius, a medieval fort with huge gold capped spires I've only seen in the distance on the edge of the capital when the sun hits it just right.

Suddenly, they're a lot closer. And we're rolling across the literal drawbridge going over the moat, right into something from a fairy tale.

Except I'm not feeling charmed.

More like someone who's been taken captive, against her will, completely at the mercy of this strange, arrogant man for reasons I'm nearly afraid to find out.

The SUV jerks up a winding road past the castle's walls, and then we're next to a huge red door. It's smooth and modern, a more recent addition to the historic structure.

A man comes to Prince Asshole's side, pops the door, and he jumps out. Much to my shock, he rounds his way to my side himself, opening the door for me, reaching out with a hand.

"Come with me, love. You're the one in a hurry, aren't you?"

I jump out and brush past him, refusing his hand. He's right about the rush, but I'll be damned if I'm going to admit it.

I still can't wrap my head around this situation. And that goes double when he leads me into the castle, walking inside it like he owns the place.

Ugh. Technically, he does, and this could be his main home for all I know.

The place looks like a lodge, a luxury hotel, and a museum smashed together in one grand jumble.

Gold chandeliers, masterful paintings of the wilderness, handcrafted furniture in every corner. Classical music pipes through the hallways he leads me down, slowing when I start

to lag, waiting for me with just a hint of impatience on his princely face.

We stop and wait for an elevator leading God knows where. My eyes finally aren't on him, but rather, on the huge ram's head protruding from the wall overhead, a long horned animal that's preposterously big, strong, and possibly extinct.

"My great grandfather bagged that one," he says, catching me looking. "One of the last ones, back when the crown owned every square inch of the mountains for hunting. You know what they say about the horns on those bastards, right?"

I shake my head. The way the smirk on his face tightens up just a little more tells me I probably won't like the answer, but he's going to throw it in my face anyway.

"Ground them up into dust, and they'll make a man crazy. He'll go all night. His dick will grow another inch or two – no bullshit. He'll become the beast, focused on nothing but fighting and fucking." He pauses, his nostrils flare, and he cocks his head. "Probably all rumors. Probably. It's hard to believe these creatures went extinct a hundred years ago if they were so good at fucking, isn't it?"

Jesus. For the first time since I've gotten here, I feel like I'm about to pass out.

I can't handle this. I wonder what I've done to deserve it, standing here in a castle with this Prince, this infamous playboy. Yes, the man saves my life and possibly dad's one day, and then talks to me about rams *fucking* the next.

The elevator door opens, and I step inside another hallway with Prince Playboy. He taps his perfectly polished toe the whole way up. I'm too busy grabbing the golden banister around the edges so I don't pass out, feeling the blood drop to my stomach as the elevator carries us up what feels like more than a dozen stories.

I look at him, my eyes burning in disbelief. He looks so good, so ordinary here, in his lair.

He's all suit and tie again. Everything clinging to his strong, thick, angular body so custom and expensive I

wouldn't be surprised if his shoelaces cost a thousand dollars.

He stops in front of a door with gold trim, pulls a key from his pocket, and unlocks it. Then we're in a round room flanked with circular windows, a fireplace, and a view that would make heaven itself jealous.

"Take a seat," he says, moving to a small cabinet in the corner. "Before I offer you a drink, I'd like to come clean. I lied about the flight, love. Don't worry about dear old dad. My men are making sure he's on a jet to Mexico as we speak."

"Mexico?!" I choke on the word, feeling my chest tightening. "You're kidding me. Please tell me that's what's going on here. This is all some strange, elaborate joke... right?"

He turns around with that hateful fucking smirk on his face again, carrying a bottle that looks like crystal wrapped around some amber liquid, plus two glasses.

"I did what I needed to get you here. You can forgive me later, babe," he says, so fucking sure that I will. Then he sets everything on the little black walnut coffee table between us, popping the cap.

Slowly, he fills our glasses. "The finest bourbon in Europe. Something like fifteen thousand euros a bottle. It's a very special day, and the drinks should match the mood."

It rolls like gold over the perfectly round scoop of ice in each glass. He slides mine over to me, and I grip it tight, letting the cold numb my hands. I can't promise I won't hurl the heavy glass at his face, first chance I get.

If I'm going to hurt this royal asshole for what he's done to me, I'd might as well do it in style. Picturing him with a knot rising on his damnably handsome head almost makes me smile.

"What's wrong with you?" I say through clenched teeth. "Really. I want you to explain what's going on here, and I mean *now*. I'm going to call the embassy if you don't. I'll tell them you've taken me hostage."

“Hey, no need to get ugly.” He frowns, pulling away the glass he’s just taken a long sip from. “Yes, I suppose you need answers, don’t you? It’s only fair. How do I say this delicately?”

He turns his head. Both of us know full well that *delicate* isn’t in this man’s makeup.

“Fuck,” he says, making me blink. I still haven’t gotten used to hearing a Prince drop the F-bomb like he’s one of the frat boys on campus. “How do I put this?”

“What?” I ask quietly, feeling my heart slow to a patter, bringing my drink to my lips with the hope it’ll steel my nerves. “What is it?”

“I need you to marry me, Erin Warwick.”

Oh.

Oh, Jesus!

Just like that, it’s out. An answer that only invites a thousand more questions, if only it didn’t completely stop my heart.

I shouldn’t be sipping this whiskey, or bourbon, or whatever the hell it is. The sting in my throat causes me to cough, and turns the world upside down.

I can’t see straight. Can’t stand up. Can’t even breathe.

Prince Silas’ strong arms wrapping around me is the last thing I sense before I completely black out.



IT HITS me in the face. Just a cold, crisp bite to the nose, bringing me back to life.

Gasping for air, I jerk up in his arms, and feel the water dripping off me. No, it’s more than that. He has an ice cube on my head, gently positioned in his lap, of all places.

We’re on the couch. It takes him a minute to see me blink before he moves, realizing I’m awake.

“Perhaps I ought to work on softening my delivery after all,” he says. I’m too weak and confused to be bothered by the

smirk on his face.

This can't be real life, can it?

"You were out for five minutes. I was going to call a medic. These blackouts must run in the blood, though I know your poor father has more reason than you do to lose it."

I sit up, hearing the heavy ice slip off my head and hit the floor like a baseball. "Fuck you. You said you'd give me an answer, asshole. You've only left me wondering. I need to go. My flight..."

"Whoa!" Prince Silas gets up and stands in front of me. He's too big, too fast, and too damned imposing to maneuver around. "Let's talk this out. I'm only asking for three years, love. Not a whole bloody lifetime."

"Three years *of what?!*"

"Marriage, of course." He narrows his eyes. "Maybe I should get that medic after all, so we're sure you didn't bang your head..."

Marriage. That word again. As ludicrous as it is heavy.

"Why – for the love of God – *why* would you want to marry me? This is insane," I tell him, trying to push past him again.

It's hopeless, I know. But I'm going to faint a second time if I don't keep moving, trying to make myself believe this isn't just a twisted nightmare.

"Because I know everything about you, Erin, and I've got all the leverage in the world," he says softly, grabbing my wrists and pulling me against his chest. "That's the funny thing about being a Prince – I have an obscene degree of control over everyone's life except my own. And let me tell you, I have my issues. You're the answer to about ninety-nine of them."

"You're insane," I tell him, finding my new favorite word. My eyes scan the table for that glass.

Just my luck that I spilled what was left of my drink when I blacked out. Otherwise, I'd have thrown it in his face and

followed it up with a resounding slap, right across that five o'clock shadow he wears, dangerously close to my skin.

I'm sweating, flushed with heat. It's not just the alcohol or the fainting spell.

Wait. *No.*

This is already fucked up enough. You can't be turned on right now, I tell myself, shaking my head.

"Yes, yes, I know what it sounds like," Prince Asshole says, thankfully mistaking my gesture. "Believe me, Miss Warwick, it's nothing but business. I'm making you an offer. Proposal, I should say, but getting down on one knee and shoving a million dollar ring on your finger is only going to send mixed messages."

"Let. Go." He releases me, and I stumble back, throwing one hand out when he approaches, thinking I'm going to fall over again. "I need some fresh air."

He gently leads me over to a huge private balcony door. A soft ocean breeze caresses my face the instant the door opens. We step outside, and I've never been so grateful for sweet oxygen.

"I know your father's very sick," he says softly, helping me over to a big lounging chair. "I also happen to know your family doesn't have the resources to give him the chance he deserves. I can do that. As a show of good faith, that's the reason he's off to Mexico on one of my planes – they can do marvelous things there doctors aren't allowed to do in our slow, but civilized countries. He needs the very best, something experimental."

My head is still reeling. It takes me a full minute with him hovering over me, eyeballing me, before I can bring myself to speak.

"And that's what you'll give me if I...marry you?" God. It scorches my tongue just to say it.

"Certainly, that's the major benefit. I'm also offering you a two million dollar stipend and all expenses paid for, while we're together. Far more than any glorified actress has ever

earned. You'll sign a prenup overseen by the best lawyers in the kingdom, of course, and I may ask you to do something when our time comes to an end that turns your name in this country to fucking mud."

"Oh." My hands clench the edges of the chair, tightening in disbelief. "So, not only am I supposed to marry you, but you're asking me to piss off several million people?"

"Only for the tabloids." Prince Silas frowns, waves his hand, as if it's no worse than asking me to do the dishes. "I can't have you going down like my late mother, you see. The people would never understand that divorce, if they love you. Especially after all the years my father had his flings behind her beloved back."

It makes a sick kind of sense, knowing the history I've read about his family.

Jesus, though. I'm not really considering this...am I?

"I still don't understand why you want this, Your Highness. There must be something very important on the line for you to go to these extremes..."

"Our kingdom's entire future hangs on it. My family line continuing to rule, anyway. I have a certain...obligation." The word sounds poisonous. He turns away from me, his hands behind his back, staring across the high rising tops of the capital below like a god.

Up here, I suppose he is, in all but name only. His head turns, and he stares at me coolly.

"Believe me, this is the last thing in the world I ever wanted to consider. You've read the trash on the internet and on the supermarket shelves. I'm not the kind of man who's content to pair up with a plain, inbred princess several countries over. I'm not ready to settle down. Not now. Maybe not ever."

This isn't making sense. I don't understand how he's going to sell this fake marriage to the media, even if I decide to go along with this temporary insanity to save dad's life.

Dad. He's the only thing that gives me pause. If it were just money, I'd already be gone, on the fastest plane home to LA.

"I don't understand, Prince. I can't."

"Let me break it down for you," he says, coming closer, sitting on the edge of the chaise next to me. "I need a wife to smile and look pretty for the cameras. You're beautiful enough to be a princess, love."

Bastard. He tells me with all his infinite charm, like it's really true. My face instantly overheats, and I wish I had one of those big, round ice cubes to calm the flush.

Worse, he isn't done talking.

"You're also a foreigner, without any investment in landing me for real, or ruining a royal name you don't own by taking my ring in all my infamy. You, Erin, won't make a fuss. You'll turn the other cheek when I stagger in from the club with too many drinks in my blood. Leave me to my parties. Look away when I disappear with other girls to fuck. You're a living, breathing gag for the playboy bullshit that's followed me like a plague. You'll be my human shield when I live like the man I am, and pretend I'm someone I'm not. Hell, we both will. That's all this is, Erin. Make believe."

"Insane," I tell him again, shaking my head. "*This* is nuts, and so are you. Everything about it."

"It's perfect, love. And so are you. My pretend princess. The American girl who came stumbling into my arms. Love at first sight. Those fucking jackals in the press will be so busy dogging their new Cinderella, they won't look at me when I'm balls deep in my next mistress, doing what I do best."

I'm not going to call him insane for the hundredth time. Doesn't change the fact that he is.

"Can I go? I need time to think about this."

"Of course. Take the whole day. My valet, Victor, will help you find your room and unwind. It's not quite as nice as mine up here, but it's still a damned good view."

I stand up, making sure I'm able to walk without having a relapse into unconsciousness. Thankfully, I can. Once I'm steady on my legs, I beat it, running back inside his castle penthouse and heading for the gold trim door as fast as my heels will carry me.

I'm supposed to be rushing home to comfort dad.

Instead, I might be taking the biggest risk ever, one I couldn't have imagined just a few hours ago. *Whatever it takes to save him.*

There's a sickly feeling in the pit of my stomach as the tall, older man in the neat suit takes me several rooms down the long hallway.

I can't avoid what's coming next. I'm going to have to sit down and think.

Think hard and serious about staying in this crazy place, with Prince Asshole, a lot longer than I'd ever imagined.



I'M DIALING the number I've been given to reach my dad. The long table in my ridiculously oversized dining room looks like something from a mafia film.

Sitting at the edge, I rest my hands on the tabloids I've asked for. Reams upon reams of them, every issue about Prince Silas Bearington and his disgusting, unbelievable, sexist antics.

Prince Scandal. Prince Hung. The Prince I'm about to marry, if I stomach going through with this.

"It's me. How're you feeling?" I say over the line, as soon as I hear him grunt a hello.

"Better. Whatever they've got here to take the edge off the pain, it's better than the crap on that damned island." Dad pauses. "Always wanted to vacation Mexico, you know. Just didn't think it'd happen like this."

"You're in good hands," I tell him, unsure if I really believe it.

“Yeah, I am. They’ve got a lot of high tech stuff here. It’s a classy place. The doctors talk like they know exactly what they’re doing. Remember that story I did a few years back about the rich and powerful going abroad for special treatments? Really hits home now.”

I smile. It’s the first time I’ve heard him talk about work since the nightmare started.

“I remember, dad. Maybe you’ll do a follow-up when all this is over.”

“Maybe.” He doesn’t say it very enthusiastically.

Still, it’s more than enough to make me beam, the very idea that he’s thinking about something besides death and early retirement.

“Turns out I got more than the scoop I came to Saint Moore for,” he says quietly. “The Prince is pretty decent after all. I regret hammering him before I had my fit.”

Ugh. This isn’t what I’d expected to hear.

He doesn’t have a clue how wrong he is. If he knew anything about the crude, calculating proposal Prince Asshole just dropped in my lap, he’d know *decent* ought to be last on the list of words to describe him.

I don’t have the heart to say anything about it. Besides dad thinking I’d gone crazy myself, I’d risk ruining his brightening spirits, and that could easily be deadly.

“So, you’re happy with your care so far? I know it was all kind of sudden.”

“Right. You’ll see for yourself when you show up here. Or are you still planning on jetting back to LA? It’d be nice to have somebody checking in on the condo besides Wilson across the hall.”

Shit. I haven’t begun to think about how I’m going to tell him I’m not coming back to North America anytime soon if I sign onto this ludicrous proposal.

“I think I’m going to be staying here on the island just a little while longer,” I say cautiously, wracking my brain.

“Huh? Whoa, honey, wait a minute...I see what’s going on here.”

Does he? I hold my breath, feeling my eyelids flutter as they pinch shut.

“That meeting with the Prince, you staying behind, sending me here alone on a private goddamned jet... congratulations, Erin. Seriously.”

“What?”

“Congrats. You must’ve landed something amazing over there with the palace. I know, I know, you’re too modest. Only have myself to blame for bringing you up that way. You don’t have to tell me the little details until you’re ready. I’m so happy for you, honey. You’re gonna leave me in the dust before you’re thirty. Everybody’ll be tuning in to see the Erin Warwick report.”

I’m laughing. He thinks it’s because I’ve been caught red handed, bursting with pride.

I wish. Laughing is the only thing I can do to avoid crying hysterically.

“Let’s leave off here. Lord knows we can both use some good news after everything that’s gone down.”

“You’re right,” I say, grabbing my belly. It won’t stop twitching, heavy with the guilt and ten ton stress my father has no clue about, pressing down on me.

“I’ve got to go. They want to run a few more tests this afternoon. I’ll check in again when I know something more, Erin. You take some time to settle in. If you wind up meeting with the Prince or the Queen, I want to hear *everything*.”

“You will,” I promise. Another sharp pang stabs me below the breast because I honestly don’t know what I’m promising anymore.

I don’t even believe myself.

“Love you, baby.”

The line goes dead. I hang up, throwing my phone across the table. My elbows hit the dirty tabloids laid out beneath me, wrinkling Prince Sicko's smug, sexy face.

God. Before I'd picked up the phone, I'd secretly hoped for a small miracle.

Dad could've said something to make me re-think this. Anything to put the brakes on this twisted ride I'm about to sign up for to save his life.

If the universe were kind, he would've already had his tests, and the doctors would've told us his cancer had mysteriously gone into remission.

But that isn't going to happen. Not unless I marry – yes, *marry* – the playboy Prince, the tease, the last man on Earth who should've been born to royal blood.

Running my hands over my face, I wait for my temples to stop throbbing. After another minute, they do.

The weight inside me shifts, settles. I'm making peace.

I think I'm ready.

I'm going to do this. I just need to swallow my pride, pretend it's just another job, and brace myself for the public eye.

It's worth dad's life. I'll humiliate myself a thousand times over to keep him from dying young.

Though in this case, I doubt I'll ever get the chance to do it alone. Prince Silas will be more than happy to embarrass both of us if he doesn't give me a heat stroke first from all the blushing, teasing, red hot agony he's bound to bring, too.

When I stand up and press the intercom on the wall to his valet, asking for an audience with the Prince, I want to believe I'm doing something noble.

Noble. Ha! Ha ha.

No, not this time. It feels like I just told my warden I'm ready for my execution, and now I'm just waiting for him to lead me down the long walk to my doom.

TERMS (SILAS)

She's standing in front of me on the balcony, holding her hands in front of her like I'm her priest at confession, and she's about to tell me something filthy.

I wish. I'd love to know all her dirty little secrets, but I want her agreement more.

"I'll do it, Your Highness. But I have terms." Erin looks up, her soft brown eyes glowing in the moonlight, the wind flipping that chestnut hair I want to pull so fucking hard over her shoulder.

"Terms?" I look into my glass of scotch and give the melting ice a shake. "Let's hear them."

Her mouth is moving, but I'm barely comprehending what she's saying. I'm only on my second drink of the evening, so it isn't the booze.

It's that dress. She's wearing the first thing that isn't some mass produced casual horseshit, one of many fine pieces I had left in her room, and she looks gorgeous. The lily white evening dress clings to her skin, accents her curves, makes my cock stir like a hungry animal in my trousers.

"...and yes, I need everything in writing. We can keep it between you and me, I don't care, but I want something solid. Trust, but verify, you understand." My eyes are on her lips the whole time while she's yammering on. I wonder how they'd twitch if I sunk my teeth in. "And one more thing, Your

Highness...no sex. I mean, you said this was all make believe, so I'm guessing that's a given. I wanted to get it out there, anyway."

"No sex?" I repeat numbly, feeling my cock pulse harder. "Half the women in this kingdom would jump at the chance to have a Prince with benefits. You know that, don't you?"

She makes a face. Probably hiding the flush, the heat that makes her want to take it back. I know a woman when she's playing coy, and when her mind is far from made up.

"Of course I know," she says, staring me dead in the eyes. "No sex. I'm not one of your admirers."

Goddamn, this is going to be a challenge. In principle, I agree.

Fucking her would only make this harder, a hell of a lot more complicated than it needs to be.

Too bad she's just taunted me. There are *very* few things in this world I can't have by virtue of money and power. I can't even remember the last time I've met a pussy I want that's telling me 'no.'

"Is any of this going to be a problem?" she asks, nervously twisting her hands when I wait too long to answer.

"No. Everything you've said is more than reasonable. I'll have my lawyer draw up a prenup tomorrow and a separate document with the terms you mentioned. I have a man who isn't connected to the palace just for these sorts of things, so we can keep this out of grandmom's prying eyes."

"And the last part?" she whispers, fighting to keep her eyes locked with mine.

I take a step closer, polishing off my scotch, setting the glass down on the little table. "No sex?"

"Yeah."

"It's a deal." I wait until we're barely a couple inches apart before I say anything more. "You're a special woman, Miss Warwick. I think you have the honor of being the first woman I've met to make me promise *not* to fuck her brains out."

There's a tick in her lips. Quick, fiery, almost imperceptible. I can smell every molecule rolling off her, a scent my cock knows, pheromones so electric they tell me this is going to be the hardest fucking promise I've ever had to keep.

"I'm glad we can keep this...professional," she says, finally snatching her eyes away, looking over my shoulder at the capital gleaming in the distance.

"So am I. You've got a very bright future ahead when this is through. Believe me, I'm glad I can do this with a woman who's close to my level. Intellectually, at least."

She looks at me like I've just insulted her. What can I say?

Mentally, we're partners in crime.

As for the money, class, ambition? We're worlds apart.

My brain doesn't let go of its old habits so easily. I'm still in hunt mode, eager to wrap this minx around every inch of me, put my mouth on hers, feel her tight little cunt dripping all over my balls.

Everything I want. Everything I can't have. Not unless I want to ruin this before I've even given it a chance.

"I hope you'll try to be a little more tactful when we're married," she says. "I'm going to be your wife. A...a Princess, I guess. God."

"You guess?" I raise an eyebrow. "That's exactly the title that comes with this job. Princess of Sealesland, Saint Moore, and All Her Tributaries. The next living, beautiful, royal vessel to continue the family line."

I reach for her. She's burning up when I touch her, gently sliding my hands up over her arms, a slow moving embrace that causes my cock to leak like a melting candle in my pants.

"No sex!" she whimpers, sucking her bottom lip.

"No sex. I'm a man of my word, Erin," I growl, bringing my face to hers, close enough to let her smell the liquor on my breath. "But we have to get used to more tender forms of

contact, of course. What would an engagement, a wedding be, without a kiss?"

Her eyes go wide. She's trembling in my arms, but it isn't just nerves talking.

I know this heat, this waver, this fire in the blood. She wants me. I want her.

No, I want to be inside her.

We're both prisoners here, holding back on our natural instincts for a greater purpose, the way it has to be. We can only graze, but never gorge.

We can't rip off each other's clothes. We can't try every position I know, and invent several new ones. We can't fuck, and it kills me, the part deep down inside that loves a good conquest.

Fuck.

"It's too soon for that," she tells me, nearly breathless. Her sweet, plump tits wedge against my chest, and I swear I can feel her nipples through several layers. "I need some time to adjust to all this. Please, Your Highness."

"Fine." I tear myself away from her, pulling her with me by one hand, to the balcony's stone edge. "You should really start calling me Silas behind closed doors."

She looks at me, and blinks. I don't say a word, just run one hand up across her shoulder, cup her cheek, and gently tilt her face to the scenery.

"Take a good, long look at all that. It's the very reason you're here. You're doing this with me to save your father's life. For me, this is about a family, a kingdom. All the people down there in that glittering city, and the thousand other villages and towns beyond that make up this island."

"How noble." Sarcasm drips from those little lips I want to bury in mine. "It's not that I don't believe you. It just seems... so unlike you, Silas."

"What do you know?" I growl. "We barely know each other. To be fair, that's the way it ought to be. There's more to

this life than fucking and partying. They're simply the fine perks I allow myself, something to keep myself sane when I have to face who I am, and what I've been destined to do since the day I was born."

She stares at me a lot more seriously now. Just like I expect.

This is all too familiar. I've brought dozens of women up here before, and sometimes I launch into this bullshit, after one too many drinks. I haven't had that tonight, but everything's creeping up, slowly strangling me.

The impending engagement. The wedding. The ridiculous marriage I'm going to have to pretend to be enjoy for the next three years, and the divorce that will come next.

Then there's the possibility Her Majesty could drop dead any time. Fuck, I haven't thought about what I'd do if I have to take the crown while I'm still married to this woman.

For a split second, doubt courses through me, deflating my erection. It doesn't go further than that.

I wouldn't be alive today if I let second guesses rule me. I take her hand in mine, squeeze it, and we stare across the capital together, my eyes focused on the palace in the distance.

"Let me tell you a secret," I whisper, wondering why I'm trying to convince her. "I'm not the bastard you think I am. If you'd come up here tonight and told me you wanted nothing to do with this proposal, I'd have let your father stay in Mexico anyway. I won't turn away a dying man from the treatment he needs. I'm not a monster."

Her eyes soften. She shifts, resting one arm against the high stone banister, just as the wind kicks up, ruffling her skirt. The wedding dress illusion to the damned thing makes my cock throb again, though this is far more casual than the long, ornate getup she'll be forced to wear at the actual wedding.

"That's good to know, but it doesn't change my mind. I'm not backing out of anything. I told you I'd marry you, go through with what we need to do. It's only right that we live up to both ends of our bargain. I don't need to know who I'm

marrying. I don't care. I just want to get this over with. It's all make believe, like you said, right?"

She studies me closely. Of course, she's right. I give her hand one more fierce squeeze before I draw away from her, slumping against the balcony's edge, allowing my turquoise tie to hang in the breeze.

"Absolutely right." I turn my head, taking her in, trying not to let my eyes roam her curves for too long. "We can both be very fair. Strange bedfellows, as they say, except we won't really be bedfellows at all."

"No sex," she says sweetly, smiling. "Remember?"

"Like I have any reason to forget. Luckily for me, I've got pussy chasing this dick all the time. They don't call me Prince Hung for nothing. I can have my pick, Erin, night after night after night. I'll bring you to the club downstairs sometime so you can see for yourself. You're more than welcome to share the facilities now that we're going to be married."

"Gross." She makes a face, sticking out her tongue. "I don't need to. What you do on your own time, in private... well, that's your business. Just like we agreed."

There's some hesitation in her voice. A noticeable two second delay that makes me want to rip that thin ivory dress off, lay her down out here, and fuck her until sunrise. Against the better judgment I'm barely holding onto, of course.

"What about me?" she asks, sizing me up. "I'm going to need to see the final draft of this agreement. Need to know you're not going to put me in a chastity belt or something weird in the clause about sex."

I'm rolling my eyes. "Please. They went out of style about two hundred years ago, love. There's a couple of the fucking things hanging up at the royal museum. I'd be happy to take you down there sometime for a tour, just to see them, if you're really so interested."

"Please!" She's laughing, but it doesn't hide the rosy red blush on her cheeks.

“You’re free to make your own arrangements with men, so long as you’re careful.”

Naturally, she’s free. I’m not really her husband, her Prince, or her lover.

Why do the words taste so sour when I say them, then? I shouldn’t feel my muscles angrily tensing, the way they used to before going on patrol outside Kandahar, when I think about that perfectly slappable ass she’s hiding grinding against another man’s cock.

“I will be. I’ve always been extremely careful with that part of my life, Silas. God.” She pauses, closing her eyes. “It’s going to take me awhile to get used to calling you by your first time.”

“Save the Your Highness crap for the press, and formal audiences. After the wedding, you’re free to talk to me as your friend in the open, anywhere except the most rigid, stuffy, and fucking stupid royal functions.”

She smiles. “Friends. I think we can do that.”

“I hope so,” I say, clenching my teeth because my cock keeps hounding me to make her a whole lot more. My dick won’t let up on that *Prince with benefits* idea. “Let’s go over more in the morning. I’ll bring Vic and Serena in for a full briefing.”

Christ, Serena. I wonder how the hell she’ll react to my abrupt engagement. One more problem I’ll have to deal with tomorrow, hoping the warning has sunk into my lovestruck press secretary.

“Yeah? What’s on the agenda?”

“First thing’s first,” I say, running through the long list of things to do to make this fake marriage happen. “We’ll have to tell grandmom, after my closest aides. She’ll need an audience with both of us.”

“Grandmom? You mean...the Queen?” Her eyes glisten, big and dark and beautiful. Swept up in what must be an outrageous fairy tale to this American girl without an ounce of royal blood in her veins.

“Yes, Her Majesty, in the flesh.” I’m going to need a few more drinks to get through the shock and awe tomorrow.

“Get some rest,” I tell her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and leading her back inside my suite. “I’ll make sure you get your own aides assigned tomorrow, too, so you’ll have some help settling in. After grandmom receives the news, we’ll have a press conference. I leave you to decide what you want to tell your father.”

“Damn, don’t remind me! It’s going to be difficult.” She drifts out of my embrace near the door leading out, rubbing her temples. “Jesus. This is happening so fast. Whatever, we’ll figure it out. I’m in this with you, Silas. I won’t let you down.”

“No, you won’t. I always make the right choice. You’re going to be the best goddamned plastic Princess a future King could hope for. If anything comes up, I’ll be here, right down the hall. Starting tomorrow, you don’t need to check with Vic to request my presence. If anything comes up, you know where to find me.”

“Okay. Goodnight,” she says, shooting me one more look with those chocolate eyes I want to lose myself in.

Smiling, we leave off there, and I shut the door.

I’m alone, left to wonder what the fuck I’ve done. The most restless night of my life since my father died on that damned yacht begins.

Flipping through my phone, I look through the numbers of men I served with, and stop just short of dialing them. I haven’t talked to most of them since I got discharged, even the ones who were like brothers in arms.

They’re good men. They held my life in their hands, like I kept theirs, and that will never, ever change.

But they’re commoners. Happily married, some with families, without crowns to worry about.

They can’t understand this shit. They can’t help me with this, like they could with Taliban sentries. Nobody can.

I'm too fucked up to go to the club. So, I break out a fresh bottle of scotch, settle into my granite bathtub with the waterfalls running out of the wall, and drink.

My cock stays hard as a stone when whiskey dick sets in. I can't get her off my mind, Little Miss Warwick the pure, begging to be corrupted.

I think about tearing that white dress off, down in the country mud, somewhere up in the highlands where you can walk the beaches nude for miles.

I don't want to kiss my new wife. It's not enough.

I want to bite her, slap her, fuck her. Bind her hands together at the wrists with my finest ties, over her head. Hear her whimper while I tease her nipples between my teeth. I want – no, *need* – to rub the full length of my raging cock across her slit, let it soak me with her cream before I finally plunge in and take her the fuck over, one hungry inch at a time.

Every atom in my body howls to fuck this girl, purely because I've told her I won't. What better way to realize my own depravity?

I'm burning up. My hand drifts underneath the water, grasping my cock, pulling off all ten inches with rough, angry strokes.

“Princess – fuck!” My eyes are closed, and I'm jerking off harder.

“Erin...” Her name growls through my throat like lava when I shoot my load in the water. “Fuck. You.”

No, fuck me. I'm the whole reason she's about to be a piece of royal meat for my designs.

My huge, fit chest swells underneath the water, sucking in oxygen to replenish the life that's been sucked out of me.

I can't screw this up. I need to keep this promise. I'll do it, no matter what happens.

Even if I have to spend the next three years kicking, screaming, boozing, and fucking everything in sight to keep

my dick away from her.

I meant what I told her. Whatever else I am, I'm a man of my word, and I'll keep the promise I've made that's about to be backed up by a legal contract.

I'll switch to ice baths tomorrow if it'll help keep my cock away from my make believe Princess.



I WAKE UP LATE, sometime after eleven, and summon Vic immediately. I'll deal with Serena and figure out whether I need to fire her and find a new press secretary later.

He's in my room while I'm eating breakfast when I break the news. "I got engaged last night, and I need to take my girl down to the palace today to fill in grandmom."

"Engaged?!" He practically chokes. "You're getting... married, sire? Forgive me, but this comes as a great surprise."

"No shit. It happened very fast. It's the American girl, Erin Warwick. We've been spending a lot of time together since she fell into my arms. I've never thought real seriously about that love at first sight nonsense, but there's something about her. I've been converted. I'm a believer, Vic. Nailed in the ass by cupid's arrow. This is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, as ludicrous as that sounds."

His expression makes it look like he's been to hell and back.

It takes a huge sip of strong black tea not to burst out laughing. When he reaches for his elbow and pinches himself, I have to flex every muscle not to spit my drink all over the room.

"You're certain about this, Your Highness?" he asks.

I can't blame him. But I've been preparing for this, expecting it, even when I opened my eyes and felt the hangover pulling at my skull. I'm ready.

"Damned right, I am. This is more than just another slut, Victor. I've met the woman I'm going to marry, the girl who's

going to serve the whole kingdom when she shares my throne one day.”

I smile. Victor looks completely pale.

Shit. Trying not to laugh in his face just got ten times harder.

“Entirely your decision, as is your right, my Prince. If it’s all right with you, I’ll request an audience with Her Majesty this instant so she can meet the future Princess.”

“Do it,” I tell him, taking a long pull from my cup. “And make sure Erin’s got something stunning to wear to the palace. Get the ladies up here who handle fashion at the royal bashes. We need to make the best first impression we can.”

“Certainly, sire.” He tips his head respectfully and I watch him head out the door.

I stand up, wash, and then get dressed in my finest suit. Amazingly, my latest hangover is already a distant memory. If that’s a side benefit from all this marriage bullshit, then I’m becoming a believer.

Vic sends me a text, letting me know everything should be ready in two hours. I step out into the morning light, feeling the warm sun on my skin, looking down on my kingdom while I fix my tie.

Erin can’t comprehend what’s at stake. It doesn’t matter that I tried to show her, to explain it, to give her some small insight into the crushing, constant duties being born a Prince brings.

Too bad. She doesn’t need to understand a damned thing to take my ring.

I need a toy. An actress. Someone to get the bastards in the media to drool all over her instead of my latest scandals.

Someone to make the future King look like one.

Someone to make everyone down there believe that I’m worthy, that I can actually fill grandmom’s shoes. Or at least know that I won’t ruin Saint Moore forever.

Someone to give me a second chance, for fuck's sake. To let me prove myself.

I'm better than my parties, my drinks, my pussy. Leaning over the edge of the balcony, my fists tighten. I see the kingdom's flags fluttering on the high towers in the distance, the black double-headed eagle grasping the crown in its talons.

That bird isn't ever letting go. Neither am I.

"You're going to find out how wrong you are," I whisper. "Every last one of you. This girl's my chance to show you that I'm going to be the best fucking King this island ever had."

Yeah, she is. And if she gets me harder than a rock in the process every time I think about her, much less see her, just like I am now, who am I to complain?

HER MAJESTY (ERIN)

I 'm barely out of bed, processing the insane thing I agreed to the night before, when I'm picked up by a whirlwind. Rather, three middle aged women.

Two of them lift me off my bed, gently shaking me awake, while another stands next to a rack of clothing that's materialized out of nowhere.

"Hurry, Marissa, she's only got an hour! We'll get her washed up."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! I think I can wash myself!" They don't listen. They've pulled off my robe and carried me halfway to the bathroom before I'm able to speak.

"Nonsense," the oldest one snaps. "It'll be much faster, more efficient, if you'll allow us, madame."

Jesus, no. This is happening too fast. These manic aides or royal valets or whatever they are will strip me naked in a matter of seconds if I don't say something.

"Stop! I order you. I'm engaged to Prince Silas Bearington himself, and that means you're supposed to do anything I say."

Does it? I have no clue. I *hope* it does.

The women take their hands off me, the three of us standing in the bathroom, staring dumbly at one another.

"Engaged?!" The dark haired one looks at her companion. "Mary, I thought she was just a guest. I didn't know we were

dealing with the future...Princess.”

She blinks her eyes, totally shocked. Part of me regrets letting the news slip so easily – but not if it means I’m going to get a chance to bathe myself.

“As you wish,” the redhead named Mary says. “But please, madame, you need to finish quickly. Marissa’s waiting outside with your clothes and breakfast. You need to be downstairs with his Highness by noon.”

I nod, tapping my foot impatiently. They’re out in a few more seconds, and I let my robe drop.

It’s been a rough night. I don’t bother using the gorgeous bathtub with the gold trim and the waterfalls flowing from the slots in the wall. I hop in the shower and stand underneath what’s probably a thousand dollar shower head, beaming me with jets.

The pressure massages me. It feels good, especially after last night.

It hasn’t been easy getting used to this.

I’m surprised I managed to get any sleep. No sooner than I got back to my room and laid down, I spent several hours tossing and turning.

Thinking about this role I’ve agreed to play. All but whoring myself out to a man who’s using me to lie to millions of people.

Thinking about dad. Thousands of miles away, battling for his life, and getting a fighting chance at it only because the same asshole who thought nothing of using me as a prop stepped in to help him.

Thinking about the Prince. Everything he’s gotten me to agree to should worry me.

But my mind goes somewhere else whenever I think about Silas.

His heat, burning beneath his skin each time he touches me, his breath drifting across me like smoke.

His power, his strength, the arrogance in every movement. He's grabbed me more times than I can count, something no man ever did before.

Always without asking. Always with superhuman confidence, like he already owns me, and we haven't even signed this stupid contract. Always with the glint in his ocean blue eyes that says everything I fear most about this insane arrangement.

I can fuck you, love. Anytime. Any place. Any way I want.

And you'll love it, Erin. Fuck yeah, you will.

You won't stop me. You'll beg because it's that good.

And once we get started, we won't be stopping until you've soaked the sheets.

"Madame?" A loud, desperate knock at the door breaks me from my filthy daydreams.

I look down at the aching, wet mess between my thighs. My hand went there without me even realizing it, my fingers drifting over my clit, stroking it while I imagine what would happen if the Prince and I threw that 'no sex' rule to the seven winds.

"Coming! Hold on, just a second," I grunt, standing up straight, flattening myself against the wall.

I don't know if she backs away from the door. I don't care.

It's dirty and depraved, but it's the release I need. It's the tension Prince Hung is strangling me with.

Is he really as *hung* as his nickname implies? Or is it one more lie he's fed to the media to make himself seem like a god?

I want to believe. I want to think about how huge he is because I *need* my release if I'm going to survive today.

The kind of sweet release I've never, ever gotten as a sheltered virgin, who always thought she'd save herself for her husband. For a good man, a noble man, someone closer to my level, sexually and otherwise.

Not the Playboy Prince, who's probably fucked hundreds, the one who doesn't even want me for real, the man who makes me want to tear out the 'no sex' clause in our non-existent contract with my bare teeth.

Oh, God. Oh, fuck.

Silas!

My thoughts are off the chain, surrendering to the filthy hulk I want bending me over, fisting my hair, slamming into me so hard I can feel my hips shaking my shoulders. He really is Prince Hung and so much more in this fantasy. He's about to push me over.

"Madame? Are you all right?" Mary sounds extra nervous in that not-quite-English accent. She jiggles the doorknob, but I can't stop now.

"Coming!" I scream again, this time a little more breathless.

Yes, coming.

Coming for the bastard, the player, the Prince. Coming so hard I feel myself gush all over my hand, something that rarely happens. Grinding my teeth, heaving my lungs, pushing myself up into the jet stream so the waves lap at my nipples like tongues.

I'm coming the way I've wanted to since I climbed into bed last night.

Coming, coming, coming while I think about him grabbing my wrists the next time we're face-to-face, pushing me against the nearest wall, and ripping off my panties...

My knees are shaking when I finally pull my hand away and turn the water off. By now, two of the women are in a full blown panic. I hear one slamming herself into the door like a battering ram.

"Jesus Christ. I'll be out in just a minute – I'm drying myself now!"

The commotion stops. I hear them angrily chattering away behind the door while I rip the Egyptian cotton towel off its

golden clip.

Recent pleasure aside, I'm hating Silas even more. His lies are rubbing off on me, and so is his dirty, evil charm.

This has to be some kind of black magic. Saint Moore, like any other European country, has its legends about sorcerers, witches, and other crazy things. I think I'm cursed. The fact that I'm pulling on fresh underwear after masturbating to a man I hate makes me wonder if all the myths are true.

"Okay. Sorry about that, ladies, I sometimes have allergies and like to breathe the steam to clean my sinuses." Another lie.

Mary and Charlotte glare at me. Fortunately, the more chipper Marissa steps between them, yanks me forward, and sits me down in front of three huge mirrors. She blow dries and combs my hair, humming an odd sounding tune.

I'm allowed to gulp down a thermos of strong black tea and something that tastes like waffles stacked high with a fantastic spread of fruit and cream drizzled over it. Delightful.

It takes me a minute to recognize the tune. It's *King of All Things*, the elegant overture Saint Moore adopted as its national anthem. It's also the song that plays every time one of the royals steps into a public setting.

It's about a great King, Queen Marina's grandfather, I think. Of course, it's loud, arrogant, and probably caused a few composers to wag their fingers angrily when it was written about a hundred and fifty years ago.

Yeah, the longer I'm here, the easier it is to see why such cocky, manipulative crap runs in Silas' blue blood.

"Stand up, please, madame! We're on a very tight schedule, you understand. Pardon the hurry." Marissa beams me a tense smile.

No sooner than I'm on my feet, she's wrapping me in several layers of the softest, most expensive clothes I've ever worn on my body. It's a long, flowing, very traditional dress. Very red – blood red. Complete with a sweet smelling flower she tucks into my hair, giving it a final push in the mirror.

“There, there. You look just lovely. What do *you* think?”
She puts her hand on my back and spins me around.

It takes me a second to recognize myself. *God.*

I’ve been transformed. Completely. Unrecognizably.

Even in my best formalwear, I never looked like anything more than a smart, savvy student from a very American college. Now, I look like I belong on a theater stage, re-enacting some play from a hundred years ago.

Or else in the royal palace on this insane island. The place I’m supposed to wind up in less than thirty minutes.

“It’s good, I guess,” I tell her. “Uh...shoes?”

“Of course!” She snaps her fingers and dives down on the floor, grabbing my feet and stuffing them into wooden clogs with gold and rubies.

The heels are surprisingly high. I hope I can actually walk in this getup without tripping all over myself. I don’t stop to think about what a pain it’s going to be if I have to use the bathroom.

“Just perfect, madame! Your Prince is waiting downstairs. Shall we go?”

“We shall,” I say, leading them out the room, straight to the elevator.

When we’re on the first floor, the boys take over. Silas’ valet, Victor, nods respectfully and walks me out to the waiting SUV tucked into its motorcade.

“His Highness is already waiting for you in the rear, madame. Please don’t be afraid to grab my arm if you need some help on these stairs.”

I thank him, but intend to take them myself. I could use the practice. I manage, slowly and haltingly, careful not to go tumbling down in a flash of reds.

The SUV’s door opens. I slide in next to Silas, or that’s what I mean to do, except suddenly I’m stuck.

“Jesus. Look at you,” he says, lowering the expensive shades he’s wearing.

It’s a look that’s way too similar to the imaginary smile Prince Hung just gave me in the shower.

I’m embarrassed. Victor comes running up to save my skirt from tearing on the metal. I swear, if Silas is about to hit me with some snotty remark, I won’t hesitate to give him the slapping he deserves. Prince or not.

“What?” I say, narrowing my eyes.

Finally. The skirt comes free and I clamber up on the seat next to him, grabbing my seat belt.

“You’re gorgeous, love. Looks like it was made for you.”

Surprise. Compliments aren’t what I expect.

I bat my eyes a couple times and turn away from him, trying not to think about what he made me do in the shower this morning.

“Well, I think this would be much easier if that were the case.”

“I’d say you’ll get plenty of practice, but you’ll be happy to hear occasions this formal tend to be rare. You can go back to your thongs and yoga pants when we’re done. Just be sure you wear something halfway decent when we’re in front of grandmom.”

Thongs and yoga pants? *Thanks, asshole.*

Without thinking, I reach over and sock him on the arm. He laughs, grabs my wrist, and brings my hand to his lips.

I hadn’t noticed how insanely hot it is underneath all this. Naturally, I do when he kisses my skin for the first time. It only lasts a second, more than a gentle peck. It’s forceful, a little wet, and haughty as everything else about him.

“If you really want to cause damage, you’ll have to punch me a whole lot harder next time. That swing just turns me on. You get rough with me, I’ll eat it up and spit it back ten times harder.” He brings his mouth to my hand again, this time

sinking his teeth in, a gentle bite igniting a flash fire in my body.

Bastard! I can't let him play with me like this. I won't, I tell myself.

He's never polite, even when he says nice things. He just wants me to let my guard down.

"No sex," I tell him, jerking my hand away.

"Please. I haven't forgotten," he says, pushing his shades back over his beautiful eyes. "I'm practicing my most gentlemanly kiss. We can't be like ice, Erin. You'd better believe the tabloids will pick up a frigid marriage if they get so much as a breeze."

"Really? Is that why you're hiding behind those sunglasses?" I stick out my tongue.

"This is pure style for a bright day, love." He grins. "Same brand the late dictator Mesaru wore in North Africa. I've heard his collection of designer shades is the only thing that survived when they ransacked his palace and stabbed him a hundred times a few years back."

"I know all about the Arab Spring," I said, confident I knew a lot more than him. "Didn't know you took fashion tips from dead tyrants."

"Hey, the man was a sick fuck, no doubt about it. Sometimes even the assholes know how to look good." He lifts his eyebrows, a gesture that lets me know he's practically eye fucking me behind his lenses. "We need to be in our Sunday best, and on our best behavior, too. You've only got one chance to make a first impression on Her Majesty."

Damn it, he's right. I tense up, folding my hands in my lap, very conscious that I'm about to meet a Queen, a ruler, a billionaire, and one of the most beloved elder stateswomen in the world.

"Love, don't spill your spaghetti now," he says, barely hiding the amusement in his voice. "It's going to be fine. Trust me, I've visited her before with enough mud dripping off me for the both of us. Unless you drop the dress and prance in

naked or something, nothing you do will ever one up me in the scandal department.”

He’s right, of course. So, why the hell isn’t that any consolation?

The worst part is, he senses my nerves coming undone. That’s probably why he reaches over, clasps my hand, and holds it like he cares.

We share a slow, tense look. Then he cocks his head, looks at me over the tops of those shades, and says something that makes me believe he isn’t just an asshole for about a minute.

“You can do this, Erin. You’ve got family, life and death on the line. That’s as valuable as an entire kingdom.”

“I’ll do my best,” I say softly, promising both of us that I will.

“Yeah, you will, Princess. I wouldn’t take on anybody who half-asses it. Not even a pretend bride.” That smile on his face erupts into a full panty-melting grin. “Half-assing anything isn’t in your nature. I know because every inch of what you’re sitting on is too fucking fine for half measures.”

Oh. My. God.

Here I am, decked out in this dress that’s worth more than the luxury vehicle we’re riding in, and he’s commenting on my ass. I can’t take it anymore.

I lean in, let my hand fly, and give him what he deserves. Silas’ royal stubble burns my palm when it explodes across his cheek.

Pulling back, my fingers are trembling, wondering if I’ve just blown the whole thing.

No, he’s still smiling. I should’ve known, after what he said about liking it rough. The idiot on top of the world next to me *likes* this.

“Hope you’re feeling better,” he says, as if I just sneezed. “I’ll take a blow like that anytime if that’s the price to pay for complimenting one of the finest asses I’ve ever seen.”

I don't say another word until we're at the palace. He takes off his shades, steps out before me, and comes to my side to help me out. I take his hand angrily, catching his dizzying blue eyes for a second before I look away.

I can't let him get to me again. This is too important. I'm already feeling light headed by the pomp and glamor adorning every inch of this incredible building. It's only my second time here since the disastrous interview, since the unthinkable became my reality.

Silas stops in front of a regal looking man in a suit that's almost as nice as his. "Where is she?" he asks.

"Throne room, my Prince. She's waiting for you, having finished with the Belgian trade minister a few minutes ago."

"Damn," he says, turning to me as he leads us on, his personal entourage trailing behind us. "I'd have hoped for some place more casual for an introduction. Whatever, it's a test. If you can get through this when she's there, perched in all her splendor, you can get through anything, love."

My heart starts hammering in my chest. Thank God corsets aren't a thing in royal fashion anymore, or else I'd be screwed.

It takes several minutes to travel through the palace, taking in more history, wealth, and power than I can fully absorb. Hell, I think I'll need several lifetimes to do that. Every wall, every ceiling, every chandelier oozes class.

The very highest, most exclusive class a human being can belong to. These royals make billionaires and celebrities back home look like posers.

I'm walking into the home of living, breathing people who think they're gods, put here to shape this island and the broader world as they please. It's their destiny, the one they're told to fulfill from the day they're born.

Besides being alien to everything I know, I can't lie about what it means. It's fucking *terrifying*.

The door to the throne room – if I can even call it that – is huge. Scenes of battle, triumph, and dragons are carved into every inch, stretching from floor to ceiling. Two men in

traditional navy blue uniforms with rifles slung over their shoulders bow their heads as soon as they see us.

“I’m here to meet with Her Majesty,” Silas tells them. “Let us in.”

The men move like clockwork. They march several long strides to the center, and grasp the huge silver handles. The door creaks open like it’s hiding Aladdin’s long lost treasure – what else? – and I’m staring into a scene from another century.

Inside, Queen Marina Bearington sits on her high throne, a tiara like crystal on her head. I’ve seen it in the pictures. She’s like a living ornament on a Christmas tree turned into a room, decked in jewels, metals, and silk robes. It’s hard to believe she’s human, much less standing in front of me.

Yes, *standing*, rising to her royal feet. Waiting for us.

“Come on. Just follow my lead,” Silas whispers under his breath. A move that teaches me *everything* echoes in this monstrous, awesome chamber, however subtle.

He steps forward, and I’m at his side. When he bows – much more deeply than the shallow head nods I’ve seen in the kingdom before – I do it, too. Then I curtsy, careful not to catch my dress on my heels, embarrassing myself forever.

“Your Majesty. It’s my great honor to present my fiancée, and future Princess, Erin Warwick from the United States.”

My head stays dipped too low to see the Queen, but I can feel her eyes. They’re focused on me like a hawk’s, wondering where the hell I came from, and why.

“Rise.” She speaks one word.

Silas takes my hand and helps me up. We’re standing beneath her elevated throne, just several feet away from a woman who’s ruled over millions long before I was born.

I can’t make out any of Silas’ facial features in hers, but they share the same eyes.

Deep, dark, royal blue, unchanged by age.

“You’re the girl whose father collapsed on television, interviewing my grandson, aren’t you?” she says, slowly scanning me with her gaze.

“Guilty as charged, Your Majesty.” I want to kick myself as soon as it’s out of my mouth. Jesus, what was I thinking – *guilty?*

The Queen turns to Silas, her tiara catching the light, sparkling brilliantly like stars in her head. “What’s the real meaning of this, Silas? Tell me the truth.”

He looks taken aback, and his fingers tighten in mine. “The meaning? I’ve found the love of my life, and I’m claiming her. You always said I ought to find a good girl to settle down with. Someone to calm me, bring balance. Well, Your Majesty, I have.”

The Queen looks incredulous. “So, you’ve done exactly what I suggested in a matter of days? You couldn’t have possibly known Miss Warwick much longer than that, all things considered.”

“You’re right,” he says. “We’ve barely known each other a week, if you want the full truth. This woman, she’s different than all the others I’ve ever been with. She isn’t just another fling. When you meet the love of your life, you just know. I used to laugh at that, but now? I get it. Hell, yeah, I do.”

He pulls my hand up, brings it to his mouth the same way he did yesterday on the balcony, and puts it against his lips.

The floor drops out beneath me.

I can’t believe I’m standing here, having my hand kissed by a Prince who doesn’t believe a word of anything he’s just said, all in front of Queen Marina Bearington.

“You’re lying,” she says, turning her angry eyes to me, making my heart sputter. “You’re either lying, or you’ve lost your mind, son. When I said you should find a woman, I meant it should happen slowly... naturally. Just as these things are meant to. You can’t possibly think I meant for you to find a wife in less than a week. What I don’t know is *why* you’re doing this. Regardless, it isn’t going to work, Silas. I see

through it, and I'm going to instruct the royal chapel not to approve any weddings with this woman."

"No!" Dad flashes in my brain, and I step forward, speaking my objection like a bullet. "I know what this looks like. It seems insane, Your Majesty, like something from a dream. That's been my last few days with the Prince, exactly. The truth is...we're in love. We want to move this forward. But I can't do that unless he gives me a place in the kingdom so I don't have to go back to LA."

Her gaze picks me up and throws me down again. I feel like I'm disembodied, watching myself plead this crazy case, telling the biggest lie I ever have in my life to a famous person I never imagined talking to.

"You don't have to believe it, but I'm giving you the truth. And the truth is...I've never met a man more kind, more noble, more handsome than your grandson." I pause, feeling his smile burn when I call the bastard handsome. *Damn him.* "I want to have a life with Silas. I'll do anything to make that happen."

"Certainly, you will," she snaps. "It isn't every day a commoner has the prospect of becoming a Princess staring her in the face."

"No," I agree softly. "Believe me, that isn't what I'm after. I'll do whatever I need to convince you I'm sincere. I'm not looking to get rich or have a title behind my name."

Except...that's exactly what I'm hoping to get from this.

"Nonsense. You'll acquire both those things, no question about it, if you two go through with this madness. Technically, there's no law restricting marriage outside the family to royal blood, so I can't oppose you on those grounds. There is, however, more than ample reason to stop this when I believe my son's judgment has been compromised. It's ludicrous!"

That last word rings off the gold walls like a cannon blast. She's rattled, for good reason, but it's disturbing as hell to hear the Queen get so emotional.

"My judgment?" he says, sharp sarcasm in his voice.

Great. They're about to argue, and I'm going to be sick. My stomach flips itself over several times. I'm almost grateful when Silas steps in front of me, closer to the throne.

The Queen nods. "You can't be in your right mind. I want her gone, Silas, and then I'm going to ensure you get a full evaluation at the royal hospital."

Silas snorts, shakes his head, and points a finger up at her.

"You've got to be fucking shitting me, Your Majesty, if you think this makes me mad. Where were you, questioning my judgment, when I decided to be the first royal since World War II going into battle? I'm pushing thirty soon. I've led men in war and saved lives, foreigners and our own subjects alike. I've watched my parents live and die. I've seen their mistakes and their triumphs. No, I haven't been perfect, but I'm trying like hell to be better, and Erin's the best chance I have to do that. Knew it the second I laid eyes on her, when she fell into my arms. You want to question my judgment? Then start by asking why the *fuck* you never did it sooner."

The Queen doesn't flinch at his rough language, which surprises me. Probably a sign she's heard it all before. She's used to Silas' outbursts by now.

She lets out a long, tense sigh. "I'm too old for this. If I wasn't bound to wear this crown on my head to the grave, or I had someone worth handing it to, I'd give it up tomorrow. Silas, you're right, for once in your outrageous life."

He blinks, his face softening. "I am?"

"I'm going to allow this, with a few very strict conditions." She steps down, her robes flowing over the short golden stairs leading to the floor like she's hovering. "Number one, Miss Warwick will be thoroughly vetted, trained, and assessed for the duties she's bound to take on as your wife."

Nod at her, damn it. It takes every muscle in my body to move my head.

Suddenly, now that she's on our level, Queen Marina is coming toward us. It seems like she's shrunk at least a foot,

but she's no less imposing, decked out in her royal wears like a ghost from a lost time.

“Your Majesty, I –“

“Quiet.” She cuts him off, turning away from us, slowly pacing on the floor. “Second condition, this wedding won't happen for at least six months. That's more than enough time for you, Silas, to decide if you've made a terrible mistake, given your track record with women in the past.”

“If you're saying I'll get bored of her, you're out of your damned –“

She holds up a finger. “Third and last, you'll announce this news to the kingdom. Both of you. Should you decide it's off sometime in the future, then that will fall on you, as well. I won't keep this a secret and risk sensationalism running wild.”

“Very fair, Your Majesty.” I tell her it is, anyway, even though thinking about the inevitable appearance in front of millions is turning every muscle in my body to stone.

“Silas?” She stops in front of her grandson, face-to-face, a royal challenge across generations.

“Whatever. I can live with it,” he says. “It's going to be my pleasure to show you how wrong you've been, grandmom.”

Queen Marina doesn't say anything. She simply turns, moving back to her throne, a force of nature.

“I don't want to hear about it until we're closer to the date, unless I change my mind,” she says, once she's perched in place again. “I'll hear everything I need to from Mister Mead, my chief of information. You're both dismissed.”

Silas looks like he's about to make his handsome face crack when he dips his head again. I mimic the gesture, watching him the whole time.

God, he's so wound up. Tighter than a spring.

Hard. Angry. Did I say *hard*?

My eyes tick over to his crotch for a split second before I jerk them away, remembering where I am.

Holy hell, what's wrong with me? I can't risk another scene.

I have to get out of here. Before we both drown in the thick, smoky tension curdling the air.

I hear the doors creak open behind us. Silas and I both rise. He snatches my hand, leading me out, and doesn't say a word as we take the long, dream-like path through the palace.

"What do you think? Was that her taking it well?" Truthfully, it seems like a disaster, but I'm new to all this and I don't know the Queen's attitude like he does.

"Well enough. She didn't outright forbid it," he says, helping me down the stairs. We take a turn toward a new section of the palace, and I realize it's adjacent to the huge, semi-public entrance that leads to the big conference room where I fell into his arms.

"You were very well spoken back there, swearing aside." I mean it, too.

"Yeah, well, I know how to pull her strings. I've been doing that damned near twenty years by now. Anything about God and country, about my service...it really gets to her, love. Reaches her on a primal fucking level."

Ouch. I cringe, suddenly wondering if he rehearsed everything about her questioning his judgment. That would be so Prince Playboy, wouldn't it?

I have to remember who I'm dealing with.

Silas, the manipulator.

Silas, the most immature war hero in the world.

Silas, the lying, faking, self-absorbed bastard.

"What's next?" I ask, trying not to dread it.

"We're going to have some tea and lunch. Then, a quick meeting with Serena, my press secretary. You've met her once with the whole press corps, under very different circumstances."

"Oh, we're being prepped already to talk to the media?"

He flashes me that wicked, teasing smile. “Babe, we’ve got ourselves a press conference this afternoon. Just you and me, in front of the entire kingdom. Grandmom wants me to show I’m serious? I’ll make her believe in this fake marriage more than we do.”

Crap! I don’t say anything. I just hope there’s something stronger than tea up ahead.



WE DON’T SAY much through our snack. We have the fanciest pot pies I’ve ever eaten, stuffed with something that tastes like duck, veggies, and wine sauce, plus spring salads, and plenty of that dark, coffee-like tea that’s a standard in the kingdom.

It’s just me and the Prince. Victor stands quietly in the corner like a loyal dog.

A servant comes in, takes our plates away, and awkward silence returns. The Prince leans back in his chair, eyeing me.

“It’ll all be over soon. I promise. You’re doing a damned good job for your first day, I have to say.” He leans forward, clasps my hand in both of his, stroking the back of my skin way more seductively than he should. “You’re going to make a beautiful bride. Absolutely fucking beautiful, Princess.”

“Don’t call me that until it’s official. I’m not anybody’s princess yet, I mean. It’s strange enough.” I smile uneasily, wondering what happens later, when a short-lived princess divorces her prince.

Victor turns our way. He’s frowning.

Has he figured out it’s all just an act? I don’t know, but it doesn’t help the butterflies in my stomach.

I’m nervous. Cameras are nothing new to me. I did plenty of journalism in high school, and video blogs in college for my projects, but I never imagined I’d be addressing an entire nation.

“What?” I ask Silas, noticing he hasn’t taken his eyes off me.

“You’re mine,” Prince Silas says, smothering me in those intense blue eyes. “Mine.”

“Your what?” I’m trying not to completely lose it.

“My Princess. I don’t give a damn if it isn’t official yet. We’re in love, right?” He cocks his head and winks, urging me to play along. “Doesn’t take a royal crest on your clothes to remind me you’re my one and only. The one I chose. The one I’ll keep. The one I’ll bind forever. By blood, by marriage, by kiss.”

“S-sure. Of course, you are. We’re going to be a great. The two of us. Together.”

God. I’m clucking like a total idiot, and I’m sure Victor catches every awkward word. It doesn’t help that he’s staring at me like it’s all true.

How can he do that? It’s like he’s had years posing as an actor, instead of a spoiled Prince. His charms are so powerful, so real, they’re dangerous in the moment.

Then I feel my hand moving through the air, going to his lips yet again.

Instant heat flows down from my belly, settling between my legs.

I can’t do this right now. Jerking my hand away, I fold it on my lap, hoping Victor doesn’t see. Whatever, I’d rather have him see the serious lengths I’ll go to avoid physical contact.

That’s better than *anyone* realizing how hot, how wet, how much I want when Silas lies to me like a champ.

A knock at the door breaks my confused haze. Victor strides across the room, opens it, and nods.

“Miss Hastings, sire. Punctual, as usual.”

Prince Silas’ evil, teasing expression goes flat. He stands as the familiar blonde steps in, wearing heels that put anything of mine to shame. There’s something odd about the way she looks at him.

It's more like an old friend than a servant. Like a woman who's seen past the royal mask he wears, down to who he truly is.

"Serena." That's his greeting when they're face-to-face.

She looks over, noticing me for the first time. Tension lines her face the second she takes in my dress, my place at the table with the Prince. I'm used to his entourage and the Queen herself being horrified by this fake engagement by now, but with her, it seems like something more.

"Hello, again." I smile politely because I don't know what else to do.

"I think I'm going to need a quick briefing," Serena says to the Prince, flipping her blonde hair. "There wasn't a formal email or anything. I'm...surprised to see her here again, Your Highness. With you, in private, that is."

He looks at her sternly. "That's because I need you to help introduce Erin as my fiancée. Future Princess of Saint Moore, Sealesland, and all her tributaries. You know, the usual. There wasn't time to write. This all came together fast."

"Fiancée?" It's like a rasp coming out of her throat. Her hand touches the corner of the table, as if she needs to steady herself, but she doesn't crack.

I stand up. Whatever's going on here, I want to show him that I'm useful, that I can help diffuse yet another crisis.

"It's a pleasure to see you again," I lie. My limited experience with this woman tells me she doesn't do courtesy, much less smile at strangers. "We're grateful for your help."

"It seems to me you already have a plan to handle this without consulting my expertise," she says to Silas, without even acknowledging me.

"You're right, I've been through the ropes before. This time, my image issues are bound to control themselves. Everybody loves a big, beautiful wedding, right?" He gives her a second, but she doesn't answer. "Whatever. I'm not the one who needs a fucking primer on how to talk to the kingdom. Erin does."

I watch the bitch swallow. She looks at me with the slowest glance in the world, eyeballing me like I'm something rotten she's just found on her plate.

"How long do we have?"

"An hour and a half. That's when the press conference is scheduled. Full house." Prince Silas folds his arms, giving her no mercy.

"Jesus," she sputters, looking back at him. "You expect me to give her a whole course on royal protocol and media pitfalls, just like that?"

Serena snaps her fingers. Way too close to the Prince's face. Victor cuts in just then, getting between us, gesturing for me to walk next to him.

"Miss Hastings, you know your duties here are whatever His Highness tells you. Please, let me escort you ladies to a private room, where you can get to work without any further interruptions. With your permission, of course, my Prince."

"Do it." Silas nods, giving me one last look. "Just do what she says, as long as it's reasonable. I'll meet you on the stage in a couple hours before all the jackals file in to pick at our bones."

It's a joke, but I'm not smiling. Victor leads me out with this woman who despises me for reasons I don't understand, into a small sitting room across the hall.

"I'll be right outside if either of you need anything," he says. "Expect a knock when the time draws near."

"Christ, Victor. Time management is part of my job, remember?" Serena says, practically spitting in his face.

We step in, and he closes the door behind us without another word.

"Let's get this over with." She finally looks at me, drinking me in. "You look like you're having a terrible enough time wearing that ridiculous thing. Lucky you, if everything else is equal, the tabloids will be talking about your fashion sense

once they've finished squawking about the main announcement.”

“It wasn't really my choice,” I tell her, taking a leather seat across from hers, next to another fireplace with a hand carved mantel. I've seen more art in this palace than I've seen in my life, I swear.

“No, of course not. First things first, you let him do the talking. Whatever he says, whatever questions may come up – you take your cue from His Highness. He's done it before, and he should know what to say. Lord knows I've tried to teach him, anyway.”

I can't believe her tone. It doesn't brighten up through the whole lecture. She's wearing a trim skirt, her legs crossed, one foot angrily bobbing her black heel.

I've had enough. “I'm sorry, is there something I've done to offend you?”

“Only by coming out of nowhere. Winning yourself a man, a kingdom, you know you don't deserve. You're not even a citizen of Saint Moore's for God's sake.” She stops there, her raging green eyes telling the full story. “No, it's not my place to criticize. I'll never understand *why* Silas picked you, but I'll *try* to respect it.”

“Silas,” I repeat.

It's just Silas. No Prince in front of it. Yeah, these two definitely have history.

“His Highness.” She corrects herself, almost as an afterthought. “I'm sorry for acting like a royal bitch this evening. It's very frustrating to have something like this dropped in my lap without notice, you understand. I don't know how to explain everything in under an hour. The best advice I can give is what I've already said – smile, look pretty, and keep your mouth shut. The tabloids and blogs snatch anything you feed them. Any misplaced word, any screwed up gesture, anything scandalous. The more boring you are, the better.”

“Good advice.” I honestly don’t know if it is, but her crazy eyes aren’t making me comfortable.

I want this to end. I’d rather have the press conference now than go over every movement and word with this envious bitch.

“Let me ask you this, Miss Warwick, what experience have you had on camera?”

Smiling awkwardly, I shrug my shoulders. Her eyes get wider and meaner.

“Just knock me out already. Please, for fuck’s sake,” she mutters to herself, running a hand across her face. “Okay. I’m going to do my best...”

And she does, for the next hour. She’s cold, detached, more like someone giving a job interview than a woman I’ve personally upset.

She tells me who to watch out for, all the names of the biggest muckrakers in the kingdom, and several who will be flying in from Europe. I’m briefed on where Silas has gone wrong before, though a lot of his mistakes were completely off the record. Playing bad boy and getting caught gave journalists plenty of fodder, attracting them like flies.

After what seems like half an hour, the biggest takeaway I’ve got is what she said before.

Shut up. Look pretty. Let him lead.

That’s what I’ve signed onto with this whole stupid thing, isn’t it? I’m not really his wife.

Not really a Princess. I’m nothing more than another stage prop in Prince Asshole’s life, no matter how good my motive. I’ve signed on to being used, and I ought to be conscious of it.

At some point, Victor knocks. “Ten minutes, ladies. Please finish up as soon as you’re able.”

“You seem like an intelligent girl, if a bit naive. I wish you the best of luck, Erin, and I hope you understand what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Holy shit. I've been holding my tongue through this entire miserable experience. I look at her, straightening up in my chair.

"You seem very smart, too, but you're kind of a bitch."

"Touche." Serena gives me a nasty smile and stands up. "I'll leave you to straighten that thing so it doesn't get caught. I don't think either of us need a cat fight to ruin that pretty dress right now. Good luck, Princess. You're going to need it."

She's out the door before I can follow up with another insult. *Infuriating.*

I can't let her drag me down now, though. As soon as she's gone, Victor steps in. I'm starting to get annoyed with his constant chaperoning.

This isn't the way I imagined royal life. The servants are supposed to help, to wait on us hand and foot. I guess they do plenty of that. But they're also *everywhere*, never more than several feet away. I'm craving my long lost privacy like never before.

"Straight through there, madame. His Highness is waiting for you on stage, near the podium."

I follow through the backstage door, to the place where he's pointing. I've forgotten how open and spacious it is in this huge, imposing medieval hall.

Yeah, privacy is the last thing I'm getting for the next few hours.

I'll be lucky if I ever find it again once the kingdom sees my face.

"Finally," Silas says, when I take a seat next to him. "Did she do her job? I'm going to jettison that woman if she's giving you any trouble. I've warned her before about setting her personal shit aside."

I have a chance to get Serena fired, and that gives me more than a little pleasure. But I don't have the heart to do it just yet. I decide to lie – what's one more on top of the untruths I've built up with just a couple days close to the Prince?

“It was fine. She could be a bit more personable, I guess, but what she said was useful.”

He hesitates for a moment. “Okay. That’ll do until this is over. Then we’ll go back to my place and get you out of that damned thing.”

He sounds like he’s almost as tired of the stifling, formal dress as I am. Small relief.

It doesn’t last long. About five minutes later, the main door across the room swings open. A large gaggle of reporters files in and takes their seats while Silas’ royal guards swarm in the room, checking their earpieces, always looking for nonexistent threats to the Prince.

I can’t imagine he has any real enemies. Maybe a lone nut, looking to write their name in blood on history, or a few of the extremists I’ve heard about who believe a republic without a hereditary monarchy is long overdue.

“Ready?” He grabs my hand where they can’t see it, looks at me, and smiles.

“As much as I’ll ever be,” I say, sighing.

The butterflies in my stomach are making tornadoes. My public jitters have gotten a lot better since I started taking journalism seriously, but I’ve never given a speech in front of a crowd like this.

My knees wobble when we finally stand up, right after Victor announces a special Q and A session from His Highness, and a guest. *King of All Things* plays, a shortened version of the anthem, and then it’s go time.

We’re hit with what seems like a hundred different cameras when we stand up. Flashing. Beaming. Blinding.

All of them wanting answers.

There’s no going back. I’m about to introduce myself to a few million people I know next to nothing about.

And then, once it’s over, I’m going to shut myself up and scream, as long and as loudly as I can.

ONCE IN A LIFETIME (SILAS)

It's our time to shine, and I'm getting pissed.

Maybe it's the frustration that sets in every time I have to face these gutter feeding reporters, drooling over their next slice of red meat.

Or maybe it's the fact that I know she's brushing off Serena's bitchiness. I fucking knew my press secretary would make this harder the second she stepped in, and looked at me like I'd lost my damned mind for introducing my pretend fiancée.

Mostly, I'm fuming because I can barely see Erin's ass underneath that hundred year old thing she's wearing, and that's a brutal shame. She's in front of me, at the podium, trying her damndest to follow my lead.

I want to take my bare hands and start tearing through every layer, then lay her out in front of me, naked as the day she was born.

Christ. I need to fuck this girl. However wrong, however complicated, however self-destructive, I don't care. My cock can't even try to give a shit.

I look into the closest camera and smile, calm and cool as I humanly can. "Ladies, gentleman, and friends of the kingdom. This is a very special day for our people, our family, and for me, especially. You'll recognize the special guest at my side as Erin Warwick, daughter of Tom, the journalist from the United

States. We're not up here to discuss her dad's health, or book a follow-up, so don't get any crazy ideas."

A couple laughs ripple through the crowd. I'm going to tease the assholes as long as I can, before I hit them between the eyes, and leave them running around like headless hens.

"Those of you who've followed me for years know I'm all about the unexpected. Miss Warwick tumbling into my arms is the happiest surprise I've ever had the pleasure of receiving." I pause, wanting to snort at my own prim and proper bullshit.

The press laps it up, of course. They love the Jekyll and Hyde split in my ego. One more contrast between buttoned up heir to the throne in public and the shameless playboy who gives them infinite drama when his private life leaks.

"Sire?" Vic mouths it from the side of the room, letting me know I've let my mind wander too long.

"Yes, well, this world's full of shocks. Some of them very ugly, like the time I found out my father had gone down with his yacht, lost to the sea forever. Some surprises, however, are quite beautiful. I walked into that interview with the Warwick Report expecting a slew of pointed questions. I didn't expect him to collapse on this very stage, and wind up leaving our kingdom for the best care a man can receive for his condition. I'm pleased to be a part of that treatment, whatever it takes to save the life of a world renowned journalist."

Next to me, Erin's face has turned visibly somber. I've said enough to play the kind, charitable Prince. I'm not going to dwell on her dear old dad's health a second longer than I need to.

"What I didn't expect, ladies and gentleman, was to find something wonderful in that public tragedy. You're all wondering why she's here, at my side, today. I won't leave you in suspense any longer. I've gotten to know her better than I ever imagined since the last day the cameras landed on us. Erin?" I turn to her, pull her closer, taking her hand.

She's squeezing me tight, but we can do better than that. I lace my fingers through hers and take her tighter, owning her

fingers the way I want to claim the rest of her body.

“I wasn’t looking at the time, but I can’t deny what’s right in front of me, precious and pure. I’m pleased to announce I’ve found my future wife, and the kingdom’s next Princess.” I wait for stunned murmurs to whisper through the crowd before I continue. “Erin Warwick and I are engaged. We’re due to be wed this winter, shortly before Christmas.”

I see Erin in my peripheral vision. Her eyes are huge.

We are? She knows I’ve just taken a piss on grandmom’s conditions, setting a firm date nobody else knows about.

The room explodes. Every reporter jumps up, going completely apeshit. The next time I speak into the mic, I have to raise my voice, watching as Serena scrambles desperately through the rows of press, trying to restore some order with threats about throwing them out.

My guards have closed in, prepped for trouble, however unlikely.

“I’ll be taking your questions for the next few minutes, once you’re ready to quiet down.”

That does it. Slowly, haltingly, the wild animals get back in their seats and shut the fuck up. That is, until the first one stands up, practically jumping out of her heels to flag me down.

“Your Highness! Isn’t this happening very fast? How could you decide to marry her after only knowing her for a few days?”

“Prince Silas – over here! Does the Queen know and approve? What’s she said about all this?”

“Prince, Prince, Prince! Does Miss Warwick know the first thing about this kingdom, or what she’s getting herself into? She’s barely been here a week, for Christ’s sake!”

“Please, please. One at a time.” I hold my hands up patiently like I’m talking to excitable children. “It’s true this is happening very fast. There’s no good explanation, except for the fact that faith and love move in mysterious ways. I’ve had

a better kindred spirit in Erin this past week than I've ever had in anyone else. There's only one answer I can give. When a man meets his soulmate, he just knows."

I look at her. She's red as a damned beet from all the attention. Seeing her nervous expression, the way she sucks her little lip, douses the fire in my dick with kerosene.

I can't hold back. I snatch her hand, bring it to my lips, and kiss it like I'm sucking her face.

A couple dozen phones and cameras fire like machine guns for the next thirty seconds. When I finally pull away, she's shaking. I put one arm around her, bringing her closer, steadying her.

"Erin? Why don't you take the next question, love? The one about the Queen..."

She shakes her head, but I push her toward the mic. Time to do her part, and show me I haven't made a giant mistake.

My hand drifts down her back, trying to calm her, stopping just shy of that sweet, round ass hiding beneath the dress.

"The Queen knows, and she agrees, ladies and gentleman," she says very softly.

"Louder." I whisper in her ear, letting my lips graze her skin when I pull back.

Fuck, she's burning up. Like a fever. Tempting me to make her body blaze a hundred degrees hotter.

"Her Majesty approves!" she says, this time louder, shouting over the commotion. "And I think I deserve a little more credit than you're giving me. It's true that I'm not a subject of Saint Moore's by birth, but I've been reading about this island and the royal family for years. Coming here was a dream, whatever else happened with my father. It's been a bigger dream than anything I could've imagined, meeting my future husband, the love of my life. I'm going to marry this man next to me, His Royal Highness, and I don't care if anybody wants to question it. They'll see the truth, in time."

“Very bold.” I whisper in her ear again, this time more loudly, while the journalists break into another mad bout of jeering questions and cheers.

This time, the guards move in. A reporter from outside the capital shoves a man wearing a French tricolor on his press badge, and all hell starts breaking loose.

It only takes one brief flash of a taser to make the rest of them settle the fuck down. All eight guards in my personal entourage, plus several more palace security members, patrol each row like sheepdogs, herding the journalists into their seats.

“This is what you wanted a career in?” I ask, quirking an eyebrow.

“Oh, shut up.” She’s careful to lean away from the mic, elbowing me in the stomach softly.

I’m so ripped I barely even feel it. Technically, she’s just committed assault on her royal fiance, and I don’t even care.

It just makes my dick throb harder. I lean in, wrapping one arm around her waist, bringing her into me.

I see her reflection in the teleprompter next to us. I never even use the fucking thing, but it’s there for notes when formal speeches happen up here.

Right now, it gives me a perfect view of her face.

She’s smiling through her nervousness. The redness has settled into her cheeks, painting them with a rosy hue – the kind I imagine she wears after she’s come herself breathless.

“Miss Warwick! Prince Silas!” A bitch I recognize stands up. It’s Eva Patina, an award winning shit stirrer from Ireland, notorious for giving celebrities hell across the continent. “I want to know one thing – what’s *really* going on here? You can’t expect the whole world to believe in this love at first sight charade. She looks like she’s barely into this – barely into *you*, Your Highness. How much did you pay her?”

Fuck. Eva smiles her world eating grin, flashing her overly perfect teeth, framed in expensive ruby lipstick. She has an

uncanny knack for seeing right through me, and everybody else unlucky enough to take her stupid questions.

“How much?” I step up to the mic, tightening my hold on Erin. “How about this much?”

Time to fight fire with fire, and give my own dick a little relief before it burns through my pants.

Erin gasps a little as I tip her back, grab her neck, and bring her into my kiss. Feeling her lips on mine makes me see white.

Goddamn, she tastes good. Everything I’ve imagined is there, tasting her. They’re naked, raw, and perfect. She isn’t wearing anything over them, a refreshing change from the glammed up whores and low swinging royalty I’ve had since my balls dropped.

This kiss is pure.

This kiss tastes like sugar and whiskey begging to slide down my throat.

This kiss slams my cock into a whole new universe of desire.

Here, now, there’s just Erin and me. All the screaming, frenzied fights in the press corps, people climbing over each other like cats, fighting for the best angle to get our kiss on film forever fades away.

Three seconds in, she moans into my mouth. Her lips go slack, and she stops fighting.

She’s giving in, surrendering her mouth to mine, giving into me. My hands roam up her back, while the digits on my other hand squeeze her neck gently. Every cell in my body wants to show her what’s coming if she just opens up, surrenders a little more.

And fuck, she does. Her lips part, perfectly and irresistibly for my tongue.

Her tits crush flush against my chest. I can practically feel her nipples there behind the fabric, hard as stones, begging to be sucked soft.

I wonder what it'd feel like to slide my oiled cock between her tits and shoot off in her mouth.

The same warm, sweet mouth that's pulsing underneath mine. My tongue sinks past her lips, anchors against hers, and takes control. Both our bodies twitch when the intimate kiss deepens, sending lightning through us.

I don't know how long we're up there, in front of the entire kingdom. Lips and tongues locked and moving like two horny teenagers. I don't know, and I don't fucking care.

All I'm thinking about is moving my hand down to her breast, and putting the other on her ass, squeezing them both at once.

I'm going to, when the earpiece I'm wearing chirps loudly.

Vic cuts in, ruining our first kiss. "Sire! The situation has become too unruly out here. The full security apparatus is coming to reinforce us, but we can't guarantee your safety. We have to move."

Damn it. I'm growling as I break away, catching Erin's soft eyes, suddenly as surprised as mine.

I'm holding her as I take a good, long look around.

Fucking hell. The press conference has collapsed into complete chaos. Half my entourage is on the floor, wrestling with reporters, while several angry bastards hurl loud insults at each other. A couple pick up the closest chairs, and let them fly.

I turn my back, using my body to shield Erin, in case anyone loses their mind and starts throwing shit at the stage. "Come on. Victor isn't kidding about this situation. Let's move."

It's a complete shit show on the way out. Several reporters have broken rank in the commotion, climbed over the ropes they're never supposed to cross. Somewhere behind me, I hear Serena arguing loudly with a woman.

Three crazed reporters stand between us and the door. I stop and stand up, looking them dead in the eye.

“Move, or I’m going to flatten all your asses.”

“Your Highness, please, just a few more questions!”

They can’t be fucking serious. They’re all foreigners, wearing flags from other countries on their badges, so my royal aura has little effect on them.

I don’t know where Victor or any of my guards have gone. I tell Erin to hold on tight while I charge through the three greedy bastards blocking our exit, standing in front of the door backstage, their arms out.

My body blows them down like bowling pins. Erin’s racing behind me, doing her best not to trip in those clogs, looking desperately over her shoulder. Several more assholes are chasing us.

She stops, spins around, and slams the door shut as hard as she can. I look back and nod, motioning with my hand.

“Can you run?” I yell.

“In this thing? Are you *kidding* me?” she looks down, eyes big and scared. The outfit has become a damned prison.

Without saying anything, I rush over, scoop her up in my arms, and go. Behind us, there’s something huge and heavy hitting the metal door.

They’re using a goddamned battering ram.

It’s only going to be a matter of time until they break through.

I’m transported back to the fields outside Kandahar. I remember my last mission, when three good men got themselves killed. They started shelling us as soon as we landed, destroying our transport chopper.

We were stranded. Pinned down. Running on nothing except the basest survival instinct.

The very same instinct kicks in now. Except, this is different because I’m carrying a woman who’s clinging to me, a woman I want to fuck, seed, and own in the most carnal ways.

Charging through the nearest exit outside, I hope to find more guards waiting with our SUV down below. I see it – only, it’s hiding behind a huge throng of assholes pouring in from downtown.

They’ve seen the commotion by now on social media. I won’t be surprised to see #palaceriot trending all over the damned place, assuming I get out of this alive.

The crowd sees us, recognizes us, and starts moving in. Erin turns her head, takes one look, and screams.

“Silas! We need to get out of here!”

“Tell me something I don’t already know, Princess.” I need a second to think. “Hold on to me as tight as you can. It might be hell getting out of here.”

Might? I know it’s going to be.

I only see one weakness – a thin gap between two bigger, older men filming with their phones as they close in. Several older women surround them. It’s a group I know I can push through if I really need to.

Yeah, I do. I give it everything I’ve got, shoving our way through them.

Wrapping my arms around Erin as tight as I can, I ignore the jeers exploding around us.

“Prince! Prince Silas! We loooooove you!”

That’s about the nicest thing I hear. Several angry protesters are in the mix, assholes who want to overturn the monarchy. They won’t think twice about grabbing us, humiliating us, or worse.

“There’s the fucking bastard! Spending even more of our hard earned money on his engagement – as if his parties and booze aren’t enough! You going to let him, lads?”

“No! No, no, no!”

Shit’s about to get serious. I take off, heading for the weakness I saw, away from the dangerous assholes calling for my head.

I may have fucked off half my history classes, but I know damned well what happens to Kings, Queens, and Princes when would-be revolutionaries smell blood. I'm not dying out here, ripped apart by an angry mob, while poor Erin gets caught in the middle.

The need to protect her supercharges my blood. I feel like I'm on fire as I crash through several skinny arms, bowling over several people, and then I keep going.

I don't let up. Not even when I realize I'm running straight into gunfire.

Shit, shit, shit. Things are really fucking bad out here, if they've brought out the guns.

How the hell did this ridiculous press conference lead to the opening shots in a civil war? At this rate, I'll be lucky to flee the country before they stick my head through the guillotine.

People start fleeing, blurring by us. Erin has her little face buried in my chest, but she's screaming just the same. Can't blame her, hearing the world fall apart around us, shattered in a hail of screams and bullets.

"Prince Silas, sir!" A loud voice screams out ahead, just as I'm starting to lose my sight. We're almost to the curb. "Down here!"

Several soldiers have set up a protective ring around what's left of our motorcade. The motorcycles have been knocked over, replaced by Humvees and armored cars. Vic looks up behind the troops, relief spreading across his face when he sees me.

About half a dozen soldiers shove the crowd, opening a space just wide enough for us to jump through, closing it the instant we're climbing inside the SUV. I hear them start shooting.

Our SUV takes off, flanked by the military vehicles. I'm wondering if I'm about to see the beginning of the end of my kingdom. Except the rioters wouldn't fall down so unnaturally like that, without a drop of blood spilling out.

Smoke rises around the palace. It's tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons.

Standard riot control stuff.

Not live bullets after all, thank God.

"Jesus." She slumps back in her seat when we're finally freed from the danger zone, racing across town. "Did you have any idea this was going to happen?"

"No." I'm telling her the truth. "It's gotten heated a few times before at the palace, but it's never devolved into a full scale riot. There's something else going on here, and I'm going to find out what."

"I can't believe you're shooting them..."

"They're damned lucky it's not real ammunition," I tell her, wondering why she's defending these animals.

The people are one thing. I'd never want shots going into innocent bystanders, even the curious ones who should know better than to be there. But the protesters...the Republic fucking Firsters...they don't care who they hurt. Why should I mind if they catch lead between the eyes?

"Look, they're breaking up the riot with all the non-lethal force the kingdom has to muster. Every man in uniform knows there's going to be hell to pay if they reach the Queen's doorstep."

Fuck, grandmom. For the first time since we got into the vehicle, I'm worried.

"Surely, they're as surprised as you, Silas. I don't think anybody can be blamed for this insanity."

I ignore her. Instead, I tap the glass separating us from the driver. A second later, it goes down, and I see the man looking at us in the mirror.

"Your Highness?"

"What's the situation at the palace? I want constant updates."

Victor sits in the passenger seat up front. “I’m receiving them now. Secondary blockades are closing off the nearest streets, and the crowd is slowly dispersing. Rest assured that all the rioters with press badges will have them permanently stripped. They’ll be blacklisted, Your Highness. I’m deeply sorry for this, we should’ve vetted *everyone* who stepped into the event, short notice or not.”

I look at Erin. There’s something about her sweet, pure face that actually causes my anger to weaken.

“Don’t be sorry,” I growl through the opening. “You couldn’t have known, Vic. None of us did. It’s got to be the damned Republic Firsters. A rat on the inside. Probably that Patina bitch. They’ll do anything to make the family look bad, even when we’re bringing the kingdom good news.”

“Rest assured there’ll be a full investigation, my Prince, as soon as the situation is under control.” Vic bows his head.

I don’t say another word. The glass panel rises, and we’re left alone.

If I’ve ever needed a drink, it’s now. Next to me, Erin looks like she’s losing it, her face criss-crossed with a thousand kinds of confusion.

She flinches when I reach over, grabbing her hand. “Do you think we’ve made a mistake?”

“Mistake? Bullshit.” I shake my head. “It won’t happen again, love. I don’t give a shit if we have to flee to the mountains and have our wedding there. Nobody’s unwinding this clock. I wanted you before, for all the reasons we’ve discussed, and now I want you at the altar a hundred times more.”

Her big brown eyes light up when they widen. Rich, electric, and fuckable. My cock stirs to life, wanting to make them roll back in her head, and feel those scared little lips on mine again.

“What now? We both know it’s going to be a disaster in the media. Probably an international one.”

“Yeah, it will be. They can fucking suck it,” I growl.
“Don’t worry. A stern word from Her Majesty will put the kingdom right. She always comes on TV when it gets bad enough, and I’d say this warrants it. She’ll put the Republic assholes in their place, and then some. They’re used to beating up on me and my dad, when he was still around, but this is different. *Nobody* insults Her Royal Majesty. Next time we talk to the press, they’ll be lucky if they aren’t wearing handcuffs, looking at us through bullet proof glass with their beady little eyes...”

She laughs. I can tell she isn’t sure if I’m serious or not.

Hell, I don’t know if I am.

“What’s so funny – the handcuffs? Didn’t know you were that sort of girl, love. For the record, I’d enjoy seeing you with your hands cuffed to the nearest bed, a pair of gold clamps softening up your nipples for my tongue.”

I fucking mean it, too. Can’t resist telling her. It earns me another slap, clean across the face, and I’m smiling at her through the blistering burn spreading across my cheek.

“Glad I can help you work it out of your system, beautiful.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She rolls her eyes sourly, too tired for another hit. “Just tell me where we’re going? I can’t imagine there’s any place that’ll be safe for us in the whole city.”

“No, you’re right. We’re heading for the summer palace. That’s the protocol when a shitstorm blows in. The Queen, she won’t leave for nothing short of a nuclear war. You and me? We’re going to the country while things calm down. We can deal with the fallout there.”

“Okay,” she says quietly.

Just okay? *Fuck me.*

Nothing’s okay at the moment.

For the first time since we got our pretend engagement on, I’m feeling a pang of guilt. A normal person would let it take over, making them wonder if they’ve fumbled something

terrible, dragging a down-on-her-luck foreign girl into this royal mess.

Not me. Prince Silas Bearington the Third doesn't make mistakes.

We're going to the summer palace, and we're going to unwind. We'll write up our statements while the wedding planning gets underway. We'll let grandmom, her courtesans, and bitchy Serena deal with the press nightmare.

More importantly, I'll have plenty of peace and quiet to explore my new wife. Find out what buttons to press to make her relax. And I'll put a fucking stake through the hearts of every evil doubt she's got running through her right now.

I'm going to have my wife, my Princess, come hell or high water. This *will* work the way it should.

If the stars align, I'm going to fuck her, too. No bullshit. I'll seduce this girl, and she'll learn to love it.

Yes, it's insane, it's suicidal, it's a thousand mistakes rolled into one, but I'm going to try.

I'm convincing myself this mad thing between us is real so no one will doubt it again, much less those jackoff reporters.

Believe. Straight down to the taste of her pussy while her legs are tossed over my shoulders. Just thinking about that warmth and wetness trembling beneath my tongue makes my cock want to spit fire.

I'm going to know every single inch of her. Whatever it takes to throw this clusterfuck of an engagement back in grandmom's face, and then I'll do the same with the other 4,999,999 people in the kingdom doubting us.

This is my once in a lifetime chance to prove myself, to save our kingdom, and show this woman that I will never, ever let a disaster come down on her head.

She won't walk away from me, disgraced and disappointed. Erin Warwick isn't going anywhere until I've fucked her senseless first.

ROYAL PAIN (ERIN)

I don't see much of Silas for the next few days after we're settled in the highlands. My orders.

There's a knock at my door several times that I'm sure isn't the guards. Then whispers, what sounds like his soft, feral voice arguing with my keepers.

From the second we stepped into the summer palace, which feels like the world's most expensive lodge, I've told my handlers I want complete, perfect, unobstructed privacy. God himself isn't going to interrupt me for the next forty-eight hours, and that extends to his royal jackass, too.

I need time to process. To think about the fact that I've narrowly survived being ripped apart by an angry mob.

Yes, I've signed the contract, presented to me this morning. Slipped it under the door without a word, triple checking to make sure our 'no sex' clause had plenty of legalese behind it.

I'm surrounded by his men in this place, the security entourage assigned to me.

I'm worried Silas can overrule the guards. He's the second most important person in this whole country, after all. But for some reason, he doesn't, and I hear him slip away while I'm laying in bed, or lounging on the ivory white chaise with my phone resting on my belly.

Incredibly, the bastard respects my privacy for once in his life. It's a life where he's had everything handed to him on demand, which makes it more amazing.

It isn't much consolation. Locked away in here, I feel like I've entered another kind of fairy tale. I wonder if Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty ever faced their own demons the way I'm staring mine down now.

The world goes on, even if I'm hidden behind the most luxurious wall on the planet.

Dad tries to call at least three times over the next few days.

It's no surprise, having a father as an award winning journalist means his eyes are glued to the news. By now, he's seen the craziness at the palace unfold a hundred times over on social media, from every single angle.

His dear naive daughter, up there on the stage, engaged to a Prince. All hell breaking loose around us.

They still don't know what caused the riot. At least, the palace isn't saying whether it was troublemakers who want to see the monarchy abolished, or just a wild energy that took on a life of its own.

I can't say I care. I'm too busy being terrified for the future, for what I'm going to tell my father.

There's no combination of words that can soften the blow. He's a smart man, no matter how sick and scared he is. He'll put the pieces together, if he hasn't already. And then he'll know I've basically whored myself out to the biggest player in the world for a chance to save him.

Only, I've sold everything except my body. The 'no sex' clause in our contract feels like the only smart thing I've done in this situation. It also might be the dumbest, because right now, I'm so miserable I'd love to lose my virginity to blow off some steam.

Even to Prince Silas. Hell, *especially* to Silas.

I can't stop thinking about him. The way his lips roamed mine...

He kissed like an animal. His lips are always so aggressive, so controlling, moving like they're entitled to mine. No different than the way a summer storm sweeps the countryside with its raw power. If I give him a chance, that same wicked energy will go straight to his hands, moving across my breasts, my ass, between my legs...

God. I run my hands across my face, just as my phone pings me again.

My stomach growls. They've been bringing me food at my request pretty regularly. It must be late evening now, close to when I should be asking for dinner, but I've lost track.

My heartbeat quickens as I look at the screen, cringing. It's another voice mail from a number in Mexico.

I can't live like this. I need to come clean.

Frustrated, I sit up. I shouldn't be so horny when there are about a dozen other emotions boiling away beneath the surface.

I just want to get this over with. All of it.

Like the brutal conversation with dad, or the wedding, and the riot that'll probably follow it. Even fucking the Prince, if I'm going to, so he'll finally have what he wants and leave me with some peace and quiet.

I want my money. I want dad to get better. And I want to go home to our boring middle class condo in boring old LA, where Kings and Queens are just something you see in movies or read about in trashy blogs.

Only one way to make that happen, to speed things along to their inevitable, probably catastrophic conclusion.

I dial dad without listening to the voice mail. "Hello?"

"It's me," I say, hearing a strange machine whirring loudly in the background. "What's that noise?"

"Fluids cycling. It's a kind of chemotherapy, my dear. I'm sitting up right now, trying to distract myself while they pump this poison through my veins."

“They’re doing their best to heal you, dad,” I whisper, hating the tension in his voice. “How’re you feeling?”

“Very restless the last few days,” he says slowly. “It’s not the treatment. That’s going fine, and I’m taking it as well as I should be. Rather, I’m having a hard time because my own fucking daughter decided to marry a goddamned Prince without saying a word about it.”

Shit. My stomach does a nosedive. I’m speechless for at least thirty seconds, trying to pull out of it, and keep myself from running to the bathroom to vomit.

“It’s not like that.”

What am I saying? It’s *exactly* like that.

“Bullshit. Erin, I don’t know what he’s offered you, but you don’t have to do this. Don’t do it for my sake. I raised you better than selling yourself out for anything, including me. I’d rather die than be a bargaining chip.”

“Daddy, it’s not like that! Silas is a good man, when he wants to be. He would’ve flown you there anyway and given you treatment. That’s exactly what he did, before I agreed to anything.”

“Silas?” I can hear him smirking over the phone. “You’re on a first name basis with the Prince? Jesus Christ, Erin. Guess it makes sense, seeing how you’re going to get hitched.”

He’s got me by the throat. I want to lie, tell him that we’re truly in love, and he’ll see how wrong he is very, very soon.

But it’s such a load that even I don’t believe it. Neither will he.

“You need to get better,” I say, the only thing I really can. “You’ll understand someday. Just trust me, daddy. Please.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to try to kick this thing, whatever happens. If I live, I’m going to figure out how to get you off that damned island before I wind up dead from disappointment. There isn’t a cure for that.”

Disappointment? It hurts, but I can’t blame him. I still can’t believe I’m doing this.

Is it too late to walk away? To take a car without Silas chasing me, and hop the first plane to Mexico City so I can apologize up and down to my father in person?

No. I'm all in, and it's already too late.

"I'll find my way, dad. Don't waste any energy on me. Get better."

He doesn't say anything. When I look at my phone, it's blank, the call terminated without a last goodbye.

There's a terrible urge to hurl the damned thing across the room. Before I can, there's a loud tap at the door.

Horrific timing. I creep up to it and put my ear close, yelling through the thick, ornately carved wood. "What?"

"His Highness has requested an audience tonight, madame. Seven o'clock, and strictly voluntary." It's Dean, a voice I vaguely recognize belonging to the man who's been assigned to me personally, posted outside.

"Tell His Highness that I'm resting again tonight. I don't want to be disturbed unless there's food involved." Fuming, I do a full 360 degree turn, realizing I've forgotten one thing. "Make sure I get a bottle of wine, too. I could use it tonight."

"Of course, Miss Warwick. I'll relay the message to Prince Silas and the staff. If you need anything else, I'll be here until at least nine, before the shift change, and —"

I stop listening. I'm heading for the bathroom where I can soak for a long bath.

Maybe it'll help drown my inner bitch for the time being. Or if it doesn't, then it should at least tide me over until the wine comes. Tonight, I'm going to forget my father, my predicament, and the persistent asshole who's sucked me into all this.



I'M HALF ASLEEP, surrounded by soft, cloud-like foam in the steamy bath when there's another knock at my door.

"Yeah, who's there?"

“Dean, madame. I have dinner and a gift for you.”

Gift? From who?

I don't even need to ask. I have an ugly feeling I already know.

My nose wrinkles, and I stand up, stretching while my naked skin drips fresh glacier water and thousand dollar soap.

“Leave it on the table outside, please!”

“As you wish.”

I step out of the huge tub and start drying myself off while I hear him enter with a cart on wheels. It only takes him a few seconds to lay out the dishes and whatever my – ugh – *gift* is on the table outside.

By the time he leaves my room and I hear the lock click into place behind him, a heavenly smell punches me in the nose.

Dinner. My gently growling belly becomes an earthquake.

Slipping into a fresh silk robe, I don't bother drying my hair, heading out to where my precious food awaits.

It's absolutely perfect, of course. There's a nice sized steak slathered in buttery goodness, just the way I want it, with citrus glazed vegetables and roasted marrow off the side, still in the bone. I don't even need to cut it to see that it's medium rare, just the way I like, cooked to perfection by chefs who are probably imported from the finest schools in Paris.

They've remembered the wine. Except, instead of a cork, there's some weird metal object stuffed into the top. A small card hangs off it, hooked to the loop with the diamond in the middle. It's a little tag, with a man's thick, black ink scrawled on it.

*I'm going to help you unwind, one way or another,
Princess. Look in the box of chocolates, too. - HRH*

Rolling my eyes, I grab the bottle and pull out the stopper. It's got to be a joke that he's using the His Royal Highness abbreviation in his note to me.

But when the strange, heavy stopper comes out with a loud *pop*, what I'm looking at isn't a joke at all.

It's a vibrator. Gold plated with stripes of silver running through it, or maybe even platinum. What else from his royally ridiculous and filthy highness?

I slam it down on the table, clenching my teeth. Of course, it accidentally triggers the switch, that diamond on the end of the ring. It buzzes and jerks until I cover it with my hands, struggling to turn it off.

My eyes dart around nervously. I used to have one of these back home, before the noise became a huge liability. First with dad, and then with my roommates.

Suddenly, I'm not as hungry. I don't even want to look in the box of chocolates. I'll probably find a huge dildo, or something even nastier.

Pulling my chair roughly across the Turkish rug, I sit, pouring my wine glass so full it almost overflows.

I need to eat. Need to distract myself from the fact that Prince Asshole thinks he can send me sex toys.

I'm not stupid. Everything he does is painfully obvious. He's rubbing the no sex rule right in my face by trying to get me to rub something else.

All horror aside, the wine tastes good. The food, magnificent.

Silas' insanity won't ruin a meal like this. I dig in with a hungry, American etiquette that would probably leave the chef who prepared it shaking his head.

The only thing I'm craving by the end is something sweet. I can't remember the last time I had a piece of chocolate. Not since coming to Saint Moore, certainly.

I'm looking at the rectangular gold box like a fish stares at bait on a hook. Yes, it's a trap.

I just *know* I'm going to find something worse than the stupidly expensive vibrating bullet inside. Is the chocolate worth the price?

Reaching out nervously, I drag the box toward me and pull the little red bow wrapped around it loose. The package falls open. About a dozen of the most divine truffles I've ever laid eyes on surround a little compartment in the middle, housing something that looks like a small gold necklace.

I pop the first truffle in my mouth and let myself melt from the fireworks dancing on my taste buds before I pull the gold chain out. When I see the two little pinchers hanging on the ends, I gasp.

The clamps slip out of my hand and clatter gently on the table. Jesus.

I remember back to the conversation in the car, just a couple days ago, when he joked about seeing me naked, handcuffed, and locked up in these.

What kind of girl does Silas think I am?

It's like he doesn't know that he's dealing with a virgin who's never felt comfortable enough with a man to let her inner freak out. Or maybe he knows exactly what I am, and that's what gives him the eerily accurate insight about what turns me on.

Tight, wet, and very taboo desire burns between my legs. I pinch my thighs together, chewing another truffle, unsure whether I should be more disgusted at him or myself for taking a second look at these terrible gifts.

Oh, and there's another little notecard tucked into the empty shell I pulled the clamps from.

In case you wondered, I'm not breaking our agreement, it says in his all too familiar bold, angry script. No sex means you and me going skin on skin. I'm perfectly entitled to send you fuck toys, and you're more than welcome to send me pictures of you using them, love.

I don't read it a second time. I'm standing up, ripping up the card, and that's when I realize how fucking wet I am.

The bastard has a scary way of feeding on my frustrations. Turning the grossest things into things I crave like magic.

Maybe I should do the unthinkable – get this *out* of my system.

I drain the tall glass of wine while the fiery, insistent tingle coursing through my body deepens. My robe falls off before I'm heading for my room, grabbing my glass, the bottle, and the two illicit gifts on the way.

Fine, I'll let myself explore if that's what it takes to scratch this itch. Alone.

Hell no, I won't send him pictures. I won't be caught dead with him knowing I've ever touched his filthy offerings.

This is for me, myself, and I. My pleasure, not *his*.

The canopy bed I've been sleeping in must have a two hundred year old frame. Each night, I'm half expecting a dashing vampire to come flying in through the glass doors leading to the balcony, making my trip back to romantic Victorian times complete.

Only, tonight there's no vampire fantasy. There's nobody on my mind except Silas as I lay down, completely naked, and tease the golden bullet against my clit.

I'm way past sopping wet. My hot, aching pussy leaks all over the thousand stitch sheets, freakishly horny in this strange, infuriating place that's beyond my class and everything I ever thought I'd be.

I hate him for putting me in this situation. I hate his toys, his presence, the very air he breathes.

But he's all I'm thinking about as I move the humming metal through my folds, focusing its energy on the little bud that won't stop pulsing, burning, begging for Silas.

My clit is a traitor. It doesn't see Prince Asshole, Prince Playboy, Prince Fuck Off Forever.

It only sees Prince Hung and his ridiculous gifts. It wants to feel him, too.

Oh, shit. Holy hell.

I'm going to come soon, thinking about his tongue, his fingers, his big and legendary cock shaking me to my core.

First, I ease up, gripping the golden clamps tightly in my hand. They're easier to attach than I expected. The hard, angry bite sinking deep into each tender nipple right now is exactly what I need.

Pleasure hits my brain, rougher than before.

So real, so precise, it scares me out of my wits. I'm going, going, *gone*.

Given over to the need for a hate fuck overwhelming my body, making me grit my teeth and pant his name through my teeth.

"Silas, you asshole. No pictures. I can't believe *this*. Can't believe you're in my head, making me –" *Oh, God*. My hips start to tremble and I can't hold back the fireball building in my womb.

"Fuck you, Prince! I'm coming."

And I do.

So hard it's blinding. My whole messed up world disappears in a hot flash of red and white explosions rippling over my rolling eyes for what feels like forever.

His wicked, royal face is the last thing I see before I come up from the deep, deep ecstasy he's thrust me into. I imagine him whispering in my ear, his fingers tangled in my hair, jerking my head back, growling with that low, sexy voice that's naturally tuned to make any woman helpless.

You like that, love? Yeah, fuck yeah, you do. We can throw this no sex rule out any second.

You can feel my mouth, my fingers, all over your sweet little body. You can feel me inside you.

Coming hard. Coming deep. Coming together, just like we're meant to.

I lose myself in the toys for hours. Lost in the rage, the need, the wine, and all the shades of wrong coloring my

attraction to the world's nastiest high class bad boy.

I'm drunk, sweating and exhausted. I barely remember to pull the clamps off before I pass out. I should feel ashamed, or guilty, like I have every other time I've ever stroked my body in the past.

No, not now. Something's changed.

I want to believe it's my situation, the deal with the devil I've made to save my father, and possibly myself, if I've ruined my career prospects with this crazy engagement.

But it's not any of that. Not really.

It's Prince Asshole. Silas.

The man who won't leave my head when he's the last person I want to see.

I can't stop thinking about his kiss, or the tight, possessive grip he had on me as he carried me out of the palace, protecting me with his very life.

No one's ever fought for me like that before. And I won't forget it, however badly I want to.

I won't stop thinking about his gorgeous, smug, and sinfully dirty highness. I won't do it for all the pain, love, and money in the world.

Even if I wanted to erase him from my mind, I can't. He's in too deep. He's marked me psychically, emotionally, and if I give him a ghost of a chance, he'll mark me physically, too.

And that scares the crap out of me.



“HOLY SHIT. Somebody's been busy.”

My eyes pop open. It's morning, probably early, judging by the golden light streaming into my room through the lovely glass panes leading to my private balcony.

It's Silas. In my room. Hovering over me while I'm wearing nothing but a sheet, dangling the nipple clamps by the chain above his face until they reflect the brilliant light.

Jerking up, I'm careful to keep the sheet wrapped around my breasts. "What the *fuck* are you doing in here?! Give them back!"

"Checking on what's mine, Princess."

"Oh? I had a feeling that package was meant for somebody else. Guess those are *your* nipple clamps." I stop just short of sticking my tongue out.

He grins and his fist tightens around the little gold chain. I won't let myself look below his waist. I know he'll be hard, imagining what went on here last night.

"Nah. They're custom made to match that little bullet, and it looks like it's gotten one hell of a workout." He gestures.

My horrified eyes move to my glass nightstand. The tiny ornate vibrator I had between my legs for at least an hour last night sits there, taunting me.

It's already too late, but I snatch it anyway, tucking it beneath the covers. He waits until I'm glaring at him with new hatred to start laughing.

"Get. Out!" I'm so pissed my voice cracks.

"Fuck, love, you really crack me up. I'm just screwing with you because I'd really like to get you to drop that sheet, but I'll take the laughs, too." He pauses, his smile disappearing, looking me up and down like a hungry tiger. "Seriously, it's going on noon. I thought you were a Type A, up early and often, always put together?"

"No. I'm the type of girl who's going to jump out of bed and scratch your eyes out if you don't get leave, Silas."

"Whatever, I'll give you some space to get dressed. Hurry up. We've got a date today."

Great, I think, gritting my teeth. It isn't much consolation watching him turn his back and step out the door, into the other room, waiting for me.

I take my sweet time with a shower and a fresh set of clothes. The whole time, I'm trying not to wonder exactly what he's got in store for me, for us. After surviving the palace

riot and another brutal conversation with dad, a new media shit show is the last thing I need.

If it's another press event, I'm saying no. We can do the damned thing another time.

By the time I come out, he's sitting by the fireplace, toying with a tiny antique tiger statue he's swiped from the mantle. Silas looks up, extinguishing more of my anger than he has any business doing with those damnably deep, beautiful blue eyes.

"I saw these in Pakistan when I served. Almost identical. We'd go out on the town, me and my men, whenever we stopped off at the allied base before heading back to hell. Hard to pull local pussy, but damn if the scenery and the food wasn't out of this world. Lots more of these little icons where this one came from."

I'm folding my arms and rolling my eyes. Simultaneously.

Has he lived a day on this Earth when he isn't totally full of himself?

"I'd love to show you sometime, Erin," he says, a sly smile on his lips. "Today, I'm more interested in getting the hell out of here. Let's get out, clear our heads, pretend the last week was nothing but a bad dream."

"So, wait, you're telling me there isn't a formal meeting with the royal whatever?" He shakes his head, gently setting the tiger statue back down on the stone. "You want to – what? – have a freaking picnic?"

"More like a night of camping, down by the beaches. The bluffs up here are pretty goddamned gorgeous. Don't look at me like I've lost my mind," he growls. I'm seriously wondering if he has, thinking I'd volunteer to go anywhere with him alone. "You're going to be my Princess, Erin. It only makes sense that you explore more of the island."

I can't take this. He's acting like nothing happened. I step up and ask him point blank, ready to walk back into my bedroom and lock the door if he gives me any crap.

“Is this marriage thing still on after what happened the other day? Be honest.”

“Please,” he snorts. “If anything, we’ve got a better chance than we had before at bringing grandmom on board. Her Royal Majestic Pain in the Ass doesn’t buckle to terrorist riots, much less on her own doorstep. I talked to her this morning. We’re speeding up the wedding, love.”

My eyes go huge. It’s not what I expected to hear.

Smiling, he steps up, and wraps his arms around me, holding me like we’re really lovers. I hate the electric heat that spreads through my body when we touch. Hate that it makes me feel so good, so hungry for more, when everything about Silas is royally bad.

“That’s right. Forty days. We’ve got another week up here, and then we’re going to get our asses back to the capital for planning. It’s going to be locked down tight, everything carefully choreographed. We’re all going to be wearing smiles constantly. Hope you’re able to pin those pretty lips, love. This goes beyond you, me, and our silly little deal. We’re getting hitched to help stop this whole fucking kingdom from going tits up.”

He reaches up, slowly moving a finger to my mouth, pressing it gently against the center of my lips. It takes me about ten seconds before I jerk away, stumbling out of his arms.

“You’re insane! This whole thing is nuts. Psycho!”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve said it so many times I’ve lost track.” He has a terrible knack for acting like everybody else is crazy, while he stands there with his calm, collected, pompous mask. “So, are we just going to mope around the summer palace all day, or are we going to have some fun?”

I don’t say anything. I won’t look at him with the panic setting in, twisting my heart around in mad, dizzying circles.

I’m scared my father might be right. This isn’t me.

Oh, my God. What have I done?

I'm still wondering when he comes up and puts his hands on my shoulders. He holds them there gently, the only reason I don't scream, spin around, and spit in his face.

"You're going through some shit. You're entitled to, love," he whispers in my ear. "I'm trying to help. I realize everything here hasn't gone according to plan. You can believe me or not, but I feel bad about that. I'm a man of my word. Right now, I'm extremely pissed that outside circumstances are fraying my promises. Let me undo the damage. I'll take you out for some fresh air, show you the highlands, just you and me. Without any guards or tourists or fucking cameras."

A retreat in nature actually sounds good, even if it involves Silas. He flexes his muscles a little firmer when he feels me sigh. Rolling my shoulders, I let his hands slide off, and turn back to face him.

"Just give me a few minutes to pack."

"Awesome. I'll wait outside." He's smiling, practically beaming because I've folded without putting up another fight. "You won't regret this, babe. You'll have more fun with me in a day than you've had in ten years."

Ugh. There's that attitude again, erasing every trace of the man I'd felt a few seconds ago, the one who made me wonder if he might be able to care about more than just himself. I shouldn't even wonder.

I've seen everything I need to know exactly what kind of 'fun' I'm going to have with Europe's most spoiled playboy.

FIRE IN THE NIGHT (SILAS)

We're about fifteen kilometers down the road in my brand new Maserati when I pop the bottle and pour myself a glass of wine. Erin does a slow turn, her eyes bugging out, and gives me that look like the stick up her ass has just wedged in deeper.

“What? This thing has all the stabilizing mods in the world. I'm not going to spill a single drop on the seats.”

“I don't know much about the laws here, but I'm certain every civilized country in the world has a very *big* problem with drinking and driving!” She stops, hissing pure frustration out her nostrils. “Jesus Christ, Silas. You really are insane.”

“Whatever.” I sip my wine gingerly, tapping the accelerator while I take my hands off the wheel.

“Silas!”

I'm laughing. I can barely even choke down the fucking wine when I see the look on her face.

We're heading right for a cliff. Her boring old life in the States is probably flashing before her eyes. It makes me smile because I know she's reliving our kiss, the one time I got my lips on hers, before all hell broke loose in the palace.

I never touch the wheel. The car jerks back to the road automatically and slows before we fly to our deaths.

She blinks, stunned for a moment. Then she shows her teeth and punches me in the bicep.

“What the hell?”

“The new model’s self-driving, love. Isn’t technology amazing? Won’t be available for the other millionaire jackoffs who drive these things until next year. For me, they’ve made an early bird exception.”

She’s shaking her head, relieved and awestruck as the car’s steering wheel tilts in front of me, bending us around another hook in the road. We’ve got a ways to go, before we’re heading straight down to the beach.

“The only rich jackoff I know is the one sitting next to me,” she says. “Jesus. You scared me shitless.”

“Sure did. Here, have some wine, I brought a couple extra glasses.” I turn around and fish into the little case next to me, producing a new crystal glass.

She doesn’t protest while I pour her a glass, passing it over. She looks at it glumly before taking a sip.

“It’s okay, Erin. Really. You won’t find any traffic cops here on royal land, but if there were, I’d offer them a drink, too. The police love me. Grandmom’s always pushing parliament to shore up their pensions.”

My perfectly uptight Princess rolls her eyes and sucks down half the glass. Finally.

I smile, relishing my triumph. It makes the rest of my glass taste even sweeter.

Erin is practically begging for a refill by the time the car begins its glide down to the beach. My finger taps the switch for the windows, pulling them down a few notches. The soft, rhythmic slap of the sea comes through, almost as comforting as hearing her purr.

Fuck. I’ve got to stop thinking like that.

It isn’t easy when I’ve gotten her out here. Alone. My dick hammers in my jeans, emboldened by the fifty year old wine,

thinking about all the places I want to lay her down out along the rocks and sands.

I won't return to the palace until I've fucked this girl. Or at least gotten her to laugh.

"You look very different today," she says, her eyes rolling up my body.

Different? Has she noticed the hard-on about to rip through my fly? Is she thinking about how good it'll feel deep inside, stretching her pussy with royal cock, right this very second?

"Different how?" I ask, ignoring the hum of sex and the pleasant buzz building in my blood.

"So casual."

I shrug. "It's the beach and the bluffs, babe. Do you expect me to show up there in a tux, wearing my royal medallion?"

She blushes. "No, of course not. You just look so... normal."

"Newsflash – normal is my middle name when I'm having fun. You'd be shocked how many more scandals the tabloids have missed because they don't recognize me when I'm out in jeans and a t-shirt."

"Oh?" Erin quirks an eyebrow.

Shit. I shouldn't have reminded her.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I don't enjoy the stuffy royal protocol and palace shit. I'll tolerate it because it's what I was born into. On my own time, I like loosening the fuck up, living my life to its fullest. I learned how to play hard years ago, and I can teach it, too."

"Like I need a lesson from you." That little motion when her big, brown eyes roll around in her head would be annoying by now, if it didn't make my cock throb harder. "Whatever. I'll try to have fun today, just for you, Your Royal Highness."

Grabbing her hand, I refill our glasses, stopping to clink mine on hers. "Yeah, you will. There's no point in being Princess if you can't enjoy it."



A COUPLE HOURS LATER, we're back on the beach after a long hike up the tallest bluffs. Erin's tank top is practically soaked in sweat, giving me a fantastic view of those tits she carries around like the world's sweetest melons.

We don't talk much. I shut up for once and let her take in the scenery. And fuck, what a view it is up here, right by the abandoned lighthouse. My great grandfather personally broke a bottle of champagne across the walls as King, about a hundred years ago.

Erin and me, we do wine instead, a fresh bottle from the fifties I pulled from the palace's wine cellar before heading out. We talk history. I answer her questions, like why the island still has royalty when most of Europe shrugged theirs off before I was born, and why I'm adamant that I'm going to be King someday instead of a powerless pretender to the throne.

Now, I'm gathering wood for a fire on a nice flat spot on the beach. There's an overgrown fire pit that hasn't been used by the royal family since grandmom was my age.

Erin watches, chugging water from a bottle, splashing more wetness over her chest every few sips. Like I need another jolt to the dick.

I'm hotter than hell once the wood is stacked up, searching for a light. I kneel down near the bag next to her, peeling off my shirt. I hear her gasp.

"See something you like? Or did you just spot a Moorish beach skunk?" I growl, pulling out the lighter, without hiding how much I love her enjoying my body.

"No, no," she stutters. Always so damned modest. "It's just...your tattoos. I've seen them before on the blogs, a few old photos taken from a distance. They're a lot more detailed in person, up close."

"Yeah, they should be. This Russian guy I paid a small fortune to for my ink's supposed to be the best on the continent. Here, have a closer look."

I step right in front of her. At first, she tries to hide how much she loves it, but her eyes betray her.

Sweet, wet, fuckable Erin looks at me like I just stepped out of her dreams.

“See this big one in the middle? The artist pulled it right off an old royal flag that’s been in our palace since the Great War. We weren’t so neutral in that war, just like the second, and everybody paid the price. Even my family. My uncles served. One died in a shelling, a hundred years ago. They used the flag to try to stem the bleeding.” I shift the lighter to one hand, banging my ribs with one fist. “Didn’t work. That’s why you’re seeing red and black, love. The thorns going around the whole design were my idea.”

“That’s surprisingly deep for you, Silas.” She’s trying to stay sarcastic, but I can tell she wants to drag her little tongue all over the tapestry on my chest. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Plenty of women have.

I want to pull her hair while she’s doing it. Have her on her knees, face gliding down to my cock, both hands tied behind her back.

Fucking hell. No, control yourself.

“What do you know about *deep*, love? I’m not talking about the English literature you studied for your minor.” Her eyes pop angrily when I remind her how much I know about her. “I’m talking about fucking. How long has it been?”

I point the end of the lighter right at her pussy. She stands up, pressing her legs together, making a face like she’s disgusted.

“Creep! Do you really think I’d tell you something so personal?”

“Well, obviously. We’re going to be hitched, you know. Husband and wife. King and Queen.”

She does a double-take, and I stop myself from doing it too.

Fuck me. What did I just say? King and Queen implies we'll be spending a lot more time together than three years worth of sham marriage. It says I'll keep her until I'm wearing the crown myself, leading this nation into a brand new age.

"You know what I meant," I growl, hating that I even have to acknowledge the slip.

"No sex," she says, tucking loose chestnut hair back behind her shoulders. "I'm here to hang out and help you start a fire. We are *not* getting more drunk than we already are, and we're definitely not discussing my sex life."

"So, it's been eons, right? Hell, you must've gotten laid last around the time the lighthouse opened up." Smiling, I gesture toward the tall stone citadel towering above us, several cliffs over.

"Come on, Silas, that's enough. I'm hungry."

She looks down like she's defeated. Christ, it was just a joke. More of the banter I've been laying on her since the day she tumbled into my arms, and I decided if I can't rip off this girl's panties, I'm damned sure going to tease them until they melt into a puddle at her feet.

I watch her grab her water bottle and head toward the firewood. It takes me a minute to join her, wondering why the fuck she's acting so wounded.

Surely, it isn't true? All the crap I've given her about not getting fucked?

Doesn't add up. I've had my fill from out-of-control college girls before. Never met one who wasn't wild, who hadn't bedded at least ten guys by the time she hit her junior year.

Erin can't be a virgin. She fucking can't.

Because if she is, I think my dick is going to explode in my Egyptian silk boxers.

We stack up the last wooden beams in silence. Then I pour on a little kerosene and give it a light. Doesn't take much longer to get the grill arranged, just a big slab of metal I

brought up here years ago, balanced in the middle over the flame.

A couple minutes later, I'm pulling the steaks and boar sausages from the ice chest, plus a few big slices of squash and mushrooms. We'll do s'mores later for dessert, or whenever I think I can handle seeing her get sticky without having to run to the nearest bushes and empty my balls before I explode.

"Damn, that smells good," she says, inhaling deeply behind me. "I've been starting to get sick of all the rich foods lately. It's nice to have something simple."

"Simple? We've got nothing less than finest grass fed lowland beef and boar meat from Africa. My men used to flip when I got this stuff shipped in special to base. Only thing that kept us sane sometimes with the Taliban waiting to strike us from the hills, every damned night."

I wait until dinner's half done before I reach for a new bottle. This time, it's rum, imported to the palace from the finest distillery in Martinique. Even after hundreds of years, the French are still trying to kiss our asses, especially when it involves access to our fishing waters and the new tech development we've got springing up in the capital. The palace gets about a hundred of these every year, with a personal note from the French President.

"It's almost ready. Here, have a shot."

She cocks her head. "Uh, we don't have any glasses, and I'm not pouring that stuff in my wine glass. We're royals, remember? We're supposed to have standards."

I laugh. She watches as I tip the bottle and pour the amber liquid straight into my crystal stem glass. Grandmom would probably have a stroke if she could see me now, and so would the elderly royal etiquette tutor who drilled me like a beast when I turned five.

Sweet, fiery warmth floods by throat and goes off like a bomb when it hits my empty stomach. I tip my head up, suck in the fresh ocean air, and start peeling down my jeans.

Won't make hiding the raging hard-on any easier, but fuck if I care.

“Hey, hey, I don't need to see that. Is it really that hot out here?” She's protesting like crazy, holding a hand over her face, but I can see her looking at the bulge in my shorts through the gaps in her fingers.

“Give it up and join me. I've got a feeling you're wearing a bikini under that thing. Don't tell me you're a commando kinda gal.”

“Am not!” She clucks her tongue, one more sign that she might be.

Fuck it, I'm going to find out.

I take the risk of burning the meat to walk over and grab her. Screaming, slapping at my hands, she squirms in my arms. Music to my ears, her loud yelling echoing on the cliffs, turning into nothing but giddy laughter by the time I get her tank off.

“Ha, am I ever wrong? You're yellow like a goddamned hornet.”

“Fuck you! I wish I could sting. I'd do it in a heartbeat – anything to get you off me.” Lies, every single word coming out of her mouth.

It's no joke, the yellow bikini. I'm impressed.

I expected something less bright and flashy from Little Miss Modest. Maybe she's got a few surprises left, a couple mysteries I'd love to unravel, sure as I'd love to get her naked.

Erin keeps wriggling in my arms while I grab the bottle. I pop the cap, take a big swig, and pass it to her, running the rim dangerously close to her lips. I have to keep my hips off her ass, or she'll feel how hard I am, fighting the urge to grind my hard-on right into her lush skin.

“What's the problem, love? Don't I taste good?”

She takes a mouthful before I step away, laughing as she spits it out, fuming. “I'll never understand how you're going to

be king someday! You're less mature than a twelve year old, Silas. God!"

"Funny. I remember being that age. Never hung out with any boys packing anything like this." I grab my cock through my shorts, twisting the fabric around it in my fist, letting her see the full, magnificent outline. "They don't call me Prince Hung for nothing."

I'm ten inches, and proud of it. I've had my share of models who laugh about my big dick when I hint about it. Plenty of jealous little bastards have raged from the sidelines when they hear the rumors.

By the end of the night, nobody's laughing, because their girls are on my arm and they want to fuck.

God gave me a winning lottery ticket. Every woman I've ever bedded knows the numbers after it's been inside them. They learn to count their lucky stars fast for a chance to ride this royal scepter.

They scream. They worship. They beg for a third, a fourth, a fifth lay, when I just want to get the fuck away the next morning.

I want to do it all with Erin, except for the morning part.

Yes, the urge to fuck and *stay*, that's new.

It scares me. More than the expression on her face when she takes a good, long look at this dick. She wants me bad, but she doesn't want to cross the line because she's wondering what that means.

Unfortunately, so am I. *Why?*

"Gross! You'd better not let that thing out, or I'm going to scream," she says, shaking her head, lying her sweet ass off.

"Suit yourself, Princess," I tell her.

For once, I'm going to take her advice. Truth is, I'm half-freaked out by the time I turn around, walk back to the grill, and tend the meat, letting the rampaging hard-on die between my legs.

She's putting on a front. It's as weak as it is needy. I know how to deal with that, but everything storming up inside me, I'm clueless.

No, it won't take much to have my way. One more little push and I'll be between my fake fiancée's legs all night.

Why the hell does that have me so worried now? It's everything I've wanted for days.

Shit, I've never backed off pussy before, much less one that puts up a fight and makes me chase it.

I focus on dinner, pushing the thoughts away, plating up the steaks, sausages, and veggies. When I pass her plate, she's sitting on a rock, half a wine glass filled with rum in her hand.

"You finally cracked." Smiling, I join her on the little boulder nearby, my own plate in hand.

Erin shrugs, forcing me to look at her cleavage again. "When in Rome...or Saint Moore, I guess. Besides, I've all but given up hope I'm going to survive the night without something strong enough to handle your antics."

"No more bullshit. You're enjoying yourself," I tell her, stabbing into my boar sausage and taking a big bite. It's good on its own. Better because I made it. "Admit it, love."

"I'm enjoying this dinner. I wish I could say the same for the company, but, you know...we couldn't be more different, Silas."

"That's what makes it so exciting. I'd have never asked a girl I found boring to marry me."

"No? I thought you wanted one who would just lay down and accept all the teenage crap that seems to be your specialty."

"Try the steak," I tell her, pointing with my fork.

She blinks in surprise. I wait until she listens before I say anything else. Her face lights up when she tastes the garlic rub. My cock stirs for the hundredth time since we got here, imagining the same expression on her face when she takes every inch of me.

“That’s my specialty, beautiful. I’ve got a few more to my name, but you’ll have to wait until later tonight to find out.”

Her fork crashes on her plate. “When are you going to stop? No sex.”

Who knew I could hate two short, simple words so fucking much?

I glare at her, chewing my food. Okay, I’m back to wanting to close her sassy little mouth with every stroke of my dick.

“Soon as you learn to have some fun, Princess. You were doing great earlier this evening. Now, you’ve pushed that stick back in, deeper than before. I should’ve brought more rum for this job...”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we need. More booze, so you can act out even more, and I can be a babysitter instead of your wife.”

My gaze on her tightens. Her cheeks go brilliant red, and it’s not just the fire. It’s the only thing that tells me she really just said what she did.

Looks like I’m not the only one slipping on rum tonight.

“My wife,” I say softly. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Look, I know what you think about me from the tabloids. You think there’s no depth, nothing past the parties and the sluts I take to bed. You’re worried you’ve agreed to a pretend marriage with a boy – not a man.”

“Have I?” She’s asking honestly. No sarcasm this time.

“I never told you why I signed up for the Royal Marines, did I?” She shakes her head while I grab a stick near my feet, tracing lines in the sand in front of me. “I wanted an adventure, sure, same as every other red blooded kid does once his balls drop. But I wanted to give back, too. It was a trip to Africa that did it, this little war-torn country run into anarchy...I must’ve been seven or eight.”

Erin’s watching me intently now. “Dad was there on charity, and he let me come along. Said it would be good to

see what a future King handles beyond the stuffy bullshit back home.

“He spent about an hour talking to the elders in this village before security hauled us back to our luxury compound in the hills. I watched my father and his latest side bitch stuff themselves on caviar, expensive wine, and then head off to bed early. They slept in a handcrafted bed from the old colonial days. Me, I barely ate. I couldn’t stop thinking about those people in the village. Their pain, their horror. Too many human skeletons missing limbs. Landmines did the damage, or so I’m told, and the chemical waste left by the war did the deformities. Hell’s got nothing on what they went through. Just dragged through shit I couldn’t even imagine, especially with my wealth and fame.”

I don’t say anything until she nudges me. Everything’s gone silent around us except for the distant, peaceful churn of the ocean and my stick skimming the sands. “Well, what happened?”

“Next day, we had to go through the village again, on our way to the landing strip to get back home. Our motorcade stopped a little ways outside it. At first, nobody knew what was going on, until the UN soldiers showed up with the Royal Marines. They said we’d have a bigger escort because the whole fucking village had been raided, burned to the ground, and every last person executed overnight by a few rebels who hadn’t agreed to the truce.”

“Jesus.” Erin looks at me, her eyes big and wide, like she might be seeing something different for the first time.

Fuck, what am I doing? I’ve never opened up like this to anyone, much less a girl I want. Whatever the reason, I’d might as well finish the story.

“We made it home, obviously, without any further hitches. But we drove through the village. I’ll never forget the burned out homes and the smoking piles of what must’ve been the poor, miserable people we’d visited the day before. They’d gone down easy after suffering so much. They were defenseless. I never forgave those rebels – I had Royal

Intelligence hire hit men to murder what was left of them a few years ago. They hunted them down in the jungles like dogs, and they deserved every goddamned bullet.”

Erin’s eyes are flickering now, and I watch the fire, letting the flames feast on my anger. “It wasn’t just the rebels, though. I also never forgot what my father did – he covered up his bawling mistress’ eyes and turned the fuck away.”

My muscles twitch. The stick snaps in my hand. Clenching my jaw, I lift it from the sand and fling it toward the fire, listening to the crackle and pop.

Even after all these years, I’m pissed. I’m not sure why I decided to tell her this shit, but it’s definitely a bad idea.

Only thing that calms me down is when I feel her little hand on my shoulder.

She’s comforting me. Erin, my Princess, the girl who’s been looking at me all day like I’m something she found stuck to her damned shoe. I might as well double-down because this story is doing something.

“Yeah, so after all his lectures about royal duty, charity, and shit, he can’t be bothered to look at what’s happened to the people he’s been pretending to give a damn about for a day. I realized speeches and lofty promises in front of the cameras won’t solve shit. That’s why I signed up to serve in the Marines. It wasn’t about Queen and country, or some medieval fantasy about leading my boys into battle like my ancestors did. I had to do *something*, however small, to prevent a massacre like that from happening again. Nobody deserves to be defenseless, or stamped out like fucking ants. I’d like to believe we stopped a few executions in Afghanistan, but some days, I just don’t know...”

“Wow.” Erin whispers softly, giving me the most predictable look in the world. “Well, you did everything you could, Silas. Don’t beat yourself up.”

I ought to roll my eyes at this fairy tale fucking ending. I’ve just spilled my guts, one of my deepest, darkest secrets, and now she’s seeing beauty behind the beast.

Beauty. Do I even have that?

Does it get any more cliché than this? Fuck, I don't care.

I won't tell her the rest. There's another reason I paid my dues to the crown in my uniform.

That's because I'm scared shitless of ending up like my father, who took his scandalous life one step too far. He paid with his life and died with nothing to show for it. Nothing but a drink in his hand and another nameless slut on his arm when his party ship sank.

I can't end up like him. *I won't.*

"My life's a lot of fun and games, but that's not all it is. I don't care what the tabloids say, what grandmom thinks, or what you see, Princess," I whisper. "There's more to me than fucking, drinking, and fast cars. I've done my time in the service, but damn if I'm going to stop doing whatever I can to help the people so far down on their luck they don't have any. I'm giving back to my kingdom and the world. It's the only thing I think about when I'm not drinking or screwing."

"Giving back," she repeats, looking past me in the fire. "I think I see now. That's why you chose me, isn't it? You could've had anyone, but you picked a girl who doesn't have wealth or fame or royal blood."

Has she lost her damned mind? She couldn't be more wrong. I reach for her hand and pull her up, refusing to say anything until we're both standing in front of the fire.

"This isn't charity, love. You're as crazy as you are gorgeous, if you believe that." She can't hold my gaze. Doesn't stop me from setting her on fire with my eyes. "This isn't real, we both know it. Doesn't change the fact that I'm a picky son of a bitch. I want a Princess who isn't afraid to sling it back at me. A woman who does more than just strike my cock like lightning every time I'm looking at her, feeling her, thinking about how hot and wet and sweet her lips taste on mine."

Goddamn, I'm going to lose it. I can't stop myself anymore. Erin trembles in my arms, and I jerk her closer,

holding her against my chest while I reach up with one hand, and cup her chin.

“Silas...”

“Enough. I don’t want to hear my name coming out of your mouth again unless you’re screaming it,” I growl, moving my lips to hers.

Fuck, fuck. She tastes incredible – better than the day I kissed her with the cameras watching.

It’s not just the ridiculous, romantic setting out here, with the sea, the fire, and the sun sinking below the horizon, surrendering to the rising moon. It’s her.

It’s Erin. She *wants* this. I feel it in her kiss, the way she moves her tongue against mine when I take control of her mouth.

My dick turns to steel, ready for conquest, hungry to be in her. I won’t let the greedy bastard rule me.

I’m taking this slow, savoring it, relishing her in a sweeping, slow moving conquest like a fire sweeping through the forests.

“No, Silas. No sex,” she whimpers, one last gasp from the rational, scared side of her I’m about to fuck into oblivion. “The ink’s barely dry on what we signed...”

“Contracts change, love,” I whisper, closing my fist behind her head, taking those long, silky brown locks I’ve been dreaming about fisting for a solid week. “We can fuck. We both want this, we’re alone, and there’s nothing in the world that’s going to stop us.”

“Yeah, there is.” She looks at me with those soft, dark eyes, so scared and so horny all at once. “If we do this...it won’t be pretend anymore.”

“Bullshit,” I say, smiling. I’m going to kiss her again in about five seconds, whether she fights it or not. “Time for an amendment to the deal, effective immediately. Let’s do this like adults, like lovers, and then go our separate ways when the time comes. It’s just sex, love. There’s nothing saying you

can't be my fake wife and a fuck buddy simultaneously. I'm your Prince with benefits, starting now, and you're going to love it."

She doesn't have an argument because I've already won. So has lust.

Our mouths do the talking when I crush my lips down on hers again. Then I reach for that little bikini strap behind her back, my cock throbbing ten beats a second, craving what I've been denied.

I'm owning every last inch of Erin Warwick tonight, and as long as she's wearing my royal ring, I'm not stopping.

LIKE A DREAM (ERIN)

I never, ever imagined this.

There I am, standing on the beach, face-to-face with the dirtiest playboy in the world. No, *closer*.

He's kissing me with a heat and intensity no woman could resist. He's already popped off my bra, taking one aching breast in his thick, strong hand. His fingers move with the same grace as his mouth – hungry, but ready to tease.

Silas looks at me, swallowing me up in those big, blue eyes, just as his fingers roll my nipple.

“God!” I sputter, pressing into his grip, wishing he'd pinch, suck, and fuck me harder.

“You're beautiful when you're on fire. Fuck, Erin, Time to feel mine. All of it. I want to light you up like Christmas and see how hot you get.”

My knees go weak. I can't tell if I'm pressing my hips into his because I need the support, or because my pussy keeps going against the rock hard, insanely huge outline of his cock like a magnet.

A very wet, persistent magnet that's put me completely under its control.

I can't think anymore. I can't protest. I can't even imagine it with him slipping down my body, sliding his rough dark

stubble against my throat, kissing my cleavage as he pulls me down.

When I open my eyes, we're in the sand. Just two moaning shadows, delighting in ourselves with the heat warming us, a delicious contrast with the cool, clean earth underneath our skin.

He's going lower. My fingers grip his shoulders tight, pressing my nails into his skin. Oh, God, he's really going there. He's going to –

“Fuck!” I curse like mad.

That's all I can do when Silas reaches out, grabbing my breasts, plumping them so sweetly in his palm. He's tugging at my bottoms, dragging them down my legs.

I realize a second later he's got them in his teeth. And he's growling, just like a wild animal, a predator who's going to eat me alive.

My ass rises instinctively. He squeezes my breasts tighter, tighter, taking me halfway to the low, full moon hanging over us while my bikini bottom disappears around my ankles.

“Christ, you're wet,” he growls, kissing up my thighs, stopping to inhale my scent. “Can't believe you've waited this long to get licked and sucked. I promise, love, it's all been worth it.”

And it is. The instant I feel his hot breath over my pussy, right before puts his mouth against it, I know it's true.

At first, he's teasing me. Teasing until I'm soaked, dripping, shaking next to his lips. My fingers push into the sand at my sides, searching for something to hold onto.

But there's nothing except my own ecstasy and the dear, sweet earth once his tongue rolls across my opening.

Holy, holy fuck.

Silas!

There are no words. No expression adequate for the rough, prickly heat coursing through my blood. One of his hands

leaves my breast, sinks down, and opens my lower lips. So much better for him to suck, tongue, and fuck me deeper.

He's in my pussy, in my head, maybe even in my heart.

Prince Asshole has become Prince Charming the second the pleasure sets in. Soon, I guess I'll meet Prince Hung, too.

Every lick takes me a little higher. The bastard growls, his animal energy sweeping through me, a feral warning before he finds my clit.

I was on the verge of completely giving it up when he thrust his tongue inside me. Now, I have no choice, not when he sucks my burning nub between his teeth and lashes it a dozen times.

Oh. My. God.

“Silas, no.” I hate myself for giving him what he wants – me, writhing, screaming his name on the beach. “Don't. Stop.”

Trouble is, I love myself, too. Love it for giving in, for letting him push me over the edge, for giving everything over to his mouth. Just the way I imagined last night, when I held his filthy gift between my thighs and came so hard I saw red.

Tonight, I'm blind.

I'm coming so hard I can't breathe, can't move, can't think. The roar of the ocean and the light of the fire, the moon...it's all gone.

There's just me and the Prince. His fingers are in me, stroking away, hitting some spot that makes me feel like I'm gushing all over his chin. He won't stop licking me, even when it's too much, and my body tries to squirm away.

He growls louder. He holds me down, shoving both hands on my thighs, pushing me deeper into the floury beach. He treats me like what I've become – his Princess with benefits. His wife, his woman, quintessentially and completely *his* to own any way he wants.

It's scary as hell. Scary, and exciting.

It also makes me come even harder, knowing I'm under his thumb, and loving it. Or is it under his tongue?

I feel like I've been picked up by a tsunami wave and thrown back down again when it's over. He's hovering over me when I open my eyes. I take in his huge, handsome, viciously tattooed chest, rising in falling in shallow, hungry breaths.

"We can fuck, or you can get on your knees and suck my cock. Only reason I'm giving you a choice is because you're a virgin. A fucking virgin." He growls the last sentence like he can't believe it.

I'm flushed, naked, ready to give it up. My feet dig into the sand and push my hips up into his, feeling his erection.

There. It's true, isn't it?

The interviews I've read with his one night stands weren't lying about his size. I've never been with a man, but I don't need to be to know he's huge.

Ridiculously big. How fitting for a man who walks like he has the biggest, meanest dick in the world to actually have one.

My hand reaches down, trembling as my fingers stop at his trunks. I feel his outline, press my palm against it, and squeeze.

"Fuck! Yeah, love, yeah. Touch it all you want. We can take this slow, let you show me what you've got..."

I don't want him to accommodate me, just because I'm inexperienced. He's been talking about giving back all evening. Maybe it's time for me to do the same.

The fact that he's not a total asshole makes me want to. My spine keeps tingling while I sit up, let him flop back onto the sand, and hold myself over his thighs. He fists his trunks in one hand, jerks them down, and I run my hands along his six pack abs.

Hell, I think I need to. I'm about to topple over without the support when I finally *see* what he's been hiding.

It's as long as I thought, and even wider. It's so thick, so angry, so alive, pulsing when he grabs my hand, pulls it down, and wraps my fingers around the throbbing root.

"Feel that? It's yours, babe. Every fucking heartbeat. You suck me right now, I think I'll be the happiest man on earth."

His dirty promise makes me want to smile. I think I would, if I was anywhere but next to his impossibly huge, eager cock.

My eyes close and every nerve in my body tingles when I squeeze him gently, rolling my hand up and down his length. Growling, he drops back, giving me the space I need to work.

It's the first cock I've ever had my hand around, but I'm not totally clueless. I've talked to my friends about boys, and read my share of books about billionaires, bikers, and kings fucking the ever living hell out of damsels in distress.

Maybe those stories and talks have prepared me for this moment. I want to please him, to show His Royally Hung Highness that I'm worthy of being on my knees, in front of his naked body.

Surprisingly, it doesn't take much to hear thunder on his lips. Pleasure, given voice, coursing through his body.

Is it all psychological – or does he truly like me this much?

"Fuck," he growls. "Fuck! Faster, Princess, stroke me, suck me, just like that."

Over and over and over, he curses, guttural and lost in his pleasure. I haven't started sucking him yet.

It looks like he'll barely fit in my mouth. Only one way to truly find out...

My lips part, and I run my tongue across them. We lock eyes before I take his swollen head in my mouth. He's leaking something warm, clear, and oily all over my fingers while I quicken my strokes.

His head slides in easier than expected. I keep going, pushing my lips wider, but I still can't make it halfway down his massive shaft.

He's looking at me with his eyelids half drawn. Slowly, I start moving up and down, watching his deep blue eyes disappear behind his lids.

"Fuck, love, don't fucking stop!" His palm moves against the back of my head, urging me on.

He tastes masculine. Like earth and salt and raw, royal power in one.

My pussy tingles, enjoying what I'm doing to him. I shouldn't like serving him so much. But I can't fight what feels good, what's natural, and this is *magnificent*.

It's only nature. His power, his arrogance, and what I think must be his heart of gold makes me enjoy prostrating myself to Prince Playboy, sucking and stroking his cock like my life depends on it.

No, maybe not my life, but definitely my next orgasm.

He's growling now, grinding in my mouth. His heavy balls swing up, clapping against the base of my hand.

"Shit, that's good. Too fucking good. You've got no business sucking like this when you're new."

No business, huh? I answer him by moving my lips faster. I'm ready for anything, ready for him to explode in my mouth. He'll probably spill more come than I could ever hope to swallow inside, leaving it spilling on my breasts.

Filthy. Wrong. Yet, so, so predictably hot.

He's thrusting in my mouth, moving to match my strokes. I push my tongue up underneath his thick head, tasting more warm pre-come drooling into my mouth. Every time I touch that spot with my tongue, below his crown, his hips jerk.

He's holding back. Trying not to hurt me by ramming his cock down my throat like I know he wants to.

Jesus, what's happening? Am I really thinking like this with my mouth full of him? Imagining how hard he'll fuck me if he's between my legs, unimpeded, punching my V-card like he's been waiting to half his life?

“Fuck, fuck! No.” Growling, he pushes me away, pulling my face off his cock by the hair.

For a second, I’m worried I’ve done something wrong. But he rises, takes me in his arms, and flips me over. Silas pushes me into the sand, flat on my back, grinding his bare, slick cock against my slit.

“I’m not wasting this nut down your throat, much as I fucking want to. You’ll taste my come later,” he growls, his fingers pressing into my chin, craning my face to meet his. “Right now, we’re fucking, Princess. Fucking all damned night in front of this fire. I’m going to leave you so sore we’ll need Vic and the boys to come tomorrow and carry us home.”

The idea fills me with horror. But I forget all about it a second later, when he moves his cock against my slit, pushing his fullness dangerously close to my entrance.

He barely remembers to stop, pull away, and reach into the bag behind him. I watch as he returns, tearing the condom wrapper with his teeth, then sliding the rubber over his length in one stroke.

It has to be extra large to fit him.

I want to tell him how much this means to me. How I’m still not sure what’s happening, but I’m going to enjoy it, and trust him for this beautiful, furious moment. For one night, I belong to Prince Hung, and I’ll take every one of those benefits he’s offered me.

“Silas...I’m yours,” I say, grabbing him by the shoulders. “Take me. Take my pussy. Any way you want.”

God. It sounds like something from a bad romance novel.

Is this how people talk dirty, or am I totally blowing it?

He smiles, slides his fingers through my hair again, and jerks my head back. “Love, I want this pussy so many ways I couldn’t do them in a thousand nights. We can get started, though. We can see what it’s like when your hot little cunt sucks the life from my balls when I’m coming inside you.”

Yes, please!

My legs hook to his, trembling, begging to do everything he just said. Maybe I've screwed up this dirty talk because I can't form words at all, overwhelmed with the need to have him inside me, to feel his cock pulsing.

"Please," I whimper. Yes, *whimper*.

No more delay. He locks eyes and pushes into me, filling my virgin hole with everything he has.

It's incredible. It hurts a little bit at first.

Mostly, it feels so fucking good, stretching to fit him, my body shifting at a physiological level to fit Prince Silas like a silk glove.

Nothing's stopping this. I'd probably die on the spot if it did after feeling my wet, craving pussy gliding around his cock, his fullness, his essence.

Silas fucks me slowly. He's careful, still holding back, even though the animal energy rolling off him doesn't feel like it understands what careful even means.

His thrusts dig deep. Mining for pleasure, marking me from the inside-out, reminding me in every single stroke who owns me now.

And I'm okay with it. Really, *really* okay with everything he's doing.

My feet hook to the backs of his legs. He grabs my wrists with his free hand, pinning them above my head, pressing his mouth down on mine while the other hand pulls my hair.

The first time I come on his cock, I'm squealing into his mouth. He drowns my moans, my screams in his groaning, growling pleasure.

I think he's about to join me, adding his convulsions to mine, especially because his infuriating royal smirk has become a caveman's smile of teeth and lust.

No. Hell, no.

He fucks me right through my first orgasm, and doesn't let up. He's going faster, shaking my body like we're suddenly

riding an earthquake.

Every curve ripples. Every drop of blood in my veins becomes fire, lapping at my veins. The ocean's roar behind us merges with our pleasure, our desire. Just one strange, inseparable fusion of earth and sex, sweat and muscle, bound to this cock that's filled me up to my womb.

"Never had anything this tight," he snarls, when I'm on the verge of coming again. "Take it, Erin. Every fucking inch. Every thrust. Every way I want, when I want. I'm ruining you for taking any cock that isn't mine again. Oh, fuck!"

Everything I've feared is happening. The words coming out of his mouth while his defenses are down don't sound like pretend anymore. Not like something a Prince with benefits would say.

We're more than just two crazy people who've struck an unthinkable deal when he's balls deep inside me. More than just fiances playing a game.

We're lovers. Losing our hearts and minds in the ecstasy igniting our bodies.

I'm helpless, scared, and more confused than I've ever been in my life. But I'm also buried in pleasure when Silas rears up, slams his hips into mine, and swells deep inside me.

He's coming through his condom. I'm coming apart.

For the next five minutes, my brain loses the ability to dwell on any higher thoughts than *yes, yes, fuck me! Fuck me more! Silas, fill me.*

His royal seed nearly does. He explodes in the condom, growling louder than ever before. His fingers jerk my hair so hard it nearly hurts, but it tips my head back to the moon, and I scream.

My pussy won't ever be the same after tonight, if he's serious. I know he is.

We're just getting started. He's going to keep fucking me, coming in me, spilling everything he's got until he's empty, and I'm so spent I'll be lucky to walk tomorrow.

Tomorrow. That's a scary thought after the mindless, screaming, skin soaking sex we're having tonight.

I don't know what we'll be when we wake up. I'm not sure if we'll be royals with benefits, or totally ruined.

I'll be lucky to keep my own sanity after tonight.

"Damn it, love, you're going to kill me before we're through," he growls, pulling out of me and tossing the condom aside.

We kiss. That's when I put my hands around his neck, scratching my nails against his skin, and deepen our tongues moving against one another. They're searching, tangled, and still so hungry.

Nothing else matters tonight except the flesh. I'm going to force myself to live in the sex, the pleasure, even if it means our dream is about to become a royal nightmare.



WE DON'T GET much sleep. Sometime near dawn, he wakes, nudging me out of our rum and sex fueled frolic.

My head hurts. My pussy aches so good, after taking him two more times, the last time bent over in the sand while he slammed into me from behind.

Silas passes me a water bottle. I drink it down like it's ambrosia, straight from heaven, groaning angrily when he tries to get me to walk.

"Come on, love. You'll catch cold out here in the morning. Can't risk you getting pneumonia – how're we going to fuck then?"

Jerk. It gets a smile, though.

I watch him get dressed, summoning just enough energy to gather up my own clothes and slip into them. When I delay moving too long, Prince Silas the soldier emerges. He picks me up, takes me in his arms, and carries me up the steps to his high tech car.

Before I know it, I'm slumped in the leather passenger seat, watching as he starts the engine and puts it on auto-pilot.

The car drives us back to civilization and the summer palace.

His guards nod politely on our way inside.

If any of them think our relationship is a sham, they don't show any signs. Or maybe they're just smart enough never to question their boss.

Soon, we're upstairs, skipping my room entirely and heading for his. He's got another one of those big, warm, and incredibly overbearing canopy beds like something shipped direct from 1820.

It doesn't matter. I crash on it like it's a silk cloud, safe in his arms, and sleep like the dead.

Silas' heartbeat guides me to my dreams.

If this is what being a Princess with benefits is like, count me in. It's a comforting thought, one that hangs with me through the sleepy morning, until I wake up.

Silas sits on the bed's edge, a phone in his hand, muttering angrily to someone on the line.

"Fuck. *Fuck!* It's a goddamned disaster, is what it is. Okay, okay, just give me a couple hours. Yes, we'll take the damned helicopter. We'll be back in the capital as soon as we can. You tell them to do every fucking thing they can to save her!"

Forget dreams. I just woke up into a royal nightmare.

WITH BATED BREATH (SILAS)

“**W**hat? What is it?” Erin sits up, the silk sheet wrapped around her, threatening to tease my cock awake after it’s fucked itself into a coma for several hours.

Any other time, I’d be ripping that thing off, throwing her on her back, and having my way.

But after the asshole from the palace gets off the phone, sex is the last thing on my mind. First time that’s ever happened, and I hate it. Almost as much as I hate having to tell her the news.

“Her Majesty’s in the royal hospital. They think it’s a stroke,” I say, feeling another blow to my guts when I repeat what I heard. “Those fucking muck raking, gutter swiping plebes...they must’ve pushed her over the edge. She’s eighty years old, for Christ’s sake – too old for the media’s shit.”

“Don’t worry about the why,” Erin says, laying her hands on my shoulders, rubbing them gently. “We just need to get back there, like you say. We’ll have time to sort out everything else later.”

“We need to get our shit together. *Now.*” I’m growling every other word, and I can’t stop myself.

I yank her up from the bed so hard she drops the sheet. “Let’s shower and get dressed.”

“Shower? Together?”

No shit. Normally, it'd be the perfect opportunity to bend her over in the wet, balmy bath, hands against the wall, and fuck her pussy until I can't think straight.

Today, it's just a time saver. We step into the huge marble shower stall together, and I slam the glass door shut.

Just seeing her naked has a calming effect. Thank fuck.

I need it right now, anything that prevents me from thinking about the thousand and one hells waiting if grandmom doesn't pull through.

I've got my Princess, but it doesn't mean the island will accept me as king. The jackals in the media will have a field day. The Republic First assholes will raise holy hell, circulate a million petitions calling for my crown, and they'll probably get it after the nastiest referendum campaign this country's ever seen.

Hell, I'll have to address the bigger, uglier jackals in parliament. One wrong move there, and the populists will pounce for political points, ending our fifteen hundred year old crown forever.

"Silas...relax." She's lathered up, smiling softly, running her hands up and down my chest.

I've never let a woman touch me like this before. Erin looks like an angel, and I can't refuse, even though she's seeing more cracks in my armor than any girl has business seeing.

I let her little hands glide down my body. She lathers me up, giving me a questioning, hungry look when her palms graze my thighs, next to the hard-on raging between my legs.

"Later, love," I tell her, cupping her ass with my hands. "Turn around."

She listens. I squeeze out a dab of thick, fragrant shampoo and lather it through her hair.

She's perfect. She's real. She's magnificent – even when I'm keeping myself from fucking her like I want to.

Erin backs into me, letting the water roll over us from the spigot above while I rinse her hair. It's strangely soothing, like some zen meditation I've been waiting half my life to discover.

I hate it like hell when I have to shut the water off. We step out together, ignoring the rock hard cock I've still got swinging near my belly button, and start toweling off.

Whatever happens, I *will* take care of myself later, and Erin, too. These royal distractions, this is the part of being a Prince I really fucking hate.

When we're back in my private suite to dress, the balcony door is cracked, letting in the fresh breeze. That's when we hear the thunder coming from one more floor above us. Erin turns around, her eyes wide, fixing the summer dress she's wearing.

"Jesus. You weren't kidding about the helicopter, were you?"

"Do I ever kid about anything?"

She sticks her tongue out. Something that makes me want to smile. Too bad the shitshow waiting for us across the country doesn't let me.

Victor joins us near the exit upstairs. We all climb aboard the huge converted military chopper. It's all mine, complete with the double-headed black eagle on the side.

It's too loud to speak until the doors are sealed shut. Even when they are, I don't say anything, lost in all the dark possibilities waiting at the palace.

We're leaving paradise. We're only in the air for a few tense minutes when I feel her hand on mine. Grabbing her fingers, I squeeze them tight, telling myself this isn't going to be the end.

I don't give a damn how fucked up things get with the kingdom. Nothing's changing my mind about my woman.



SOON AS WE'RE on the palace's landing pad, Vic and I slip off. I kiss Erin goodbye, and straighten my tie, ready to take on everything that's keeping me from her.

A long walk down the hall and several flights of stairs later, we're in the throne room. It's weird as hell to see it empty. Unoccupied.

That chair has never looked so imposing because I might be in it sooner than I ever expected. Worse, it could up a museum piece, never to house a royal ass in it again.

"How is she?" I ask sharply, seeing Patricia waiting for us by the window.

The Queen's valet is there, along with her personal emissary to parliament, a big man named George. There's also Serena – the last bitch in the world I want to see right now. She flashes me a huge, man eating smile. I don't even acknowledge her, focusing on Patricia instead.

"Stable, Your Highness. The symptoms began this morning. She woke in a state of confusion, and had great difficulty sitting up. We had her rushed to the hospital immediately. The medical team says she's in good spirits, resting, while they wait for a few more scans."

"My God. What if there's brain damage?" One sentence from George gets everybody's nerves going. "I'm sorry, that was rude. I'm worried about the inquiries from parliament, Your Highness, nothing more. They won't like this uncertainty, particularly after the recent upsets in this very palace."

"Fuck the politicians!" I snarl, pacing in front of the window.

They know to give me my space. All of them except Serena, who creeps up next to me, mustering her most soothing voice.

"My Prince, I'd advise against that kind of tone. We need our PR working to unify the country. The last thing we ought to risk is more division."

“Didn’t ask for your advice,” I snap, pushing past her. “The country’s already divided down to its roots. It’s going to take weeding to bring it together again, and everybody in this room knows it.”

Vic clears his throat. “Sire, if you’d like us to put a cap on this, and head for the hospital, I’d be more than willing to summon a car.” He speaks slowly, trying to diffuse the walking bomb I’ve become.

“No, we have to talk this out,” I mutter, hating what I have to admit next. “Serena’s right, damn it. I’ll be there immediately if grandmom’s condition changes, for better or worse. It’s our job to make sure the whole kingdom doesn’t go to hell in the meantime. I want her on black out – anything that isn’t absolutely necessary doesn’t get through. No politics, no drama, no jackals buzzing around her room. We can’t risk upsetting her while she’s being treated.”

Patricia gives me a sour look. She’s never liked me very much. Her first and last duty is to the Queen, sure, but her distaste is personal, too. The prim, proper woman is probably about to lay a load because there’s a risk I’m about to become King far sooner than anyone expected.

Including me.

Christ, King. My gaze drifts to the throne.

I can’t imagine myself up there, wearing my grandfather’s crown, wrapped up in robes made from mountain lions, wild bears, and gold. I see myself surrounded by guards and valets, Victor in Patricia’s place, and – of course – Erin at my side.

Then the others vanish. I’m imagining myself on the throne in *just* my robe. Erin is on her knees, her sweet, smooth skin reflecting the fire’s glow. Naked for me, ready to sit on my raging cock and take the sovereign’s seed, pump my dick with her luscious cunt until we’re dripping all over thousand year old gold.

Fuck. Patricia’s talking, but I’ve been too busy thinking about filthy, ridiculous things to listen.

“We’ll take it day by day with her condition. That’s all I’m asking, Prince. We needn’t consider anything rash, much less any assumptions of royal power, unless it’s clearly necessary.”

“Patricia, you know full well what palace protocol and the kingdom’s laws say about this,” Victor cuts in. “A country needs a head in the crown. If Her Majesty is incapacitated – briefly, I pray – then all the duties fall on the heir in the interim. His Highness is effectively King, the kingdom’s chief representative, and its sole functioning sovereign, until such time as Her Majesty is ready and able to resume her full duties.”

They look like they’re about to kill each other. Just what we need – another standoff.

“Vic, come on. I’m ready to do anything I need to while she’s down and out. But I’m damned sure *not* King unless I’m sitting in that chair. I don’t need the extra title to sort this out,” I say, nodding to the throne. “George, you tell the assholes in the chamber exactly what I’ve said. The crown isn’t passing to anyone unless my grandmother isn’t breathing. God forbid.”

“Certainly, Your Highness. They won’t like it – politicians thrive on what’s clear cut, as you know. However, they’ll live with it.”

Yeah, they will, I think to myself. Because if they don’t, I’ll find some way to have the son of bitches dissolved and call early elections. Even the Republic First rabble rousers would love to see that happen.

“A sensible choice, Your Highness.” Vic nods politely, but I can’t tell if he’s being honest, or just blowing more smoke up my ass.

Patricia doesn’t say anything. She turns, staring sadly at the empty throne.

That fucking chair is going to decide too many people’s futures. I’m tired of seeing it. I want to get out of here.

“Update me on Her Majesty’s condition, the second there’s any change,” I tell grandmom’s valet.

“Of course, my Prince.”

I wave at Victor to follow me, and we're gone, heading into the hallway. We're only a few steps outside the throne room when I hear Serena's heels clicking behind us.

Goddamn. I knew she wouldn't stay muzzled forever.

"Your Highness! Please." I hear her calling, barely slowing down to let her catch up. "We need to schedule a meeting to address the PR problem. I'd like to talk with you and that girl in private. Maybe go over some talking points we can use with the kingdom, in case the situation deteriorates."

"That girl?" I stop and look at her. "Is that what you're going to call my fiancée, potentially your future Queen?"

The color drains from her face. Time seems to stop, turning the whole atmosphere electric like a storm around us. Even Vic looks nervous.

"Silas –"

"Your Highness, Miss Hastings," Vic corrects, glaring at her.

"I'm sorry, of course. It's the stress today, that's all," she lies. I'm about to lose what little patience for her I've got left. "I want to do right by the kingdom. You have to know, I feel *awful* about what happened during the press conference. I should've requested more security when I set it up. Let me make it up to you...to everyone. I'll prep three different speeches. One for every scenario we might have to deal with. You choose whichever you like best."

"How about the one where I throw your ass out and tell you to find a new job?" I growl.

She blinks, surprised. Unfortunately, after fucking me, she's too fearless for her own good.

"That seems...rather uncalled for," she says, choosing her words carefully. "I'm just doing my job, Your Highness. Forgive me if I've offended you or your fiancée."

I study her face when she says the last word. Damn if it doesn't look like she's chewing something rotten.

“It’s been a rough day for everyone. I’m more than happy to coach Erin with anything I need to. She’s the one you’ve chosen to marry, after all.” Surrender, that’s what’s coming out of her now.

I’ve seen that hurt, puppy dog look on women I’ve fucked a hundred times. This has to be the first where I’m feeling absolutely no remorse.

Victor’s looking at me. Waiting. He’s got one hand on his phone, ready to call security if I decide to kick her to the curb this very second.

Lucky for her, she’s too damned good at what she does. I can’t risk an untested specialist working the kingdom’s media if grandmom’s health goes to complete shit.

“I don’t have time for this. Go write.” I’m flying down the hall without a second glance behind my shoulder.

Vic trots after me, struggling to keep up. I don’t slow down for a damned second.



I’M ALONE for the next few hours, stuck in my office. I’ve got to make a few more phone calls. Contingencies for the worst clusterfucks I can imagine for myself and the kingdom.

First, I talk to the generals and admirals. Their loyalty to the crown means everything if the kingdom falls into total chaos.

Then I’m on the line with the leaders of both major parties. George has already told them what I said this morning, spelling out my role while my grandmother takes the longest break she’s ever had from royal duties.

Fifty fucking years holding the scepter. I can’t imagine it, but I’d better start. I’m next in line.

I answer the tense, probing questions from the men who depend on lofty promises to win votes for power.

“Everything is fine,” I tell them, over and over, wondering if I’ll believe it after I say it enough times.

It's a phrase of the day fit for Robby the Talking Horse to sing a song about, if he could, the main character on the nation's kids' show. I sang with him, once, when I was about nine, and they wanted to bring the Prince on as a special guest.

I mangled the stupid ballad about ten times before I got it right in the last cut. Singing hasn't interested me since.

Whatever mistakes I've made before in my life, there's no room for new ones.

Deflect, spin, and promise. That's what I do with the ministers and party leaders before I get the hell off the line, faking a call coming in from the royal hospital.

I'm not even stretching the truth that much. It's the last and most stressful call of the evening. When I get Her Majesty's physician on the line, I look out the window, and it's dark.

Thousands of little lines glowing across the city's skyline, melded with fuchsia and burgundy. Several hundred royal purple candles sit flaming in windowsills, praying for grandmom's recovery.

"Well, how is she?" I ask, ripping open my drawer. The bottle of scotch I've stashed for emergency situations is still there.

"We have more assessments to finish, Your Highness. Tests so far have been inconclusive."

There's a word I hate. It takes a long, fiery swig of booze to quell my frustration enough to finish this conversation.

"So, what? Is it a stroke, or not?"

"We don't know, sire. We're doing our best. I promise you, we'll know more in the morning. She's being monitored around the clock."

"Give me two scenarios, best and worst." I pop the bottle open and take a long pull while the doctor clears his throat, closing my eyes as sweet, calming fire splashes my stomach.

"Best case? We find the event was limited, hasn't done any lasting damage, and she's discharged within the week. As for

the worst, well...she's eighty years old, Your Highness. Worst could mean a lot of things."

He won't tell me she could die. Nobody has the balls to say it, to even think it. Not when this woman has been on the radio and TV since most of the kingdom was in diapers, a comforting presence in the troubling times.

"Call me if anything changes. Don't care if it's the middle of the night. You call, doctor."

"Understood, Prince Silas."

I slam down the phone. There's a schedule in front of me, glowing on the screen, everything the Queen had lined up for the next week.

Tomorrow, there's supposed to be afternoon tea with the Russian ambassador, and then a late dinner with the emissary from the States. Our kingdom's longtime neutrality and grandmom's generosity has put us front and center, mediating a territorial dispute in the Baltic.

I don't know where the negotiations are at. There's a good chance I'm going to turn over the table if we can't get the Russians and NATO to shake hands, accidentally starting World War III.

Fuck.

I stand up, bottle in hand, barreling around the office. I'm looking for a glass so I can really lay down the scotch. When I finally find one, I stop just short of filling it.

My stomach turns, staring at the liquid gold in the glass.

It's...revolting.

Double fuck. The day I've always feared has arrived. Booze won't help me anymore. It won't do anything except cause a disaster if I'm sucking on the bottle as King, and starting tonight.

Growling to myself, I push the cap down on the bottle.

I'm growing up. The fucking, the drinking, the parties with supermodels and spoiled rich kids from across Europe, they're

in the past. I can't indulge them anymore. I don't even want to because they're not going to take the edge off.

There's only one thing that's made me feel human since I found out the brutal news this morning.

Erin. My Princess with benefits.

She's waiting for me in her chamber, probably pouring over the news breaking online. Wondering what kind of man she's going to see when I return.

I have a chance to show her it won't be a stumbling, horny drunk. To show myself that I can take the reigns without falling off my horse.

My father would be a drunken, weeping mess right now. Probably running for the nearest bar with another slut at his side.

Never me. I grit my teeth, staring at my reflection in the empty glass. No, fuck, I'm better than that.

If I can fix this kingdom in its darkest hour, then I can damned sure fix myself. And that means this crazy thing I've got with my Princess could be more than pretend.

Am I ready for that? Ready to settle down, to love, to act like a man with his wife-to-be instead of just a carefree fuck with a dick bigger than his crown?

I don't know, but I'm about to find out.

OPEN REVERY (ERIN)

It's late.

I haven't seen Silas since we returned to the palace. I've been in his chamber all day, watched around the clock by Dean and several other guards.

They've been whispering into their phones and radios all day.

I hear the same words over and over.

Her Majesty's health. Chaos. Damned rioters.

Silas. Prince. *King*.

Every time I hear that last one, it makes me swoon, and get so lightheaded I want to throw up. I've barely gotten a handle on this Princess thing. I never imagined I'd be a Queen in my wildest dreams – even a pretend one – and I'm scared. I'm in too deep.

The way they say *King Silas* makes me worry, too. It's said with tension and humor, the way a person talks about a silly hypothetical, something that won't *really* happen.

I'm sitting by the window, watching the capital's lights wink on below. It seems like half the windows are filled with royal purple candles lit to pray for Queen Marina's health.

Their glow splashes everything like smooth wine. I wonder if I'm watching the last time the kingdom will know peace.

I'm so lost in my thoughts, I don't hear him come in. There's a hand on my shoulder so thick, firm, and confident it can only belong to one man.

I look up, placing my hand over his. He takes my fingers like he owns them, squeezes, then lifts them to his mouth.

His lips make me feel better instantly. Whatever else is happening out there, I know where we stand in this room.

"Hey," I whisper. "What's the latest?"

"Hell," he says, a one word answer heavy as ice on his tongue. "Nobody knows what's going to happen. We just have to take it day by day, love. Do everything we can to settle the nerves rattling this kingdom. That's what royals do."

I stand up, facing him, sliding my hands over his shoulders. He pulls me into his arms. I'm scanning his eyes, falling deeper into ocean blue. I want to understand how he's so calm with the weight of the world – or at least a whole kingdom – hanging around his neck.

"How can I help?" I ask, running one hand across his cheek.

God, his stubble feels good. He hasn't had time to shave all day. It's rough like rest of him. I'm still discovering what I enjoy in a man, but I love when things match, bound together in a single gorgeous package.

"You really want to know?" he asks, that sly quirk pulling at his lips.

Swallowing the expectation in my throat, I look at him, and nod.

"Don't fight me when I rip off that dress. That's going to help a lot." It's the only warning he gives.

His hands are on me. Moving, tearing, pulling. He's quick, ferocious, a wild animal who needs to get me naked *this fucking second*.

When I'm down to just my panties, I turn toward the hall leading to the bedroom. Big mistake.

Silas jerks me into his arms, slamming me against his chest, resting his forehead on mine.

“No. We’ll save the sheets for later. We’re going to fuck in front of this glass, beautiful, where anyone can look in and see. I want transparency, love. Let the people see their future King and Queen, in lust, with nothing left to hide.”

I’m taken aback. More importantly, both my wrists are in his fists, and he guides me to the huge window pane. My back slides against it, cool as a sheet of ice.

Warmth, fire, and glacial cool collides in my bloodstream. It’s strange, conflicted, and oh so wrong.

But I’m getting used to wrong feeling right – especially when he moves his head down my breasts. My nipple disappears into his mouth, and my knees start shaking.

“Oh, God!” I whimper, losing myself in the pleasure when his teeth form a tight little ring.

He eases off after several seconds, just long enough to make the wet spot on my panties three times bigger. Clenching my ass, he pulls me into him, then moves one hand around my thigh, sliding to the middle.

He slips his fingers in me hard, never taking those blue eyes off mine for a second. “Silas,” he growls.

“What?” I can barely speak when he starts to move, stroking that spot in my pussy that’s going to make me see stars.

“Silas. That’s the only thing on your lips when you’re coming, love. That’s the man who’s strumming your whole body, making your wet little cunt sing. That’s who wants to own you. Body, mind, and soul.”

His thumb finds my clit and brushes against it.

Oh, God. Oh, yes. Oh, Silas.

I’m trembling, putting my hands against the glass, hoping my legs don’t completely buckle when he makes me come.

I can't think about the people behind their glass. Hell, I won't let myself wonder what kind of message this is sending either. This manic, animal rush to sex when a whole country is hanging by its nails...

"Move that sweet ass. Fuck my fingers," he growls, pulling them away, making me grind down against his hand.

I'm twisting like a whore. It makes me flush, sweat, and get even wetter. Just standing in this palace, with what looks like a crystal chandelier more expensive than a house hanging over us, its edges reflecting every filthy, desperate face I'm making each time he pleasures me.

How can he stroke so deeply like this? So good? How can he know exactly what gets me off?

It's because he's slept with like half a million women, and I've only had him.

One.

For a second, through my haze of ecstasy that makes me grit my teeth, I'm jealous, and disappointed with myself for falling so hard, so quickly, to this man who's had a king's feast of pussy. It shouldn't be this hard to imagine myself in another man's arms.

But when Silas lifts his hand away, dragging my panties down my legs, there's nothing I want more than having him inside me again.

Him, and *only* him. My Prince with benefits that make my eyes roll wild.

"Step aside, love, so I can get these fucking things off." I lift my leg, and he swings them around, throwing the sopping wet mess behind his shoulder.

"Turn around," he growls, standing up, towering over me.

The hard-on raging in his pants rubs against my ass through his trousers before he even takes it out. He takes my breast again in his fingers, rolling my nipple gently, a prelude to the crisp pinch that's ten times better than the golden clamps could ever be.

“Beautiful, love. You’re going to come so hard tonight. So fucking hard we both forget our own names, much less the hell going on around us.”

“Only if you make me,” I whisper, spreading my fingers high above my head, flat against the glass.

Every gesture in my body language now says one thing – *please*.

More thunder rumbles through his throat, and this time it doesn’t form words. I hear his belt buckle coming undone.

My bottom lip catches in my teeth. My breath grows tense, ragged. My pussy pulses so hot between my legs I need to pinch my thighs together. I’m going to either come on the spot or die first, if he doesn’t fucking touch me right now.

“Please, Silas. Make me come,” I whimper.

“Make you?” he growls, slipping his bare, seething cock between my ass cheeks. “Love, I thought you’d give me a challenge. Something to take my mind off the kingdom and it’s damned bloody politics tonight. We both know you’re going to come like mad the second this king sized dick fills your tight little pussy.”

No!

“No!” I shake my head furiously, trying to deny it. Too bad my body won’t let me.

“Yeah, yeah, fuck yeah,” he says slowly, a hot, low groan in my ear. “You’re a good Princess because you’re begging to be my royal whore. You’ll come for me because I’ve got the biggest, meanest cock you’ve ever had. The *only* cock. The first, the last, the best dick. Made for fucking your pussy, love. Made for making you come when I tell you to.”

I’m burning up. Sweating, trembling, staring out the glass and trying not to pant like an animal in heat.

Jesus, I’m shaking, desperately grinding my ass on his length, bucking my hips to try to pull him inside me.

I see his reflection behind me, his face hovering over my shoulder. He smiles like a lion looking down at his dinner.

Damn him. God damn him!

He's beautiful, but he's still a royal asshole.

I hate that he's enjoying this, watching me come undone. I absolutely, positive loathe that he's making me enjoy it, too – maybe more than he is.

“You’re an asshole, Silas, even when you’re sexy,” I say, staring out at the city.

I’ve never been so vulnerable before. Anyone with the right angle or a pair of binoculars can look up here and see my naked body against the glass, my hot, desperate breath fogging it up, hiding my face.

Small consolation. So are having his hands grab my thighs. He digs his fingers into my tender skin, and of course, it heats my blood ten more degrees.

“And you’re going to come for me, love. You’re going to come so hard half the city thinks a fucking bomb has detonated up here.”

He shoves his cock in me.

There isn’t time to protest. No time for comebacks or denials or self-conscious doubts.

He thrusts about three times, pulling my hips into his, before I’m losing it. My lips form a ring, I lean on the glass, and I’m gone.

I’m coming. His dick fucks me harder, straight through the clenching, screaming, shaking mess I’ve become.

My back arches so hard my spine goes stiff. Silas grabs my hair, twirls it around his fingers, and jerks me close enough to hear him growl.

That’s when the screaming starts. He’s fucking me, drilling me deep, pounding me until some wild, wicked instinct I don’t understand rips lose.

I’m not in his palace anymore. I’m in nirvana, spasming and moaning. Slave to his cock for what feels like forever.

“Fuck,” he growls, thrusting his full length into me and holding it there when I’m coming down from it. “That’s the way you’ll always come on this dick, love. Every damned orgasm you have is beautiful because I made it, and you’d better believe I’m making more tonight.”

Shit! He’s right. There’s no stopping him.

I don’t even want to. My body leans into his, knees still trembling, letting his strong, tall weight steady me. His hold on my hair tightens, pulling me in. Silas bites my shoulder, sinks his teeth in, growling until it vibrates through my entire body.

We’re lost in our sex. I’m not just drowning in those royal blue eyes anymore, but sinking into him, every single inch.

It’s scary. It’s insane. It chains me up like I’m losing my mind and releases me again.

I’ve been starved for so long. And now, I’m finally allowed to feast, as long as I’m joined to his ridiculously perfect cock.

When he holds one hand up to my mouth, I bite it, getting him back for the hickies he’s no doubt left around my throat. I know it drives him wild because he fucks me harder.

Pushing me against the window, he holds me by the throat. Gently, but firmly, he starts fucking harder. Faster. Slamming his hips into mine until I go over the edge at least two more times, crazy to feel him add his heat to mind.

I don’t know if he’s stopped to roll on a condom. I’m way past caring.

Thinking about his seed inside me nearly makes me come again. Silas is panting, holding us both against the glass. I’m glad it’s industrial strength, or else we’d have broken through it ten minutes ago.

Or is it an hour ago? Time has no more meaning, wrecked in our fucking, groaning, screaming affair.

“Please. Please, Silas,” I pant, hissing the words through my teeth. “I can’t keep this up...I can’t...”

Can a person die from too many orgasms? From being fucked too hard? I don't know, but I'm worried I'm about to find out.

I need a break. Just a few minutes to catch my breath, to let my body settle from its proud, mind blowing storm. My toes will lock if they curl anymore.

“Can't what? Can't wait to feel me come?” He pauses, letting the new inferno rush through my blood, setting me on fire again, when burning into a new orgasm should be impossible. I think he's going to give me a few seconds rest.

“Silas...” I moan.

Then the bastard says it. “Erin, love...I'm coming.”

It's like I've been trained. My body seizes up and my head snaps backward against his hand, loving how he makes it burn when he pulls, down to the root.

His cock moves in me like a piston now.

In and out. Deeper, deeper.

Stroking, thrusting, slamming into me until his balls swing up, slapping my clit. His free hand reaches down between my legs, pinches my nub, and frigs it until I'm coming apart.

Coming again. Coming for the King.

“Fucking hell!” Snarling, he explodes, holding his dick in me as it swells, releasing pure fire.

Yes, fucking hell. Fucking Silas. Fucking King.

I don't care that he doesn't officially have the crown. He rules every molecule in my body with an iron fist.

We're coming together, harder than two people should.

My fingers scratch the glass helplessly. I'm going to need a chiropractor to unfurl my toes, my fingers. I don't know how I'm going to hide the marks he's left on my neck, my shoulders, especially when all but the most formal dresses I've seen in the wardrobe have so much room for skin.

For the next minute, the longest minute of my life, I don't fucking care.

Nothing else matters except the Prince and I. The man who's spilling every drop of himself into me, and making me feel it.

Making my pussy work for its pleasure by wringing his cock until he's spent. His knuckle slows against my clit, little by little, but he won't pull out.

We're panting, drinking precious oxygen into our lungs, when he finally softens. He slips out with a growl, backing away from me, giving me the space to turn around.

"I want you on the pill, the patch, or whatever suits you tomorrow," he says, rolling the condom off his hardness and tying it at the end before he looks at me.

It should be a relief that he slipped one on without me knowing it. Strangely, it doesn't feel that way.

"Next time we're fucking after tonight, I want to feel what's mine, skin-on-skin. I'm coming in you, love. Spilling every goddamned drop."

Yes. I've been wet all evening, and now I'm even wetter.

I pinch my legs together to hide it, walking over, and taking his hand. He leads me to his bedroom at last, where yet another huge bed with curtains hanging around the edges waits like something from a fairy tale.

No, forget the fairy tales. They aren't this dirty.

Cinderella never let her Prince mount her and deliver too many orgasms to count in front of an entire city.

This is for real, and I'm his.

I'm blushing, picturing how we must've looked behind the glass. I sit on the edge of the bed while he pulls a carafe of water from a small silver fridge.

"You think anybody saw us?" I ask.

"Sure hope so."

I raise an eyebrow and love the coolness against my skin when he pushes a glass of water into my hand. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“No, love. We both know I don’t do jokes. I’m dead serious.” I’m shaking my head, cursing him under my breath again, when he wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me close. “I was afraid how we’d look in front of the kingdom before, back before the stupid press conference and the riot changed everything.”

“You? Afraid?” I can’t believe it, taking a long, refreshing sip.

“There was always a risk that nobody would believe us, love. That we’d come off stiff. Unnatural.” His eyes roam my body, telling me something else will be stiff again really soon. “Far as I’m concerned, that’s over. All this time getting up close and personal means we’re going to make the kingdom believe we’re in love.”

I reach out, resting my hands on his bare, beautiful chest. I want to tell him I’m starting to believe it, too.

But a man like this doesn’t do love. *One and done*, wasn’t that motto in interviews with the playboy blogs? I’m feeling a lot of things, an emotional windstorm that would leave any woman dizzy.

“It’s becoming very natural,” I say cautiously, refusing to let myself believe anything I know I shouldn’t. “What will you do when we’re at the altar? That’s the kiss we have to get right to make them believe.”

My gaze drifts up his body, slowly rising from his magnificent cock to his chiseled chin, his magical eyes. The royal eagle sits in his skin, searching, ready to fly out and tear the world apart if he’s ever challenged.

“Obviously,” he says, reaching behind my head and pulling my face closer. “No worries, love. We’ve got several weeks ahead for practice. How about I train you to come every time you touch my tongue?”

“Uh, how about you don’t!” Laughing, I slap my hands against his chest. “Jesus. You’re not joking about the whole kingdom seeing us, are you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Princess? I –”

Rolling my eyes, I finish it for him. “Yeah, yeah. You never kid. You’re the most serious man in the world. I’m so lucky.”

“Say it like you mean it. Looks like you need to be reminded why.” He takes my hand, guides it down between his legs, and wraps my fingers around his swelling cock. “I don’t think enough people saw us tonight. Should’ve gone out on the balcony, bent you the banister, and let your screams blow into the streets.”

“You’re insane! I’m not doing anything worse than what we’ve already done.”

“No? Guess you’ll be seeing less of this, then.” He pushes his huge, hard erection through my hand, forcing me to remember how good he feels inside me.

“No more teasing, Silas.” I let go, drop back on the bed, and spread my legs. “A Prince just takes what he wants, doesn’t he?”

“A Prince takes a lot of things,” he growls, rolling on top of me, holding that angry, irresistible hard-on against my opening.

Damn! My body aches to tell him I already have an IUD – something I had put in by the college clinic about two years ago, waiting for Mister Perfect. It’s been collecting rust until this past week, when I lost my sanity and my virginity to the cocky, hulking, panty ripping rogue between my legs, kissing his way between my breasts.

“This pussy, love, I’m fucking hooked.” He stops between my legs, pushing his face in, running his tongue between my folds before he pulls up. “Can’t wait to pump my seed straight up you when I’m coming like no tomorrow. I want you leaking me for hours. Only improvement possible for this pussy.”

Royal. Asshole.

If he's going to keep teasing me, then I'll leave him one more thing to discover. I'm not quite ready to ride bareback with Silas unless he's going to start fucking me properly, without this torture disguised as foreplay.

Of course, that's an idle threat. I *love* this torture. Love it so much it's frightening.

His tongue teases my clit until my legs part. Then he holds my thighs, spreading my legs wider, placing them on his shoulders. The pompous bastard makes me bite my lip while I'm waiting for him to sink in.

He reaches behind him, producing a condom from fucking nowhere, ripping the foil with his teeth. My eyes betray me, staring as he rolls it onto his huge length, giving his cock one last pump with his fist. It throbs like mad.

I'm not going to beg, I promise myself. I don't care how good it feels, how much I want you.

I'm NOT begging, god damn it.

His eyes narrow, watching me twitch and writhe beneath him. He rubs the tip of his cock against my clit, before he lets me have an inch.

"No, no more teasing. Silas – please!"

Fuck me. I give up. My body's begging, so who cares if my mouth does, too?

"Please what?"

"I need this. I need you. Please, just fuck me."

I need this to be more than just pretend, my racing mind reminds me. I don't dare say that part out loud.

"Why didn't you say so?" He sinks into me with a smile, and I'm clutching the sheets, desperately bucking my hips against the cock inside me. "Since you asked so nicely, we'll do it your way, love. No more teasing tonight. You'll pay me back later."

"Later? What's later?" I ask.

He answers me with a thrust, preventing me from calling him all the names on the tip of my tongue. “You’ll see, Princess. You’ll find out very fucking soon.”

I’ve had it up to *here* with his strange, cryptic bullshit. But I’m also too busy having him, every glorious inch, and I can’t bring myself to care.

He fucks me until I’m screaming myself breathless, slipping into the zone. Here, we’re alone with our pleasure.

Our worries, our tensions, they all melt away. There’s just Prince Silas Bearington the Royal Fucker and that imperial dick of his, the one that’s bringing me off for what feels like the hundredth time tonight.

Right before I’m about to go over, he grabs me, jerks me onto his lap, and rolls underneath me.

I’m suddenly on top, and he’s moving my hips, pulling my ass up and down in his hands. He wants me to fuck him, to keep the rhythm. Whenever I slow down, he gives me a sharp swat on the butt, like he’s breaking in a pet.

Or another servant.

Fuck you, I want to say.

Fuck you and your overgrown, pussy wetting dick.

Fuck you for making me your wife.

Fuck you for making me want it, and for wanting more.

I’m speechless, lost in my thoughts, and about to come.

Those explosive things I want to tell him? Too fucking bad.

There are no words when I’m riding him like this, letting his pubic bone grind against my clit. He takes my hips, pulls me against him harder. There’s no hope of escaping this leverage, this manic thrusting.

Silas bears his teeth, tenses up, and I know he’s about to come. “Fuck, love. You feel so goddamned good. Come for me again! Come with me.”

It's not a suggestion. It's a command, and I'm completely helpless, especially when his cock balloons and the heat surges through his condom.

“Silas!” *Coming!*

“Erin! Fuck!”

We cry out together. Surrendering to the sweat, the sweetness, and the lightning thrashing through our bodies.

I'm coming so hard on his cock I nearly pass out. Ecstasy blurs to bliss.

Then he's pulling me to his chest, while I gather my breath. Holding me, kissing me, showing me there's a tenderness behind all the arrogant master crap I'm becoming a sucker for.

“Seriously, what did you mean by ‘paying you back later?’” I ask him again, now that I can actually think straight. “What are you planning?”

“I don't joke, and I don't ruin promises, Princess. And no, that's not more teasing. I'm a man of my word. I'm –“

“The most upright, honorable, and fucking ridiculous man in the world.” I stick my tongue out, giving him a perfect opening to kiss me again. He takes it.

“You forgot biggest dick in there, babe,” he says, stopping my little fist in mid-air when I try to punch him. “You manage to hit me, and there's going to be teasing. A fuck of a lot more.”

I let go, collapsing against his chest.

The bastard wins. There's no way I'm going to risk more delicious agony tonight, even if I'm dying to know exactly what the hell he's putting together in his devious head.



“LOOK, peach, I've been doing a lot of thinking,” dad says over the phone the next day. “Maybe this is good for you. God knows I've made my mistakes with women. Live and learn, I'd say, like everyone has to. Just as long as you're avoiding your old man's mistakes.”

I'm standing in the royal gardens, amazed that he's doing this strange about-face on me and Silas. It also worries me.

This better not be his way of making peace before his health takes a turn for the worse.

"It's no mistake, daddy. Silas is a wonderful man. He loves me. He cares about me."

The last part is becoming more true by the day, at least. Too bad that makes me want to believe the big, bad L-word might not be a total lie we're fabricating to save a crown.

"I'm sure he does," dad says grudgingly. "It's your life, Erin. If you want to hang up the journalism plan and become a Princess, who am I to say it's not the right thing? Jesus, I never thought I'd say those words."

That makes me smile. I'm walking over a tiny bridge lined with rocks, cherry blossoms, and little stone statues of frogs and birds. It's very zen, like they had a piece of Japan airlifted halfway around the world to the palace. For all I know, that's what they actually did.

Dad isn't kidding about the strange absurdity hanging over us. Silas is a Prince – I have to keep reminding myself – part of the blue bloods with so much money nothing is off limits. Ever.

"Who says I can't do both?" I tell him. "I don't think you have to shut down and disappear as soon as there's a title in front of your name. Silas was just telling me about his cousin the other day, the Duchess of Southshore. You'd know her face if you saw her. She's been partnered up with fitness guys and New Age gurus for years, helping push health, her passion."

"Your first responsibility is always going to be to that country," dad says. "Don't have to tell you things work different in Europe than they do in the States, peach. Marrying that man means taking on a hell of an obligation – maybe one that prevents you from doing a lot of what you want."

"I know exactly what I'm getting into," I snap, forgetting the fact that I barely have a clue. "Well, the wedding's coming up in about a month. I won't be talked out of it. And, daddy, if

you're feeling up to traveling, I'd really love to have you there."

I shouldn't say it, stifling the tremor in my voice, but I do. It's official. I'm inviting my father to my fake marriage with a man who's little more than a fuck buddy with royal blood. A man who's already said he's going to let go at some point, leaving me with these insane memories, along with more money than I can imagine.

"You're right. It's not my place to tell you anything. You're a grown woman, and you can do what you want."

"Exactly. So, maybe I won't be trotting around the globe interviewing celebrities and Presidents like you, daddy. But someday, I'm going to publish an amazing book."

"Yeah, you will." I can practically hear him smiling over the phone, warming my heart.

I have to know how he's really doing. This kind of surrender, acceptance, tolerance just isn't like him.

"How's the treatment, anyway?" I ask. "Have they done more tests since your last round of chemo?"

"It's...inconclusive," he says, choosing his words carefully. "Doesn't mean anything bad. They don't have a lot of experience with what I've got. It's the Big C, yeah, but they all behave a little differently, from what I understand. I'll know more next week."

Next week. It feels like an eternity to me, waiting to find out if he's sitting on a death sentence or not. I can't even imagine what it's like for him, and my stomach twists in knots, weighed down with guilt. I regret being so bitchy about Silas just a minute ago.

"You're going to be *fine*, daddy. You have to believe that. Positive thinking..."

"Peach, with you and Prince Charming pumping the finest drugs money can buy into my veins, I'm bringing the fight. I won't go down without swinging back as hard as I can. Whatever happens, it's been a good life. I'm always going to worry about you, Erin, because you're my daughter. But I'm

not worried about you doing the right thing anymore. You've got your head screwed tight and your heart in the right place. I did a good job with that, whatever other mistakes I've made."

"You did." The way he's talking makes me want to cry.

I sit down on a small bamboo bench by the stream, staring through the dense trees, wondering how hot the sun feels on the other side of the world in Mexico.

"I've got another appointment in about ten minutes, so I'd better go. Love you, darling. Always have, always will, and always gonna be –"

"I know, I know," I cut in, finishing the phrase he's said to me since I was as little girl for him. "My daddy."

"Damned straight." My phone goes quiet.

I lower it to my lap, brushing the tears from my eyes. The furious lion that's always been a fixture in the media has turned into a gentle giant. I'm touched and scared for him just the same, and I spend the next few minutes enveloped in my thoughts, a thousand chances at life and death rolling by like clouds taking shape.

"What the hell happened?" I hear Silas growl it before I look up, feeling his protective hand on my shoulder.

"It's nothing," I lie. "Just worried about my father. We talked. He's doing okay – or so he says – but he doesn't do details. It's almost like he knows he won't be around much longer."

Silas sits next to me, putting his arm around my shoulder, and pulls me in tight. "People change when they're face-to-face with death, love. He's going to make it – none of those doctors would dare to let me down after all the money they've gotten for their research."

"I don't know that cancer cares about your generosity, Your Highness," I say, more sarcastically than I really need to.

I hate it when I'm sad.

I'm the kind of girl who wraps herself up in barbed wire to hide the pain. Anybody coming too close *will* get pricked, and

bleed with me.

“No, but the small army I’ve got working on it are better than any disease. I’ve always been careful with who I fund. Nobody gets a penny unless they’re the best of the best. Mom taught me that lesson.”

He squeezes my hand. I look at him slowly, the bitterness fading.

Different doesn’t begin to describe the worlds we’re from, but here, we’re a lot more alike than we should be. His mother, the kingdom’s beloved Princess for twenty years, already had her fight with the same thing hammering my dad. She lost hers when he was just a boy.

“I’m sorry,” I say, lacing my fingers through his. “I forgot, you’ve been through all this before...”

“Not quite. Mom’s fight was hopeless. The technology wasn’t as good, and she held off too long on treatment. The woman stopped caring about her health after the cheating started. My goddamned father, she never got over it...losing his heart, and his loyalty. Watching him ruin himself on women half his age. Pissing away his life, until the ocean put him out of his misery for good.”

I stare at him, not saying much, dragging my heel through the gravel underneath us. “I can’t imagine what it’s like, losing both parents. I barely talk to mom. She hasn’t wanted much to do with either of us since the divorce. She’s all work, spending her days and nights at the law firm in New York. Maybe she’s trying to forget the life she used to have, including me. It’s like addiction comes naturally to people trying to run from something. Like your dad, maybe.”

Silas snorts, lifting my hand to his mouth. He stops to kiss the back of my hand before he says anything. Heat blooms inside me, hot and red and wanting.

I still can’t figure out how this man is so damned good at turning me on with nothing more than the slightest kiss.

“My father never saw past pussy and drink. Although I’ve inherited his knack for getting panties wet, I’d like to think

I'm more than just another player."

Right now, he's *all* player, and he's won the game. I'm burning up by the time his fingers trace through my hair, and he pulls my face to his, smothering me in another fiery trademark kiss.

"Let's forget all this shit. It's too beautiful a day to dwell on it," he says, gesturing to the green vastness on the path I haven't even explored. "You haven't seen all the gardens yet, have you?"

I shake my head. "No. I might need a tour guide for that, I'm afraid."

"At your service," he stands up and does an exaggerated bow.

It's so ridiculous coming from a real life Prince, especially one as arrogant as Silas, that I burst out laughing. "I don't know if I can handle more of that on the trail."

"Deeply sorry, love, I'm afraid I'm your only choice today," he says, doing his very best to imitate Victor's prim and proper style. "These gardens go on for at least a thousand acres, so you're not going alone. And I'm not turning you over to fuck the gardener."

Sticking out my tongue, I slap his chest. "Like I would ever do that!"

"I don't know, love. I think I've created a monster when I took you to bed. We both know you need it morning, noon, and night."

There's Prince Asshole again, jerking me to his chest, guiding me into his next kiss. Everything says I should fight like hell to push him away, but I don't when I feel him, taste him, lose myself in his infuriating lips.

If this thing is a fairy tale, then it's the most twisted, incredible story a girl can live.



WE'RE deep in the gardens, talking about everything and nothing at all. I find out things about Silas I never imagined.

He got suspended from the most prestigious prep school in Europe for sneaking in his childhood bulldog. The animal went on a rampage, chewing up several priceless books in the school library after getting spooked by a violin practice next door.

He likes his coffee strong and black. The only way it should be after a late night with too many drinks.

He remembers the war. Afghanistan follows him, especially when he sneaks away to the royal military cemetery once a year. Always on some dark, cold, rainy day when people hold their umbrellas low, reducing the chances he'll ever be recognized.

He isn't shy about his big, beautiful cock. Well, I knew that before, but he's still stroking his...ego.

At least he says I'm the finest, hottest pussy he's ever had wrapped around it.

I roll my eyes and laugh at his latest crude jests. They do their job, though, making me uncomfortably hot and wet. I'm grateful for the humid, lush forest surrounding us on every side. It's the only thing that distracts me, helps me keep my hands off his big, solid body.

"Since we're playing a thousand questions, there's something I'd like to know," I tell him, holding his hand while we go over yet another beautiful stone bridge that's at least a century old. "What happened with Serena? What's her deal?"

His face darkens. "I made a big fucking mistake with that one. Put my dick somewhere it never should've gone last summer. She hasn't gotten over it."

"Did you lead her on?" I look at him, point blank.

"Hell no. Truthfully, the bitch is psychotic or painfully desperate. Maybe both." He shakes his head so adamantly I have to believe him. "I never promised her a damned thing. She let her Princess fantasies get to her, like some women do. They suck me, fuck me, think it means they're going to wear the royal ring and have Sunday dinners with grandmom. The other girls were easy to brush off. Serena, not so much,

because she's too good at her job. I don't want to send her packing unless she crosses the line."

She already has with me. Several times. I keep my thoughts to myself, knowing it isn't my place to decide who he keeps as press secretary.

"You can't take back what happened. I get that."

"Yeah, and we don't need to dwell on it, love. I've taken the liberty of chatting with the bitch myself so you don't have to. We're set for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? What's happening then?"

"Our second appearance in public." He tightens his hold on my hand when I look at him, my eyes going huge. "We've got ourselves a royal parade scheduled. Show of power, really, to remind the Republic assholes who's still boss. We're going out for a ride with tight security. There'll also be several dignitaries present, paying their respects to Her Majesty while she's ill."

My chest tightens. I have to hold my hand across my breast. Silas stops when I do, his head cocked, wondering what's wrong.

"You're sure it's safe? It seems so soon, riding out into crowds like that, after what happened at the palace."

I took too many history classes for my own good at college. I'm having brutal flashes of JFK and Arch Duke Ferdinand, both cut down in their prime with their Princesses riding next to them.

"The rabble rousers don't have the balls to do anything except sneer at us from the sidelines with their signs and banners. I've been through this half a dozen times over the years, love. I promise it's safe. Trust me."

He reaches for my hand. I hesitate for several seconds before I let my fingers wind around his. Reassured, for now.

Maybe he's right. Publicity is half of what I signed up for when I agreed to this marriage. I can't be scared.

“Okay. I’ll do my best. Will they expect us to speak again?”

“A few words from me in front of the cameras, maybe,” he says. “Not like before. This isn’t an announcement. We’re there for eye candy, moving through the streets like living ornaments. We’ll meet some dignitaries at the end of it, but whatever comes after with them will be said behind closed doors. Most of the people love us. We’ll make the world see a couple thousand smiling faces, and just a few angry pricks. Believe me, if anything gets out of line, they won’t get far with the extra agents stationed in the crowd.”

I hope you’re right. I hold my tongue, thinking it, without saying anything.

“I haven’t gotten a tour of the capital yet. Good way to do that, I suppose,” I say.

“It’s gorgeous. Lucky for you, I’ll also be giving you that surprise tomorrow morning.”

Oh, God. I’d almost forgotten it. Now, I can’t think of anything else with the sly, mischievous glint beading in his deep blue eyes.

“Tell me, Silas. I don’t like surprises.”

“You’ll love this one. Small disclaimer, I’m not responsible if you accidentally come your brains out.”

I don’t even have time to gasp, or hit him with a dozen questions. He takes my hand by the wrist and pulls me along, further along the path into the gardens. Deeper into this craziness and mystery, wondering how I’m going to survive.

PUBLIC EYE (SILAS)

It takes everything I've got not to smile when she opens the platinum box. It's morning, we're due in the car in about an hour, and my Princess is looking at an egg shaped remote-control vibrator custom designed for her pussy.

Her fingers tremble a little when she picks it up. She's eyeballing it like I just presented her with a stick of dynamite.

Hell, maybe I have. My cock certainly feels like it's going to explode in my pants while I'm watching her grasp it, hold it up, and turn that shocked little look on her face into total horror.

"I'm *not* using this in public. You're out of your fucking mind, Silas."

"Yeah? Then why are you holding it like you're already in love?" I smile, sit down on the bed next to her, and put my hand over hers. Our fingers both close around the cool, sterile gold, made to get her hotter than an incoming meteor when I crank it to high.

"No, just – no!" She says it again, shaking her sweet head, desperately trying to push my hand away with the device in it.

I don't let her. "Take a chance on it, love. Let yourself have a little excitement. I saw how nervous you looked yesterday, in the gardens, when I mentioned our outing. Believe me, with this thing in, you'll be too busy coming to think about all the eyes on you."

“Bad idea! All of it.” She manages to wrestle out of my grasp, jumping up, pacing around the bedroom. “It really shouldn’t surprise me what a crude psycho you can be, but for some reason it does.”

I clench the small metal object harder in my hand. Can’t stop thinking about it wedged in her sweet cunt, shaking between her legs, making her soak everything she’s wearing underneath that fancy formal dress.

It’s thinner and more modern than the one she had to wear to meet grandmom. Perfect for hiding what I’m doing to her from everybody with a camera, while it shows me everything.

“Look, if you’re dead set against it, I won’t make you,” I say, standing up.

“Like you could!” Erin sticks her tongue out.

Ah, a challenge. *Fuck me.*

My hand twitches for another reason. I want to spank that ass raw. For a split second, I think about pulling out my phone, calling Vic, and canceling the whole event.

Unfortunately, the interests of the kingdom and my ten inch cock are often quite different. I swear I can hear the world’s smallest violin playing a sad song.

“Babe, take it.” I step up, pushing it into her hand. I’ll risk her throwing it through the wall, or maybe at my head. “Go. Finish getting dressed. I’ll let you decide whether you want to slip that thing in, or leave it on the bathroom counter.”

Her cheeks glow rosy. It’s a conflicted, reddish flush spreading across her face when she stares at the filthy toy in her hand before she looks up at me, her brows furrowed.

“I can’t believe you’re thinking about sex again on the day we have a second chance to get this right.”

“Funny. I can’t believe you think I’d rather be thinking about anything else. Especially when you’re folding your arms, pushing your tits in my face, reminding me that I want to shred that fucking dress and have you against the wall.”

My dick's doing the talking now. As usual, I'm at a loss to shut him up.

"I have to get ready," she says, briskly spinning around.

As soon as the bathroom door closes, I let myself smile. I'd bet my whole fortune she's wetter than she wants to be.

What are the odds I won't see my gift abandoned on the counter if I look in there before we head out?

I'm still crunching the numbers in my head, trying to distract my rampaging cock, when she finally steps out. The ladies assigned to help her dress this morning are gone at my orders, and I'm relieved to see she can handle the entire outfit herself.

Wait, handle it? No, she looks good. Sexy. Divine.

Good enough to eat my fill. My cock aches in tune with my lips, hungry to get her naked, spread her legs, and lick her hard and deep. I want to make this girl squirt on my face, and taste her own cream on my lips when I fuck her senseless.

"Well? How do I look?" she says, a husky edge in her voice that isn't helping me calm down.

"Like a Princess should," I say, standing.

She smiles, calling me to walk on over and embrace her. There's a knock at our door just then.

"Your Highness, the men are performing the last security check on the motorcade. Everything's ready, at your convenience."

"Thanks. We'll be out in just a minute."

Not enough time to satisfy my evil desires. Just enough to kiss her, grab her ass, and realize there's one more thing I have to do before we leave.

"Go on, love. I'll be out in just a second. Need to make a quick pit stop."

I head for the bathroom. While I'm there, I let my eyes wander to the counter.

No sign of anything there. I'm washing my hands while I let my foot slide to the pedal on the small steel trashcan.

The lid lifts up, and I see the hottest thing in my life after Erin's naked skin.

Nothing. It's empty, which means...fuck.

Fuck yes.

The small, secret remote I've got concealed in my pocket burns like my pistol used to in Afghanistan.

Today just got a lot more exciting, and it's got nothing to do with playing head of state.



"HERE WE GO," I say, grabbing her hand as the car slowly rolls forward, perfectly positioned between two jet black SUVs with flashing lights.

She looks at me and smiles. Bashful. She knows that I know what's in her pussy by now, but she doesn't have a clue my words have double meaning.

Here we go, princess. Here we fucking go, and we're not stopping until you've come so hard you won't walk straight.

My thumb burns like mad, hovering over the little wheel that controls the intensity of the earthquake she's about to feel. I've already turned it on, as soon as Victor gave me the thirty second countdown, before our convertible started moving.

He's in the passenger seat next to our driver, eyes roaming like a sheepdog, making sure every little detail goes according to plan. He won't have a spare second to notice what's happening to my Princess in the back seat, next to me.

Seeing the city center with throngs of bystanders is nothing new. Having a woman riding next to me while I own everything that happens between her legs for the next hour or two is.

My finger nudges the switch. Erin's eyelids flutter, and she leans back in her seat, not even noticing the rows of people waving hysterically all around us. We're into the thick of it

now. Christ, there must be thousands, all of them here to show their support for the royal family.

The speakers across the city start blasting *King of All Things*. My dick throbs to the heavy drumbeats and clashing cymbals like it's saluting the kingdom's anthem.

"You doing all right, love?" I ask, grasping her hand.

She barely nods. My signal to crank the power higher.

"Oh, God." I can't hear her over the crowd screaming, but I know it's the only thing on her lips when they open up, form a perfect ring, and tell me I'm bringing her O closer.

I have to look away for a few seconds before I shoot off in my pants. Besides, the cameras are rolling. I sit up as tall as I can in the seat, waving to the people, giving them my very best princely salute.

I've watched my grandmom and my great grandfather do it a thousand times in old movies. My hand moves up and waves, every movement carefully choreographed. The people lining the streets swoon with the prince and future king so close.

Men and women alike. I think some of the girls are about to faint, visibly leaning into their friends and husbands for support when I flash them my smile.

It's boring. The only woman I want to see losing her mind is already next to me, ready to go over the edge as soon as I twist the dial higher.

And I do.

"Silas – oh!" I read her lips again. She's leaning back in her seat now, her hips squirming like mad.

Can't resist putting my hand on her thigh and squeezing it hard. I stare her down in between smiling at the crowd, throttling the controls back. Just enough to leave her on the precipice.

"You don't come until I say you do," I growl, leaning over to whisper in her ear.

She looks at me like she wants to sink a knife in my throat. Smiling, I suppress a laugh, wondering what the media jackasses are capturing right now through their lenses. The video online later ought to be *very* interesting.

We turn the corner, circling the next street, rolling down another double row of people screaming at us like we're rock stars about to bang out their favorite tune.

Everyone except one asshole, anyway.

A big, surly bastard in a trench coat rushes my car, hate twisted on his face. Secret service acts fast. I see them throw the fucker down on the pavement, a boot pressed firmly in his back. His sign slips out of his hands and hits the curb, right-side up.

NO MORE GREED.

NO MORE LIES.

NO MORE KING.

I don't even bat an eye at the ridiculous slogans written there in thick black ink. I turn to Erin, wondering if he scared her, but she's in another world. She's balls deep in pleasure, lost there so deeply she's forgotten what pain and fear mean.

She's simply gorgeous. I pause, taking a good, long look, before I decide how I'm going to bring her off for good. Squirming, bucking her hips shallowly in her seat, desperately trying to milk the last burst of pleasure in the toy that sends her over the edge.

"What did I tell you, Princess? Can you hear me?" I say softly, placing my hand over hers.

"You're killing me. Please, Silas. *Please.*"

"Please what?" I smile, wondering how filthy and crazy she can get when she really wants it.

"I'm not going to...I can't fucking say it. God, you're a bastard!"

Guilty as charged. My thumb slides across the little wheel in my pocket, but only for a split second, teasing with such

sharp vibrations I'm sure she can feel it in her clit.

My dick leaks more pre-come in my pants. I hope like hell there isn't an improved press conference after this. The entire kingdom is going to see my hard-on if I don't get a chance to fuck her first.

"Sire, Mister Nelson from the Daily Eagle is just ahead," Vic cuts in. "We'll do our very best not to let him get too close, but you know how aggressive he can be."

Yeah, I do. The motherfucker ambushed me last year in my own nightclub, dancing with no less than Serena when I was drunk off my ass. The rumors that hit the press the next day didn't help me, or my secretary's ridiculous crush.

"Let him come up," I tell my chief.

"Your Highness?" He looks behind him in the seat, both his eyebrows raised.

"You heard me. We have nothing to hide."

Slowly, he turns back around, and whispers something into the radio to security. Perfect timing. I see Nelson's giddy, goateed face staring from the curb. The idiot steps out onto the asphalt with two assistants, all their cameras flashing.

That's when I throw my arm around Erin, pull her close, and smash my lips down on hers.

Sometimes, the only way to tame a tiger is to give the damned thing its red meat. I'm giving him exactly what he wants – the photo of a lifetime. Serving up huge, juicy steaks with this kiss, so hot and sudden I think we're going to set our custom made Rolls-Royce convertible on fire.

Her sweet, dark eyes are narrow. Lids half shut. Begging.

Not yet, beautiful, I tell her with my kiss. You don't get it unless I see how bad you want it.

Show me.

Her desperation tastes incredible. When I try to break the kiss so I can smile to my subjects some more, she doesn't let

me. Erin throws her little hands around my neck, digs her nails into my skin, and bites my lower lip.

Fuck, doesn't she know I'm going to bite back harder? We're practically stripping off our clothes and fucking in the seat before it's over. I wonder if I can shut down the bullet shoved inside her, make her come with just my kiss.

It's goddamned tempting, if only it wouldn't ruin all the fun.

I have to break the kiss. *Have to*, before I roll around, push between her legs, and take her in broad daylight in front of several million people.

I've always had a bit of an exhibitionist streak, certainly, but even I'm not that big a freak.

I'm winded when I break away, settling reluctantly back into my seat.

My tension has nothing on hers, though. Erin has her eyes pinched shut, gently bobbing her hips, after the leverage she needs for sweet release.

My heart starts pounding. The car rolls on, reminding me I'm the sole heir to an entire kingdom someday. Lesser men would swell up and prance like peacocks at the prospect.

Not me. With Erin on the brink of coming next to me, it's nothing.

I'm not after power over anyone except her, and her next O. My fingertip burns against the remote, stuffed into my pocket, while I look back across the crowd and wave with my very best.

A few more Republic First disruptors go down when they come for the motorcade, tackled by my boys. A couple thousand more people get my smile, my wink, my grey gloved hand waving their way with grace and reassurance.

I don't have the soft, motherly air Her Majesty brings. But I can tell the people I won't let them down. They're safe, happy, and prosperous with me, whatever the media jackals and the protesters say.

“Sire, the King Winston bridge is coming up next. Several ministers there from the EU, China, and India are waiting. They’re scheduled to meet you after the parade, as planned, and we’ve given them one of the best spots in the city to observe your arrival.”

“Of course. Wonderful work, Victor.” I see him glowing in the rear view mirror.

That pride’s starting to rub off on me, but not because I give a damn about the old, robotic diplomats waiting to shake my royal hand. Slowly, I turn to Erin, a smile creeping across my lips when I see the sweat building on her brow.

She’s dying to come. Lucky her, I’m finally going to make it happen, just as soon as the dignitaries are in sight.

I slide across the seat, coiling one hand around her shoulder. “I’m going to kiss you, love, and you’re going to give it up. *All* of it.”

“Silas, God yes...please.”

Please. Fuck, now she’s showing me.

Holy shit. Her big brown eyes are huge, pleading, completely mine. She’s still begging, and I’m worried I’m going to lose it in my trousers when I bring her off like I promised it.

Fuck it. My free hand slips into my pocket while the other tightens on her shoulder, squeezing her so hard it should hurt ever-so-slightly. I clench my jaw, rolling my thumb against the wheel, just as I see the tall, shadowy figures of men and women in fine suits standing on the huge stone bridge.

“You can’t look at me like that, Princess,” I whisper, hearing a moan slip out her mouth. “You keep that up, you’re going to make me fall in love. Don’t, for both our sakes. I don’t know how to deal in hearts – only in the best fucking sex you’ll ever have in your life.”

I’m sweating like mad, saying shit I know I shouldn’t. Don’t know whether it’s my slip up or my finger gliding across the wheel that sends her into heaven. The wheel cranks as far as it can, making me think I can hear the little toy

vibrating inside her when we pass through a quiet break in the crowd.

“Oh. My. God...Fuck!” Those are the only four words I can make out when I feel her start shaking.

She clenches my suit, hangs on for dear life. She comes, harder than I’ve ever seen her explode. My head leans on hers, pushing her mouth to my wrist. I let her bite it so she won’t scream while the tsunami I’ve unleashed in her body sweeps her into another world.

“You’re bad for me, Princess,” I tell her, hoping my dick won’t rip through my trousers just watching this. “Look at you. Coming for me, coming like mad, soaking the fucking seat in front of all these ministers and ambassadors. I ought to pull you down on my throne, and spank your hot little ass until you scream.”

She squeals against my skin. Rocking in her seat, gushing underneath that dress, coming until she can’t even breathe.

It’s too much – for everyone. My dick barely holds onto the fire raging in my balls.

Vic clears his throat in the front seat, and the idea of being discovered back here throws cold water on my desire for a split second.

My eyes shift off the beautiful woman twitching next to me. He’s talking into his radio, not looking back at us in the mirror, thank fuck.

I don’t start turning down the intensity until she whimpers. Then my lips smash down on hers, sucking whatever pleasure I can from her mouth, awed by the burn of her teeth marks on my wrist.

What the hell is happening? Playing pretend isn’t supposed to be this wild.

It’s a fake engagement to a fake wife, and the f-word is sounding extra hollow the more it’s said.

Fake, fake, fake. Fuck.

Fake isn't supposed to bring my cock to the brink. Fake damned sure isn't supposed to make me admire every inch of her when she's buried in her orgasm. Fake definitely isn't kissable when she comes down from it, looks up at me, and sucks my eyes into hers with a single blink.

I'm starting to freak out, but I don't show it. I just kiss her harder, until she stops moving, and I make sure the remote is turned to off.

"Time to stop playing slut and do Princess again," I say, taking her hand as I sit back in my seat.

"Really? You haven't realized how talented I am yet?" Erin sticks her tongue out for a split second. "I was born to multi-task."

"Careful, babe. The cameras are watching every second."

Absurd advice, after I just gave her one of the best orgasms in her life on film, and we both know it. She looks at me, smiling, shaking her beautiful head.

"You're so ridiculous. Did you mean what you said about love?" Her tone turns more serious. "When we were in the heat of the moment, I mean..."

I don't know. I'm about to wiggle my way into some wishy-washy, half-assed escape when royal duty sweeps in to save me.

Our car stops. Erin's passenger door pops open, and I see her valet standing there, holding the door. "They're waiting next to the conference center, at your convenience, Your Highness."

She flashes me another quizzical look just before we slide out. I've bought myself some time, but she isn't going to let this go.

I never should've ran my mouth. Hell, I should've kept the strange thoughts and feelings from invading me, speaking their evil out loud.

Meeting these ministers and smiling pretty for the cameras might be the easiest thing I do all day. Who knew making this

woman come her brains out in the riskiest, hottest way ever would have such a steep price?

Her touch doesn't betray anything when I take her arm. About a dozen dignitaries stand at attention, waiting for us at the end of the bridge, next to the conference venue.

Most of them bow when we approach. The others shake hands. One big Russian diplomat I've met before lets his gaze linger on my wrist too long.

"I trust you're in...good health, Your Highness?"

I smile, slipping my hand into my pocket, hiding the reddish impressions Erin's little teeth have left in my skin. "Never better, Sergei. Too much rock climbing last week in the highlands."

He nods enthusiastically. "Da, da. They used to bring us to the Urals for training in the army. Amazing how the mountains look so beautiful, but cut so deep, no?"

"Yeah."

Yeah. He doesn't have a fucking clue.



SEVERAL HOURS of trade talks and a dinner fit for a Roman emperor later, we're back at the palace. I've passed the dignitaries off to the kingdom's trade ministers to iron out the fine print on several new agreements.

Technically, it isn't royalty's role to get involved in politics, or make any real decisions like this for the nation. In practice, we've been charming the best and brightest from all over the world to see things our way for at least a hundred years.

Erin hasn't said much since dinner. I saw her drinking lots of water, barely touching the champagne, which tells me the gift I gave her in the car practically sucked her soul out. Or at least half the water molecules in her sweet skin.

Best of all, I'm not done yet. Far from it.

Next time, we'll come together, and I'll banish this painful swelling between my legs that's been taunting me all evening.

“So, we’re staying here tonight? Not going back to the castle?”

I shake my head. “Not while I’m in charge. You slept like a baby in the chamber last night anyway, love.”

She doesn’t deny it. I can say the same thing, really, which is weird.

I haven’t felt so at home in the palace since my parents were still around. Before I was old enough to realize the picture perfect days they gave me as a boy were lies. Before those days became hellish nights where they fought late into the darkness, storming off to separate rooms when they were finally exhausted...

My old place at the castle has lost its charm, and it’s not just because I’m effectively head of state with grandmom in the hospital.

I think about my old club downstairs, the parties I hosted in the huge lounge, endlessly stocked with fine scotch and even finer women.

It doesn’t do shit for me. Something’s changed big time, because nothing does it anymore.

Nothing except getting Erin Warwick naked, sweaty, and moaning even touches my crank.

She pulls ahead of me, holding my hand, making her way to the big staircase that will take us up to our room. I stop her right there.

“Hold up. I have a detour in mind,” I say softly, taking her in the opposite direction.

My dick jerks. I’m crazy for doing this, but when will I get another chance?

I can’t ignore the fantasy I had in the car while I teased her pussy raw. Fucking her in the throne room, the holiest, most taboo place possible, where there’s always bound to be somebody around.

Except for tonight because I have an idea.

We walk quickly, and I guide her through the ancient passages, careful to avoid the places where I think the guards are likely to be on night patrol. Erin's eyes go wide when we're stopped, standing in front of the huge handcrafted door. Two honor guards come to attention and salute.

"At ease. I'd like to show my lady the throne room while there's some peace and quiet. We won't be long."

"Aye aye, Your Highness."

My greedy grip tightens on her hand. She knows what's coming – both of us, naked and grunting like animals while we fuck on gold and gemstones. Completely surrounded in the luxurious rapture that can't be duplicated anywhere else.

I won't get another chance like this for years, maybe decades. Her Majesty will be home soon. If the day comes when I'm King, there will always be someone posted inside, waiting for my royal ass to get parked in the seat and take care of business.

It's the first time I've been inside it by myself since I was a kid. I look around, letting out the slightest whistle when the huge doors behind us slam shut.

The fire isn't even lit. I have to walk over to the fireplace myself and start the gas.

There's no Patricia, no Victor, no foreign emissary in shock and awe from standing in front of the richest royal family in the world.

There's nobody. Just the ghosts of everybody who ever wore this crown, probably staring in horror at what I'm about to do. Maybe a few of my ancestors from the middle ages are cheering me on – the old Kings were notorious bastards, scoundrels who'd fuck the finest woman in every village in between their dirty orgies.

"So, why are we here?" She says nervously. Like she doesn't already know.

I turn, taking her into my arms, pressing my lips to hers for a good, long minute. "We're here tonight because of what I said in the car."

Staring, she cocks her head. It's adorable, and it really fucking shouldn't be.

I let out a long sigh. "Look, love, I've never been great with words. Actions mean more. If a man can't show you what he means, what good is he?"

I take her hand, lead her over to the huge golden chair in the center. My butt hasn't touched the ridiculously comfy burgundy cushion since I was twelve years old, but now it does.

I sink down, feeling lightning roll up my back, pulling Erin onto my lap. My hands roam her curves, doing circles on her thighs, resisting the urge to rip right through that dress she has on.

"You can't be serious!" she whispers sharply. "Silas, of all the things you've done, *this* is too much. We can't get caught – I can't. You're not telling me anything. Why are we here?"

"Like you don't already know, love. I haven't been in this room informally for years," I say, quickening my circles on her legs. Her thighs shift open, and my cock pulses again. "I was a little shit in my early teens."

"You? Never." She rolls her eyes, pushing playfully against my chest.

I catch her wrists with my free hands. Pulling her closer, we kiss before I continue my story. I'm not sure where the hell it's going, considering the blood rushing to my temples, making me hear the heartbeat that's pounding in my balls.

It's hard to think about anything except how bad I want my cock in my Princess.

"I snuck down here with a smoke bomb when I was a kid. Thought I'd throw it in the fireplace and let the white smoke roll out the palace chimney, get it thick over the city, in mom's memory. It was about a year after she died. Got the idea from watching the Pope being elected, watching the white smoke roll out the Vatican. That fucking counselor they hired, I wouldn't tell him anything. Words wouldn't help me then, and neither would any shrink. Thought I could remind myself and

remind the country she isn't really gone, as long as we remember.”

She blinks raw emotion. “That’s a little more touching than I expected. So, what happened?”

“It was the wrong kind of smoke bomb. The damned thing detonated in the fireplace and blew the glass doors to hell. Guards rushed in, thinking it was a terrorist. I never heard the end of it from dad, my nanny, and the prick who kept hounding me to talk through my feelings.”

“That prick might’ve been right,” she says, moving a finger up my chest. “You can drop the asshole act sometimes, Your Highness. I know there’s more to you now than what they show in the tabloids.”

“Yeah, you’d better, after we’ve been more than skin deep.” My hands go straight to her ass underneath that dress, squeezing.

Christ, she looks like an angel. She’s soft, smiling, and teasing me the way my cock loves.

“With some things, words aren’t enough. What good does it do to tell you I’m deadly, crazy serious about all that crap I said in the car? That it wasn’t just my dick doing the talking?”

Her eyes are huge now. I hug her tighter, dragging her fully into me on the throne, until our foreheads are as close as our lips.

“It’s getting real between us, Erin. So goddamned real it’s the only thing I taste, think, and feel when I’m able to. Or, hell, maybe when I’m supposed to be paying attention to everything else that comes with being heir to this throne.”

“Silas...”

My name comes out in such a low whisper, I wonder if she knows what the hell to say. I don’t give us a chance to find out. I reach up, press my finger snug over her lips, and keep on speaking.

“I know what you are. You’re a walking, talking, cock-teasing risk, Princess. The biggest one I’ve ever wanted in my

life. I could waste the next few hours telling you all about my feelings. Or, we can do it my way, and I can show you just how far I'm willing to go. Don't know yet if your pussy's magic, or what, but I know I can't let it go. I won't. Not for fucking anything."

Show me. Her eyes are screaming for it, begging with the same intensity they did in the car when I teased her to the edge of her O.

I'm going to push her right off that cliff a few more times tonight.

My finger drops away and my hand goes behind her head. We kiss in sweet, sexy silence, filling the void with passion.

A woman shouldn't taste this good. I can't get that honey richness out of my mouth when my lips own hers again and again.

My other hand paws at her breasts, angrily tugging on the fabric, rolling her nipple through the layers. She leans back while I hold her. Moaning, struggling for breath, already grinding her hips on mine.

My dick's been denied all day, and he won't take a second more of this. Gently lifting her off my lap, I lower her onto her knees. She goes down like a good girl, reaching for my cock the instant I start working the zipper.

"Suck." It's one word, beautiful as it is filthy. "Suck me so dry I can't even see straight, Princess."

Cool air surrounds my free cock for about two seconds before it's bathed in her silky, intoxicating warmth. Scotch on an empty stomach wouldn't hit my brain half as hard as this.

I'm grunting, clenching the arms of the throne, while my swollen head disappears behind her lips. She's been paying attention during the last few times I've let her do it.

Her tongue teases me before moving in for the kill. Erin pulls me in, moaning on my length, bobbing her head up and down, until my balls are about to pop.

Faster. Hotter. More tongue swirls around my massive cock, focused on that sweet spot underneath my tip.

I can't help myself. My hips start moving ragged in her face, fucking her mouth as hard and deep as I can without hurting her.

She loves it. I can see her nipples through the dress, hard and pleading, aching for my mouth as much as my cock begs for hers.

“Jesus. Erin, baby, you're going to make me –“

I never get it out. She starts pumping my thick base with one hand, reaching up with the other to pull on my tie. It's so fucking hot and possessive I lose it on the spot, especially when she slams her face down on my dick, pulling me in halfway, teasing me with that glorious tongue.

Fuck!

Her pressure doubles when I start groaning. I'm leaning back in my family's throne, grinding my teeth like sandpaper. I'm coming.

Fire spits out my balls and my whole damned spine goes electric.

This was my idea, yeah, but I can't believe it's actually happening. I'm coming so hard I see stars for at least the next minute, watching my seed spill out her mouth. Her little hand catches the excess before it spills on her top, giving us away once we step outside.

It's so intense, so good. I jerk her up as soon as the wild spasms in my dick soften.

I'm not done yet. I have to fuck her again, right fucking now, or else I'm going to do something worse.

What's worse? Something outrageous, like saying the dreaded L-word.

Yeah, Prince Silas Bearington III is losing his mind, but he hasn't gone so batshit insane he's letting himself say *I love you* to a Princess who was just pretend a few weeks ago.

My hands tear at her furiously, helping her out of that dress. She's never looked more beautiful than she does now, naked before me, bathed in the golden glow reflecting on the amber walls.

"Tell me you're on something so we can fuck like we should."

"Yes. IUD. I've had it the whole time," she whispers.

Everything I need to hear. It's an invitation to her bare pussy. It's all I can tolerate as I jerk her up, tearing down my pants, bringing her on my cock.

My hard-on never fades. It needs more, it needs her, right fucking now, or else I'm going to start climbing the walls and swinging from the two hundred year old crystal chandelier above us.

She grabs the high seat of the throne behind me for leverage when I start pumping in and out. It's hell stopping ourselves from the moaning, the groaning, the screaming. The door looks like it's as thick as a vault, supposedly soundproof for royal happenings in here, but even I'm not crazy enough to test it, bellowing as loud as I can.

I grab her hair, wrap it around my hands, and pull those chestnut locks tight. I swallow every little noise leaving her mouth.

A dozen strokes in, she's coming. She's so hot, so responsive to every thrust inside her, it's like she was made for me.

A thought so ludicrous it turns me into a fucking maniac. Maybe a maniac fucking.

I don't know who I am or what I'm doing, buried in her to the hilt, moving her hips up and down my cock with a speed that defies gravity. Her gorgeous tits are flopping from my chest to my face each time she moves. My palm slaps her ass several times, forcing her on faster.

Faster, goddammit! I won't stop until we've blown out every circuit in our bodies. Not before we're drunk and stupid

and so sated on pleasure I'll have to request help just to carry us out.

I'm surprised I last as long as I do. All the stamina I've built up over the years is about half what it should be when I'm fucking this woman.

She's in the middle of her second climax, clutching my shoulders, tearing her lips off mine and arching her back, when magma churns in my balls. I can't stop it. Don't even fucking try.

"Keep coming, love. Keep coming on this dick that owns you, the one you've been waiting for your whole life. Come the fuck with me!"

Erin cries out, losing control, and so do I. I don't think about the noise or the guards or anything else.

I'm too busy shooting every damned drop up her bare, clenching pussy this time, pouring my royal seed in her womb.

I can't worry about anything outside us, except how fucking *right* this feels. I'm coming inside her, coming in my Princess, coming so rough I can't roar loudly enough to drown out the thunder roaring through my body.

Even when it's over, with my come pouring out of her, I don't pull out. My cock stays hard while the rest of me is spent. My arms hold her against my chest, one hand rifling through her hair. I need to touch it, smell it, bury my nose in it to bring myself back to earth.

"Silas...do you think they heard us?" She gestures to the door behind her, wiggling her ass, tempting me all over again.

"If they did, it was worth it. I don't give a damn if we end up on social media tomorrow with our bare asses hanging out in this room. That kind of sex is worth it. You're worth it, love."

Smiling, she looks at me with those irresistible brown eyes, and kisses me again. "I thought you were insane before."

"You don't anymore? Guess we're making serious progress."

“No,” she says, her cheeks flushing red. “I’m starting to understand. And I think...maybe...this could become more than pretend.”

So do I. I’ve confessed too much today to say it.

But she knows exactly what I mean when our lips connect for the thousand time, salty and sweet as ever. We fuck two more times before we finally clean ourselves up as best we can and step out.

I nod to the guards. They return my salute, staring ahead like statues, just as they’ve been trained.

We’re taking the stairs slowly, one by one, up to our room. The men back there don’t show any signs they’ve noticed anything. I hope they’ve heard us the entire time, as twisted as it is.

Sex like ours, in that room, is once in a lifetime. Fuck secrets.

What we have is so exquisite, it deserves witnesses.

ROYAL INTERRUPTION (ERIN)

I wonder if I died in that ridiculous royal parade, coming so hard I passed out and never woke up in the fancy car.

The last two weeks have been heaven. Fancy dinners, tours around the capital fit for a Queen, perfecting my royal smile in front of the tireless paparazzi cameras.

Then there's the sex.

Toe curling, gasping, sheet soaking bliss. Every day. Every night. Every time we're alone, or sometimes just barely.

Sex that shakes the bed, the shower, the stone bridge in the royal gardens. Anywhere and everywhere Silas decides to lay me down, taking down my panties with his teeth, claiming what's his.

It doesn't matter whether it's hours, or just a few minutes. I can't tell anymore who's more addicted to who, and I don't care.

Yesterday, on our way home from a royal military memorial, nobody knew I had the gold clamps on underneath my dress. Silas looked extra dashing with his formal uniform on, the purple rose and diamond crosses he'd earned in the war shining brilliantly.

The warrior Prince barely waited until we were in the nearest alley to conquer me. He held my hands by the wrists,

hiked up my dress, and fucked me as hard as he could, those tiny golden teeth digging into my breasts with every thrust.

It took the edge off the somber ceremony that came before. I notice he's drinking less, barely touching more than an evening scotch, or maybe a few glasses of wine with dinner.

I wasn't sure before, but now? It couldn't be more clear.

I'm his new addiction.

His escape.

His Princess – with more benefits by the day.

Today, he's away, visiting Her Majesty. I haven't seen Queen Marina since she returned to the palace, except for a brief glimpse when everyone lined up to see her. She's slower, a little more shaky than before, still on bed rest half her days.

But she's doing better again, and things are starting to feel as normal as a life of royalty, wealth, and power can be.

Her Majesty isn't the only one. My last few calls with dad were just like old times. He tells me he's in remission, so swiftly and suddenly he probably won't have to go under the knife again.

It's nothing short of a miracle.

I even talk to my mom, so busy with work she's been completely out of the loop about my impending marriage to a billionaire Prince. It's clear she doesn't care about my life either, muttering half-thought complaints about her latest cases and business deals while she types on her keyboard.

So, I don't bother to fill her in.

Let her find out when the wedding invitations hit the mail. Just a matter of weeks now.

"Madame, Miss Hastings will see you, at your convenience." Dean calls lightly through my door, gentle as ever.

"Thanks! I'm almost ready."

Ugh. Will I ever be? I don't really want to sit down alone with Serena, the bitch, and deal with her nasty attitude again.

Too bad she's still the sitting press secretary. I'd better get used to it, too, because this Princess thing means a woman needs a high tolerance for assholes.

We're going to have breakfast with the Queen next week, a halfway public affair that will have more cameras than usual covering it due to her health.

I can't screw this up. Meaning, I have to put my own feelings aside, and work with Silas' old crush to make sure I don't curtsy to Her Majesty at the wrong time, or accidentally walk in front of someone who should go through the next door ahead of me according to royal tradition.

There are a thousand and one mistakes waiting to be made in this position. However 'normal' this life feels, I'm very new to being a Princess. I won't even pretend I've figured it out yet.

As soon as I'm done, dressed in a nice business dress and a blouse, Dean takes me downstairs. My guards stop outside the same small press room Silas and I used before for our prep work to face the cameras.

Was it really only half a season ago? It's all come together so fast, and changed me in more ways than I can count.

The door shuts behind me. Serena sits at her desk with coffee, a tablet and a stack of papers on the small desk next to the ancient stained glass window. Brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows dance across her skin, making her look more evil than she already does.

"Oh, there you are," she says, flipping her hair back. Something about that not-quite-English accent sounds extra haughty coming from her.

She steps out behind my desk, gesturing to a chair, towering over me on her tall black heels. New heels. Like something she's bought just to rub her limited power in my face.

I sit down and muster up my best look that says *don't. I'm not taking this crap again.*

“Just tell me what I need to do so I don't screw this up,” I say, a small prayer that maybe we can get this over with quickly.

Serena sits on the edge of her desk and narrows her eyes. “Protocol, protocol, protocol. I'd say you should've been doing that from the very beginning, but I certainly can't control what Silas lets his women get away with.”

“Don't you mean His Highness?”

She purses her lips. “Sure. Anyhow, the Queen's tea service is always a very sensitive and traditional event. This one, more than ever, knowing what we do about her health. You, madame, are expected to be at the Prince's side the entire time. Smile and wave to the cameras. Don't, under any circumstances, talk to reporters. You know how nosy they can be, I'm sure, since that's the direction you were heading before you found your Prince.”

“I still am,” I say. My fists tighten on my lap when I see her give me a surprised look. “I'm going to be writing a book sometime after the wedding. All about my experiences, the beauty and kindness in this kingdom, falling in love with Silas.”

“Don't *you* mean His Highness?”

I blink at her angrily, wondering what the hell she means. As his fiancée, I'm not required to use the royal title. I'm sure of it. I looked it up weeks ago.

Serena tips her head back and laughs, tapping her heels like the evil witch she is. “That was a joke, dear. Lighten up. God, even in the backrooms, they say you come off so tense, so cold. The press wants another Lady Bearington to adore like Silas' poor mom. So far, you're coming dangerously close to falling flat.”

Falling flat? I'll show her *falling*, preferably by shoving the bitch off that desk if she doesn't shut her mouth...

“Oh, and you’re going to have to send your manuscript to me, as soon as you have it ready. I’ll go over it with Perkins, the palace’s lawyer, strictly to ensure you haven’t said anything that would cast the crown or the kingdom in a bad light.”

“You’re kidding, right? You make it sound like this isn’t a free country. I think I’m entitled to write whatever I want, so long as it isn’t libel. There’s no reason for me to insult anybody, much less my own husband and his family.”

“Nonsense. You’re entitled, dear, to writing anything you damned well please. What you’re not entitled to is publication, if the palace deems it’s going to be a problem. Still thinking like an American, I see. If you want to be a Princess, you’d better start acting like it, and thinking like one as well. That means leaving the free speech on demand crap on the side.”

I’ve had it. I stand up, look her in the eye, and let it roll.

“Why are you constantly so fucking insulting? What did I do to deserve this?”

She gives me a blank look. “We both know why, dear. You’re abandoning your dreams to take over mine. Marrying Prince Playboy, heir to the throne, in a country you know next to nothing about.”

“That isn’t true! I’m reading every damned day, when I’m not busy traveling, or talking to all the great people he introduces me to. I –“

“It isn’t my place to judge, or to alter anyone’s decisions. I’m here to whip you into shape so you don’t embarrass Her Majesty and cost this family its throne. Look, I’m being as open and honest with you as I can. There’s no sense in hiding it. I’m *trying* to get over him. Someday, I know I will, and then it’ll be all business.”

“Like it should be now? I should tell Silas myself.”

“Go ahead. He still reports to the Queen, as long as she’s breathing. He won’t get rid of me.” She smiles sweetly, a shark-like grin that makes me want to punch her stupid face. “The great thing about being in this position means I’m privy

to all kinds of dirt. Silas won't take the risk. Not when he's tying the knot, thinking about hanging up the partying, and becoming King in the next few years. Or is he? Maybe that's the latest load he's decided to feed you. He'll say anything and everything to charm you into having his way. Trust me, I know from experience..."

I don't say anything. I'm blindsided, wondering if I should interpret this as a threat. She isn't that crazy...is she?

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I meant *His Highness*. Is that better, my Lady?" Sarcasm drips off every word like poison.

"I need to go," I say, knowing it's true. I need to get the hell out of here before I do something I really regret, like risk a drag out fight.

It would be worth it just to put this asshole in her place, too. If only it weren't for the scratches and bruises I wouldn't be able to hide before the Queen's tea in a couple days.

"We aren't finished," Serena snaps, trying to lock me down with her pale blue eyes. "If you'll sit, my Lady, we can go over exactly what you should expect. I'll even do it without being a bitch. I am a professional, after all."

It takes every fiber of patience in my body to park myself back on that seat and stare at her. For the next half hour, she becomes another person.

She talks about the history, the pushy journalists to watch for, and the demeanor each person should have when they're enjoying this high royal honor. I actually listen, biting my tongue the entire time. It's easier because she lives up to her word.

She muzzles her inner bitch, and I gag mine. I wonder why she can't be like this all the time.

"Are we finished?" I say, when she stops talking and grabs the French press next to her, pouring more coffee into her china cup.

"For now. See, my Lady, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

“No. We might be able to make this work if you could hold that attitude a little more often.”

She kills my hopes with a single smile. “What would be the fun in that? I’ll tell you what I can do, though.”

We lock eyes. If I could choose any superpower that moment, it’d be the ability to shoot daggers out my pupils.

“I’ll go along with this,” she says quietly. “Just do my fucking job without letting my feelings get in the way. Because I’m damned good at it. It’s most certainly *not* my place to screw up things between you and Silas, or prevent this ridiculous wedding from happening. I’ll let you find out for yourself what it’s like to be used and cast aside like rubbish. He always does it to his girls, sooner or later. You’ve just gotten a little further than most for reasons I’ll never understand.”

I don’t jump her, or slap her, or tackle her on the floor and start ripping out her hair. Every evil little fantasy burning in my brain gets doused just long enough so I can stand up, turn around, and walk out the door without seeing her venomous smile one more time.

“Everything all right, my Lady?”

“I want to see the Prince,” I tell Dean, letting him wonder about the pain that’s curdling my face. “Take me to him.”

The guard frowns. “Mister Chambers told me His Highness won’t be available until after four. He’s at the Air Force base, awarding several men today. I can take you there if you’re willing to wait until the ceremony’s finished.”

“Sure, sure. Whatever. I’ll wait however long Victor says.”

“I’ll fetch a car and a security detail this instant, madame.” He’s already got his phone out before I walk past him.

I need to talk to Silas. I have to get him to discipline Serena, or fire her, or just let me spit in the bitch’s face.

It isn’t just personal, although it’s definitely that. She’s so busy talking about protocol and making sure traditions happen like they should.

I'm not going to take this when I'm officially wearing Silas' ring. If I let her walk all over me when I'm officially Princess, or God forbid, Queen, I'll never live it down. I *have* to put this bitter woman in her place, and demand some respect when she insults my soon-to-be-husband, too.

By the time the pitch black SUV circles up with Dean and several others inside, I'm seething. I don't say a word as I climb into the back, tearing a bottle of water from the ice.

I have to cool myself down before I talk to him. I swear.

If I don't, something absolutely crazy is going to happen.



I SIT IN A BACK ROW, insisting on a subtle space cleared by the guards so I don't bother the families. Watching Silas up there with the Royal Air Force pilots helps stifle the anger. It's so somber, just like the other times I've seen him wearing his uniform, around other military men.

He takes this soldier stuff *very* seriously. It's beautiful, really, showing a side he wants to pretend isn't there.

This is my man with his shields down. The man I want to marry behind the magnificent tattooed body and the king-sized cock. The hero, the veteran, the worldly gentleman with the filthiest mouth I've ever imagined.

This is Prince Charming, the war hero, incarnate.

I wait patiently, until he's finally done. A few of the families below us whisper about me and my entourage. I try to shrink down, not wanting to take the moment away from them.

When the ceremony is finished, and the captain is leading his men off the runway with their wives and kids, Silas sees me.

Surprise. He doubles his speed, walking through the small gate held open by the guards.

I climb halfway down the metal seats to meet him. He grabs me, holds me in those tender, powerful arms, and banishes my woes in a single kiss.

If only they'd stay gone.

“What’re you doing here, love? I would’ve been home in another hour or two.”

“Serena.”

One single word, and his face tightens knowingly. “What did the bitch do now?”

“She insulted me, insulted you, and I’m not going to take it anymore. I’m afraid she’s never going to let it go. Whatever she thinks the two of you had. She won’t stop being a bitch to me, every time I’m supposed to meet her for those briefings.”

“She won’t be easy to replace, Erin.” He frowns, thinking it all over. “I’ll probably have to get grandmom’s approval, simply because she’s been a favorite for several years. Shame, really. Old Henry, her predecessor, never would’ve treated you like trash. I *knew* I made a mistake with her. Whatever, I’ll do what it takes to sort this out.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” I tell him, squeezing both his hands. “I don’t need her fired if you think there’s some way to make her shut up and show some respect. This isn’t an ego clash. I just can’t wait and wonder if she’ll ever stop questioning us with every other sentence that comes out of her mouth. It’s not her place, and it’s rude as hell.”

“Forget it,” he growls, sliding one hand down to the small of my back, pushing me against his chest. “She’s gone. I’ll get Her Majesty on board, one way or another. I’ve got to be careful not to stress her too much, seeing how she’s in recovery. Still, I’ll find a way.”

“Oh.” I look down, suddenly embarrassed. I hadn’t thought of that. “Well, if you think you can do something.”

“Babe, don’t even ask again. I’ll put the bitch in the dungeon and give her a talking to myself, if that’s what it takes to shut her yap.”

I’m laughing. “You’re joking, right? You don’t really have a...dungeon?”

He smiles. Yes, that familiar, slightly wicked, damnably handsome curl of the lips.

“Hasn’t been used since the eighteenth century, love. I think it’s time we made an exception.”

“Don’t!” I slap playfully against his chest. “Seriously. She’s a bitch, but she isn’t a criminal.”

“She’s a demon in my book,” Silas growls. “*Nobody* fucks with my princess.”

He brings his face closer, gently grabs my face, and tips my lips to his. I can feel his breath on my skin, and I’m already getting wet.

“Don’t worry, I won’t torture her. I won’t even scare her unless she really lays it on thick. I’m not letting this go until the palace has a new press secretary. Anyone who insults my wife, my Princess, isn’t fit to clean the fucking stables.”

“Wait, stables? You have horses?”

He laughs. A deep, baritone, belly busting sound that’s like music to my ears.

“What’s a Prince without his white horse? After the wedding’s over, I’ll take you on a trip to Saxon castle in the south. You can meet Eddy, the stud I used to ride when I was a boy. Only animal on this island who’s more hung than me.”

He’s insane. I’m slapping his chest again and trying to wiggle away, laughing, but nothing could ever escape these arms. Silas’ lips take mine, harder than before.

It’s a kiss that tells me I’m going to be reminded just how big the favorite part of his anatomy is tonight. Maybe reminded at least five times.

God, yes.



HE TALKS TO SERENA, but he doesn’t tell me what he’s said. It’s morning, several days later, less than an hour before we’re due to arrive for tea with Her Majesty.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about anymore, love. She’s been taken care of. Gently, I assure you.”

“So, she’s not in irons over in Grace tower?” I nod my head out the window toward the high spire across town, supposedly attached to Silas’ castle by a secret passage.

“I wish.” He shakes his head. “I do have principles, whether you want to believe it or not. There’s only one woman I want to see writhing in restraints, and she sure as hell isn’t Serena.”

He steps up, cups my chin, and silences my next round of sass in a powerful kiss. “Mmm. Now, you’re making me wonder who.”

“Bullshit.” His hand glides down my back, lifts off, and smacks my ass. “You know.”

I do. I’m reminded every single day how much he wants me.

We’re about to kiss again when Silas’ phone goes off. “Yeah?”

I watch his face go dark and tense. He swears under his breath, turns around, and whispers a few more words into the phone. I don’t move until he ends the call and stuffs the leather and gold clad unit back in his pocket.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, hoping it isn’t the Queen’s health.

“Fucking protesters. Again.” He paces around me angrily, moving to the window, staring out across the city.

I join him. The streets are teeming with little crowds, tourists and pedestrians, mostly people milling around the palace so they can catch the royals setting off for tea. It’s been all over the morning news, Her Majesty’s first public event since coming home to the palace.

“I don’t understand. What is it they want, Silas?” My hand squeezes his shoulder, trying to be reassuring.

He’s bristling with so much rage he won’t relax. “They’d hack off our heads if they could. Fucking maniacs, all of them. I’m sure half the bastards are hoping they cause grandmom to have another stroke so the crown falls to me, and they can have their damned referendum.”

He isn't just speaking anymore. He's growling, each word more angry than the last, sending chills up my spine.

"I'm sure it'll be all right. It seems like there's nothing but sympathy for the royal family. If they do anything crazy, the public will turn on them."

I'm trying to talk with confidence. But truth be told, I know very little about the emotions wrapped up in the political situation here.

That has to change, and soon. Everything's becoming less theoretical by the day with our wedding approaching.

Silas looks at me, his eyes full of flickering blue fire. "I'll tell you something, love. These shit-stirrers are lucky we're not the monsters they claim. If we had the rights and powers we enjoyed five hundred years ago, they'd be rotting away with rats and moldy bread crusts by now."

Silas' phone chirps again before I can respond. "Shit, time to get downstairs. They want us to leave early, considering the situation. The biggest idiots have been cleared away from the palace grounds, at least."

I nod, grateful for the small progress. When he takes my hand to lead me out, his grip is tight, almost as intense as the day our first press conference turned into disaster.

"Sire!" A soldier in camo fatigues salutes the Prince when we're outside, heading for our big white limo. We have a military escort, more than just the usual security services, as I can see from the Humvees with heavy guns mounted to the sides.

Silas nods, helps me into the car, looking around him the entire time. My instinct makes me want to run my eyes over the people gathered just outside the gate as well, in case I see any impending violence.

I'm stopped in my tracks, though, because suddenly I'm face-to-face with Queen Marina.

"How are you, dear?" she asks, sitting across from me with Patricia and several bodyguards I don't recognize.

“Perfectly well, Your Majesty!”

Yeah, if perfectly well means stressed as hell.

“You look much better. I’m pleased to hear you’re on the mend,” I say, while Silas climbs in next to me.

Is there anything worse than trying to make small talk with a Queen?

“I still have a few good days in me to serve this kingdom,” she says, twirling the platinum and gold tipped cane in her hand. “Silas, what’s eating you, boy?”

“The protests,” he growls, as if it isn’t obvious. “Can’t stay off our damned backs for a single minute.”

I lay my hand on his. Patricia gives us both a sour look. Next to me on the other side, Victor clears his throat uncomfortably.

“They’re entitled to their opinions. They certainly won’t be allowed to stomp their feet or smash up my property. However, what kind of kingdom do you think we’d have if we didn’t allow a place where people are free to express the unthinkable?”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” he says, clenching my hand tighter. It doesn’t sound like he’s being honest. “I’ve been worried about you lately, Your Majesty. That’s all.”

“Take your minds off me today, please.” She pauses, looking around at each of us. “That goes for everyone in this car. Today, we have a chance to show our people that we’re peaceful and united. I trust no one here wants to screw that up, and too much thought my way isn’t helping the situation.”

It’s hard not to laugh. I wonder if she knows she’s riding on a powder keg.

Peaceful? United? It won’t take much to blow it all sky high.

“We’ll be at Milton’s in five minutes, Your Majesty,” Patricia says. She snidely one-ups Victor, who’d been pulling out his phone to check the time.

“Wonderful. Miss Warwick, you’ll be pleased to taste the finest tea in Europe at our traditional spot today,” Her Majesty says.

“Oh, yes!” I clap my hands together, praying it won’t ignite the tension in the air. The grin on my face feels crazy. “I love, love, *love* a good cup of tea.”

I’m trying harder than I ever had in my life to diffuse the invisible rage.

For a minute, nobody says anything. Then Silas relaxes his grip on my hand and starts to laugh, shaking his head.

“Yeah, tea. I’m going to tell them to make mine so damned strong I go blind.”



I THINK THINGS ARE GOING...well.

Unbelievably well, perhaps. We’ve just sat down at a private table reserved for the Queen. The media bombards us with camera flashes of our first orders before they’re shuffled out the door, leaving us alone.

They won’t see us again until we head back to our car, all smiles, Silas gently helping his grandmother down the steps. It’s going to be a picture perfect end to a picture perfect photo op with so little drama people will fall asleep when it rolls across their newsfeed.

That’s what I’m hoping for, anyway.

Our tea shows up in no time while the royals talk about Silas’ dealings with diplomats in Her Majesty’s absence. Mine is black, velvety, sweet and citrusy. It’s heaven in a cup, a million times more soothing than the shot of something stronger I’m sure Silas is craving.

“Erin helped with the trade ministers from the EU,” he says, eyeballing me while he sips from his cup. “They were very impressed with her candor and beauty when we rolled in to meet them at the foot of the bridge.”

Oh, God. He’s referring back to the day I came in front of half the capital, clenching his hand, squirming in my seat.

I smile delicately at Queen Marina, trying to pretend nothing unusual happened. I can't believe he's teasing me like this. If he's hoping I won't go anywhere near his dick tonight, he's doing a great job.

"Yes, I believe the media is taking a slow, but steady liking to our new lady," she says, looking at me. "Of course, she won't be fully in their eye until the wedding and the ceremony where she's crowned. We're moving to the right place for this kingdom and our family. It just takes time."

I watch her too perfect false teeth take a huge bite from a flaky croissant. My stomach growls, and I'm mustering up the courage to eat in front of the Queen when the door behind us flies open.

My appetite goes completely cold when I turn around and see who's there. Silas bolts from his chair, whipping around so hard it tips over, hitting the floor.

"What the hell are you doing here, Serena?" he growls.

My heart skips several beats. I don't know if the rage boiling in his eyes is more directed at her, or the guard who let her nose her way in.

So much for picture perfect. The bitch smiles, staring at me, slowly coming closer.

"It's really a shame I have to do this. You were all doing so well on your way in. Heeding my advice about tea today, no doubt."

"I'm not asking again," Silas rumbles, his eyes shifting nervously to his grandmother.

I'm quietly praying he won't go nuclear. Jesus, he can't.

Queen Marina doesn't need this stress right now, especially with more bodyguards rushing in, surrounding Serena before she can totally reach out table.

"You thought you could get rid of me. You did what you had to because the American girl decided she didn't like my attitude. I get that, Silas. This isn't about us anymore. I'm here

today to protect the kingdom and Her Majesty's honor. Just another patriotic, helpful subject, hoping for the best."

"Your Majesty?" Patricia looks angrily across the room, gesturing to the guards, making them form a wall between the intruder and the rest of us.

"Let her come forward. Pat her down first. I want to know the meaning of this."

Silas does a slow, maddening pivot. His face says it all. *You can't be fucking serious.*

I have to stop the mushroom cloud that's about to turn this room to ashes. I bolt up, wrap my arms around him, and hold him tight. I can feel his huge muscles bulging, trembling ever-so-slightly, his caveman instinct to kill and protect on overdrive.

No, I mouth to him, as soon as his eyes swing to me. *You can't.*

I'm worried he's going to fling me aside and go for Serena's throat. The guards have finished their pat down, and she's walking past, straight through us, taking a seat at the fucking table like she's part of our group.

"Your Majesty, I hope you'll forgive me. You know I've served you to the best of my abilities for years. That's the only thing I want to do here today, one last time, before I'm on my way out and –"

"Enough. Why are you here?" Queen Marina's royal blue eyes are blazing now. I think she's a second or two away from having the guards haul the bitch out after all.

I hope. Just like I hope it happens before her health takes a hit.

"I've been doing some research before Silas came to me last night and told me I'd never serve the royal family in any capacity again. Lots of research, before he called me a cunt to my face, and swore he'd have me locked up if I dared defy his royal orders."

My jaw clenches until it feels like my teeth are about to pop. If she's looking for sympathy, it isn't going to work, no matter what Silas did or didn't say.

It's a miracle he's staying quiet. He feels like granite in my arms, a statue ready to come to life and throw Serena out the nearest window if she makes one more wrong move.

"Now, you've all seen the op eds in the papers. The ones that wonder if this wedding is illegal or not, according to the kingdom's laws and traditions. I've talked to several lawyers, and I'm certain it is, but I won't bother going into that because there's still a shred of doubt." She pauses, reaches for my glass, and takes a long, agonizing pull.

Yeah, the bitch is drinking my tea like a hummingbird. I'm about to ask Silas to restrain me for my own good.

"We have our own lawyers, the very best in the nation. Whoever you've spoken to, they can't possibly be better," the Queen snaps. "If you have nothing more important than this nonsense, I'll ask you to find your way out, this instant."

"Oh, Your Majesty, I wouldn't be here if that were the case." She sets the teacup down loudly. "I've been talking to some doctors in Mexico about Miss Warwick's father."

My face goes dark. I'm afraid to check my own pulse and discover proof my blood just froze.

"As we know, he's very been very sick, but he's on the mend. What's very interesting is the funding." She turns away from the Queen, staring up at us, tucking her blonde hair back in that almost flirty and completely antagonizing way. "You see, Silas, I know you didn't pull the money out of that little trust stipend you like to use on liquor, parties, and gifts for you women."

"I don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about, woman, but you're going to be sued for every word you say. I'm keeping track, starting now."

"Sued? Ha!" Her shitty grin only gets bigger. "The only one who's going to be suing anybody will be Suzie Q. Public. Probably led by the Republic Firsters. For all their flaws,

they've got some powerful legal contacts. Seriously, Your Highness, what were you thinking? Using a public account on this medical bribe for your whore of a wife?"

She shakes her head slowly, mockingly sad. I want to slap her stupid face until it's spinning like a merry-go-round.

"Did you really think you could just snap your fingers and Victor could pull money from wherever, without getting caught? In this case, the royal wildlife fund, which receives several million a year from public tax dollars for wilderness and recreation? It almost worked, I suppose. You probably wouldn't have gotten caught if I hadn't been motivated to follow every single transactions. Thing is, my Prince, I did. And the scandal will *kill* Her Majesty when I feed it to the press."

Silas spins around, turning me with him. He's eyeballing Victor now.

"Your Highness...I...there wasn't enough in your private account at the time to cover a private, unscheduled trip to Mexico and the extensive treatment Mister Warwick received. Your trust fund wouldn't have disbursed additional money quickly enough when time was of the essence to save his life. For the record, the nature fund in question only receives partial public reimbursement each year. Most of its money comes from admission fees to the parks, and I was certain it wouldn't be a problem. This is, of course, entirely my fault, and I'm deeply sorry."

Silas isn't listening anymore. Serena stands up, drifts past us again, looking over her shoulder as she heads for the guards.

I can't bear to look at the Queen. She's probably as speechless as I am. I'm fucking devastated, hurt and confused, hanging onto him like a helpless monkey.

"This all could've gone down so differently, once. I really did love working for the palace, just like I used to love you, my Prince. Who knows where life will lead us once you're a pretender to a throne that doesn't exist anymore, but it's a

shame we'll never cross paths again. We could've been something beautiful."

"Don't let this fucking bitch leave," Silas growls to the guards.

I hear several other chairs scrape across the floor. The Queen, Patricia, and Victor are all talking at once. Serena starts screaming the second one of the men in the suits grabs her arm.

The whole world spins, catapulting my field of vision around and around until I'm going to be sick.

I can't do this. I have to get out of here. I need to move my feet out the door beyond all the commotion, before I pass out.

It's a miracle. I do better than just power walk because something makes me *run*, without tripping on my heels or my skirt.

Silas yells after me once. But the guards are too busy with the anarchy all around them to think about catching me, and he never gives the order to chase me down.

I burst through the doors and run across the hallway. The teahouse is attached to an old hotel, where I crash down on the seats in front of a TV, burying my face to hide my tears.

Serena has the perfect bait to destroy everything that matters to him.

And it's all my fault.

For the first time in weeks, I want to be home. Back in North America, wherever dad is, consoling myself on being a good daughter because I don't know if I can be a good wife.

I can't be a good Princess.

God. There's something on TV. I see it through my blurry eyes, a scary scene outside the palace. It's the protests. They're still happening, live.

Two men tangled together in a crowd, fighting. One wears a black shirt with a big, red X through a gold crown held by the double-headed eagle.

Another man has a purple lapel pin for the Queen, but it's hard to make out. His shirt looks bloody – probably from the broken nose the protester gives him before the police throw him to the ground, jabbing a taser into his side.

This kingdom is a mess. And it's only going to get *worse* when Serena drops the bomb, assuming she makes it out of here without being able to sue royal security for assault.

Everything suddenly feels radioactive. It's killing me, shattering my heart in a way I've never known.

I don't want to leave him. Really, I fucking don't, more than I've ever wanted to avoid a thing in my entire life.

Doesn't matter. I can't ignore the sick truth gnawing at me deep in my soul.

This kingdom, this family, is going to tear itself apart if I stay a day longer. I won't watch that happen, even if it causes my heart to shrivel up and die.

I can't be his Princess – with benefits, or without. I can't be anywhere on this island anymore.

MELTING POINT (SILAS)

She's gone, gone, gone like a fucking ghost, and it's all my fault.

Nobody knows where she rushed off to. I couldn't go after her when that bitch, Serena, was still standing there throwing barbs, threatening to ignite a new stroke in grandmom's poor brain with every evil word.

Her Majesty let her say her piece – her load of total bullshit. Then security escorted her out.

All while I stood there like a chump. Frozen.

Paralyzed like I haven't been since facing the damned war, except even mortar blasts never turned me to stone.

I'm back at the palace in my private office, staring at the bottle of scotch laid out on my desk, next to the crystal glass. My fingers shake so much each time I take a good, long look, imagining how good it'll feel to have the familiar heat in my guts. I grab myself by the wrist, clenching my teeth, snarling like a wild beast.

“No. No, goddamn it. You're going to find her, and you're not falling back on bad habits. She can't be gone.”

But she is.

It doesn't matter if security tells me exactly where she's gone over the next few hours. I can feel it in the pit of my stomach, my woman pushed over the edge by forces she can't

control. Leaving me here to my tower, just like some dark Prince in a fucking fairy tale.

Those stories have happy endings, at least. Once she's outside the island's airspace, my power is limited. I'll never be able to bring her home without causing an international incident. I can't anyway, after Serena turned our whole royal world upside down.

Drinking won't fix this.

Hell, not even grabbing that traitorous bitch by the throat and squeezing the life out of her will solve anything at this point.

Nothing besides feeling Erin's perfect, pink lips under mine is going to make it all right again.

The drug I need isn't here on this desk, taunting me in the face because it used to solve my problems, and doesn't do shit anymore.

Growling, my arm swings through the air, pushing the scotch and glass onto the floor, along with an antique clock and several paper weights.

My raging heart won't stop pounding. I have to make sure I'm not hallucinating when I hear the faint rap at the door.

"It's open," I say, sitting back in my seat, adjusting my tie.

Vic slinks in like a scorned cat, pausing when he sees the mess. "Your Highness – is everything all right?"

"You know the answer," I growl. "Send in whoever to clean this up when you're finished. I'm done having my temper tantrum, I'm sure."

I motion to the seat across from me. Victor takes it, stepping carefully over the shattered glass.

My arms press against the desk, and I stare at him, the words I want to say burning my tongue. "You know where she is, don't you? Tell me."

"She took off in a private jet this evening, sire. Chartered, rather than royal. The plane was heading for Mexico, I'm told,

surely so she can join her father at his treatment center. No one thought to freeze her access to the accounts, seeing as we were otherwise preoccupied...”

“Yeah, with making sure Her Majesty didn’t die on the fucking spot after everything that bitch said.”

“Indeed.” Vic nods, eerily calm, and pulls an envelope from his pocket.

My eyes shift down, watching as he slides it over to me. My fists and jaw clench simultaneously before I pick it up, rip it open, and pull out the lengthy typed letter. It only takes me thirty seconds to scan it before I’ve got the gist – and I don’t like it.

“You’re not quitting on me,” I tell him, slamming it back down on the ivory surface.

“Your Highness, we both know that’s the most reasonable course of action. Perhaps my departure will make things easier for the crown, legally speaking, in the matter Miss Hastings plans to bring forward. My mistake provided her with ample fire to burn the palace to the ground. I can’t live with that. I’ve failed you, my Prince, and I fear I’ll never recover from these grotesque missteps.”

I almost snort. The only thing that looks grotesque right now is how pale and dead his face is. It takes balls to hand in your notice at a job that’s your whole reason for living.

“Sire, if you’ll permit, I’ll do my very best to find someone worthy of this position so this never, ever happens –“

“Enough.” Pulling the paper off the desk, I tear it neatly in half, crumple both halves, and throw them in the basket at my feet. “You’re not going anywhere, Vic. It was an honest mistake. One I forced on you by setting up this arranged marriage. When I told you to help her old man, it wasn’t real between us. Not at first. Believe me, man, it’s worth more than my own damned crown now.”

He looks at me and nods, a faint smile lining his lips. “As you wish, Your Highness. I’ll serve you faithfully.”

“Yeah? Then start by finding Serena and bringing her ass back here for a talk.”

My valet blinks, surprised, shaking his head.

“You heard me. I want to set this crap right once and for all. Nothing illegal – we’ve already done plenty of that.” My fists clench, wishing I hadn’t passed on the scotch. “I need to talk to her. Alone. I’m going to find out how much it costs to make a deal with the devil.”

After a moment, Victor nods. “I’ll keep it as quiet as I can, sire. A security detail will be going out shortly to find Miss Hastings and bring her here.”

“Good. I’ll meet you both downstairs. Tell me as soon as she’s arrived,” I say, watching as he stands up to leave. “And Victor...I want you to speak more freely now, man to man, instead of reminding me I’m your master all the time. We’ve known each other too many years, worked under the same roof. It’s high time you started calling me Silas.”

“Of course, if that’s your wish...Silas.”

I wait until the door closes before I smile. He could barely choke out my name.

Some things in this world just aren’t going to change.

Doesn’t matter. I won’t let Erin go without bringing the greatest fight of my life.

I didn’t give up booze and pussy to quit my whole reason for getting off them, and starting to live for the first time in my life. I *need* my woman, my love, my princess. God willing, I’m bringing her home, whatever it takes.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, I’m pacing slowly on the patio overlooking the royal gardens, one more place where this unlikely poached my heart like a lion ripping into an antelope.

I don’t look behind me until I hear the door open. Then I whip around and see Vic with several guards, standing in front of the bitch herself.

“Give us some privacy, boys,” I say, motioning Vic to the corner, to stay outside. “Serena, take a seat.”

She looks at me haughtily, colder than the icy late summer night. I don’t see that man-eating smile on her face until she sits down, relishing in the power she thinks she’s got.

“Well, I didn’t think my message had actually sunk in. Have you finally come to your senses, Silas – or will we be seeing each other in front of a royal judge next time?”

“You’ve schemed this entire thing, and it’s all bullshit,” I say, glaring. “I’m not here to play games. I want your terms, short and sweet, so I can forget about this and work on bringing my girl home.”

Her face sours. Unmistakable jealousy.

Christ.

She *still* wants me at some level. My guts twist in disgust.

Sure, I’ve woken up with that *what the hell were you thinking?* feeling more mornings than I care to count. When I remember fucking the woman sitting across from me with her evil grin and pointy witch heels, it’s visceral.

“You’re going after her? After she’s ruined you, and the drama she’s brought threatens a fifteen hundred year old dynasty?”

“Yeah. Already told you, Serena, I’m bringing her home. That’s what you don’t get. She’s *mine*. All your threats, your nastiness, every damned legal decree on the planet – none of it’s going to stop me from going after her. They’re nothing in the face of love.”

“Love?” She whips her head around and spits it out like a curse. “*You?* Prince Playboy in love? You’ve lost your mind, Silas. I’m not stupid. I can’t believe this, and I don’t have to trust a word of it. You’re not playing me a second time. Look, I *know* you took this girl on to improve your image after the Queen suggested it. We talked about it together. We put the same idea in your head. If only I’d known it would’ve taken on this absurd life of its own!”

“Nobody’s getting played tonight except me because I’m offering you a deal,” I say, stepping toward her. “Sometimes, you get blindsided when you least expect it. I brought Erin in for reputation management, business, it’s true...and that all ended awhile ago. We found love. What we’ve got, after spending so much time together, it’s real.”

Real. The demon in front of me pinches her eyes shut like I’ve just driven a dagger in her chest.

“Do you really want to know what I want, Silas? Or did you just bring me here for torture?”

“Told you, I want a deal. Whatever the fuck it takes to make you drop this lawsuit and never hear from you again. Name a price,” I growl, hoping like hell she finally will.

“Forget that stupid American bitch! How about that? You obviously don’t care who you get to play Princess. Do it with me, instead. Make me your bride. I’ll play along with anything you want – the drinking, the parties, the women – anything and everything. Just as long as you take me and forget all about her!”

Fuck. I’m taken aback. The crazy in this woman’s eyes shines brighter than the moon.

“I can’t believe this.” I shake my head. It was a big fucking mistake bringing her here, thinking I could reason with her.

“No!” Serena comes closer. “It’s not too late, Silas. You can get yourself out of this, do something for both of us. You can –“

“I’m not marrying you, bitch. Unless you want to name a price in dollars, Euros, or fucking rubles, the deal’s off. We’re through tonight, and forever.”

Her face goes bright red. It looks like there’s shame heating her blood, but I don’t think this woman is self-aware enough to feel embarrassment.

“You’re making a *huge* mistake, Prince. I won’t let you live this down. You want to marry her? Fine! You can do it with *nothing* left to your name except millions in debt, and your crown in the gutter. That’s where you really belong.”

Raw anger hisses out her lips. “I truly thought you were better than this. Silas, you’re a stupid man. A monster.”

“And you’re a fucking lunatic, Serena. I’ve got everything on the line, and I’m going to fight. You want to talk stupid? That’s trying to blackmail a Bearington by thinking I’d ever let you get anywhere near the throne.”

I barely hear her scream before she rushes me. Then there’s a whirlwind of little fists beating against my chest. Her heels kick me in the shins while I try to grab her.

She’s hitting me with her purse, reaching into it. She’s so skinny and quick it’s hard to get a hold. I don’t want to hurt her, much as my baser instincts would like to.

I grab her, fold one arm around the stomach when she’s turned away from me, just as she screams, reaching into her purse.

Something sharp scrapes my arm when she flails again. I don’t have to time to see what, because Victor is on us, ahead of several guards.

“Miss Hastings! Let go! For God’s sake, you can’t assault the Crown Prince of Saint Moore! You must –“

He makes a sad, strained sound. I’ve finally got a lock on the bitch, knocking that little metal thing in her hands to the ground. It’s hard to see in the darkness, but it looks like a brass keychain made to wrap around the knuckles for self-defense.

I notice the red spot spreading in Victor’s abdomen about a second before he tumbles to the ground.

“Shit, Vic!” The guards catch up to us then, thank fuck. “Get this bitch out of here!”

She’s still snarling like a wild animal, throwing every obscenity in the book at me, while they drag her out. I hit the ground, pressing my hand over the valet’s wound.

Damn it, there’s blood.

A lot of blood. I’m roaring like a lion for a doctor, vowing the bitch is going to pay big for what she’s done.

“Your Highness...Silas...don’t let me fail you again. I can’t –“

“You haven’t failed me in anything, friend. You just took a psycho’s blade that was meant for me. That’s doing more for me than any of these slow goddamned guards.”

He isn’t speaking anymore. Blood keeps leaking all over my hands, and suddenly I’m back in Afghanistan, covering my Lieutenant’s gash from a mortar round.

Everything goes numb in my head, like I’m detached, watching somebody else. There’s nothing except my hands trying to stop precious life from leaking out of his veins, shaking him every few seconds, trying to keep this man awake and alive.

Medics show, seemingly out of nowhere. I step aside, my hands covered in gore. I won’t go back into the palace until they’ve got him out, on his way to an ambulance.

If Vic dies, I swear to holy hell I’m going to tear that cunt’s head off myself.

They’re hoisting him up on a stretcher, rolling him back through the greenhouse, when I see someone who should *not* be here.

No, *two* very out of place someones. Serena stands there in plastic handcuffs, held by two guards, glaring hatefully at me. Like I didn’t just stop her from tearing my servant’s throat out.

The other person is Her Majesty. Grandmom looks like she’s just woken up, standing in a regal white flowing gown, without a single piece of jewelry on her royal skin.

“What’s the meaning of this, Silas?”

My fucking heart sinks. This night couldn’t get any worse. Oh, except for having to admit that I’d tried to strike a deal with Serena Hastings behind her back.

“I tried to talk to Serena,” I tell her, not knowing where the hell I should begin. “Things went bloody crazy. She attacked me, and stabbed Victor.”

“You’re telling her I struck first, you bastard, after everything you said?!” Serena screams against the wall, beyond deranged. “It was self-defense! I’d do it all over again! I swear, I’ll –“

“Get her the fuck out here!” I roar to the guards, wishing it were just as easy to dismiss this whole evil situation.

“Belay that order,” Her Majesty snaps. “She isn’t going anywhere until you tell me exactly what’s going on in my palace, Silas.”

I’m screwed. If I hide the truth, it’s only going to piss her off more, and that might tip her health into the red zone.

The truth, that’s all I have, the only thing that hasn’t been shot to shit by the last twenty-four hours.

Okay.

“We know what happened at tea, grandmom. Erin’s gone. Dealing with this bitch ripped her heart out, sent her running to Mexico, to be with her father. Can’t blame her, honestly. I pushed this on her. In the beginning, this whole wedding was going to be a fraud.” I pause, watching as my grandmother’s matching blue eyes go huge. “It isn’t that way anymore, Your Majesty. I swear on every single thing I’ve got. We were just playing pretend, Erin and me, a selfish plan I hatched to save my image. I took your advice, and I wanted to take the pressure off you so the kingdom would think I’d be fit for the crown someday.”

I take another breath. Every drop of blood running through my veins feels like it’s on fire. I wonder if anyone’s ever spontaneously self-combusted from a confession before.

“Go on.” That’s all she says, tapping her exuberant cane against the stone floor.

Fuck, why isn’t she saying anything? I clear my throat and do as she asks.

“I know it was wrong. Just like the way I tried to bring Serena here. I tried to negotiate some way to pay her off tonight so she’d leave us all alone.” I close the distance between grandmom and me, never breaking eye contact.

“They say love causes people to act like idiots. I didn’t understand that until just recently. After our pretend engagement became real, little by little. I’m going after her, Your Majesty. Nothing means more to me now.”

Boom. Right between the eyes. I’m amazed my grandmother remains silent.

“Do whatever you need to. No hard feelings. I’ll resign my crown, my title, give up every damned Euro and dollar in my accounts. You can make my cousin in Sealesland heir to the throne, and I’ll never step foot on this island again. I’m sorry as hell to leave Serena and her crap on your plate, grandmom, but I’m not sure what she can do after cutting into Vic like that. I’m sorry, but I can’t wait any longer. I have to go soon.”

“Silas...shut up.” She blinks, letting out a sigh that sounds like she’s been holding it in for a fifty years. “There’s an awful lot I’ll never understand about you. If the last twenty-five years have taught me anything, it’s that. But I do understand a man and woman in love, as well as an intruder in the way. There’s nothing more to explain, son. You’re free.”

Her old, bony hand lands gently on my shoulder. *Free?*

“Find her. Bring her back. She’ll make a beautiful Princess for this kingdom, and you’re going to make a better King than I’d believed, one day.” Her head turns, focusing her gaze on Serena, up against the wall. “I’ll deal with this despicable traitor myself. You, boy, follow your heart.”

I’m smiling. Leave it to the royal wannabe bitch in the corner to kill the mood.

“That’s it? Are you fucking kidding me? You’re mad! All of you! The Republic First idiots are right. This crown deserves to fall, for the good of the country. I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that happens – just watch!”

Nobody moves except grandmom. I watch her, heading for Serena and the guards at a slow hobble. I barely hear what she whispers to Dean and the other boys until I step up.

“Turn her around, please,” Her Majesty says.

Serena won't stop seething. She's disrespecting everything she ever swore to serve. Fucking hypocrite.

I'm standing by, hoping grandmom knows what she's doing, dangerously close to this psychopath. Serena opens her mouth to bitch again, but nothing ever comes out.

Her Majesty's soft, wrinkled hand slaps our ex-press secretary across the face. It echoes through the greenhouse like a gunshot.

Everybody stops, stares in shock. I hope those guards remembered to keep their grip on the asshole.

"I've had enough of your mouth!" Grandmom says, turning to Dean. "Take her to the auxiliary holding area. We'll deal with the police report there. I'm going to come clean to the ministers about everything that's happened here tonight, but I'd like to make certain Miss Hastings doesn't set one foot onto the streets until she has a qualified doctor and a parole officer assigned."

"Auxiliary holding area?" Dean looks at the other guard, smiling. "Right away, Your Majesty!"

That's the formal name for the five hundred year old dungeon underneath the palace. An off-the-books prison that isn't supposed to be used except for overflow in times of war or national crisis.

Serena doesn't even spill any more venom as they're hauling her out. I think we're all too stunned to do anything. Grandmom slowly turns to me, leaning on her cane, like slapping Serena has sapped her energy.

"Why are you still standing there, Silas? Don't you know where your lady has gone?"

"I have a good idea," I say, walking up to her while Patricia comes out the door and grabs my grandmom by the arm, helping steady her.

"Take the first royal jet you see to Mexico, then. I'll handle the rest of this nasty, nasty business."

I nod, more than ready to head for the airport. But I stop first, and throw my arms around the old woman.

We've always been distant. That's the way it is between a royal living legend, and a man who hasn't been fit to fill her throne until just recently.

But tonight, we're family. One and the same.

We're Bearingtons. Always just, savage when we need to be, and determined as the mythic eagle stamped on my chest until the day I die.



One Week Later

IT'S A RESORT. I'm on the highest level, overlooking the cancer treatment center, an unassuming facility at the edge of this luxury circus.

It's taken me several days since landing to find out where she is. Special intelligence had to track her down at my request because she'd chosen a small hostel outside the resort zone.

Smart, if she wants to disappear completely. It costs me and my men some effort.

I could've confronted her at the hospital, sure, but the visiting hours are always irregular. And the last first impression I want to make on her old man is seeing me begging her to come back.

That's right. Prince Silas Bearington III, ex-soldier, badass, biggest swinging dick in Europe, is ready to do whatever it takes to tear my heart out and hand it to the woman I love. Even if it means crawling to her on my hands and knees.

I can't lose this girl. I can't fuck this up.

I *can't* go home without her.

I won't walk away, even if I have to spend years in the Americas convincing her we're meant to be together.

My small, but devoted security detail would never let me slip into city without them. But I do it anyway, taking a taxi. I

keep my t-shirt and my shades pulled tight, praying nobody will recognize a billionaire Prince among them.

Thankfully, there's not as much celeb gossip here as the States.

The taxi driver stops in front of a dirty, ancient looking building. He mutters a few words in Spanish, telling me the price and wishing me well.

I pop the door, stuffing the biggest tip he's ever gotten into his hand on the way out. He calls after me, wondering if it's a mistake or I'm positively *loco*. I don't bother stopping.

It's early morning, just after five o'clock. Nothing's stopping me.

The place isn't as dirty inside, but it's not exactly up to Western standards either. Instead of rooms, people are gathered in huge wards by gender, with privacy curtains to pull shut at night.

The woman at the desk can't give me a precise spot where I'll find Erin. She turns her nose up, though, muttering about that wounded American girl, the one who's kept several other girls up at night with her crying.

I've come to the right place. I creep into the women's section, careful to only take the quickest peek behind the curtains. Stealth combat training comes in handy here. I'm still expecting one of them to see me for a second too long, and wake up the whole room screaming.

I see her as soon as I peel back the last little curtain in the corner. I'd know that body I've had wrapped around me anywhere.

Fuck, she's beautiful. She's sleeping, the faintest morning light seeping through the curtain, falling across her dark hair. I push past it and wait there until she stirs.

At first, she doesn't see me. When I move my hand up to rub my face, she jumps, jerking up flat against the headboard.

"Silas? You can't be here!"

“Believe it, Princess. I’ve come for what’s mine.” I step up to the bed, pulling her into my arms.

She’s too stunned to fight for the first few seconds. Then she starts twisting like mad, wriggling away, throwing me off.

“What the hell’s wrong with you, love? Sorry about the surprise. Didn’t have much choice.”

Her tits look like ripe fruits swinging in that gown. My dick swells for the first time in what feels like forever, begging for the pussy it’s craving something fierce.

“No. You’re *not* supposed to be here. You can’t be. I’m going home to LA with dad in just a few days. He’s about to be discharged.”

Folding my arms, I smile through the dim light. “He’s cured? Great. I knew the magnificent bastards here would come through for him. Guess I’ll be booking a flight to LA next, too.”

Those lips I want to ravish all day drop. Her sweet head shakes, amusement and sadness written all over face in one warring symphony.

“No. No, Silas. This is crazy. I left Saint Moore behind, and I left you, too.” She looks up, tears wavering in her big brown eyes. “I can’t be responsible for tearing that place apart. It isn’t my country. Whatever else we had, I corrupted you. I set you up for doing dumb things that let Serena weasel her way into threats. No more.”

“You’re wrong, love. Serena’s been dealt with. The crazy bitch tried to stab me, missed, and hit Victor instead. She’s done.” While she’s staring me all shocked, I throw my arm around her tighter, pulling her into my embrace. “He’s okay. Recovering at the royal hospital. Lost a lot of blood.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Grandmom’s going to come clean about the money that was moved around. I’d bet everything that nobody in the parliament has the balls to say boo about it. Anybody running for election has done a hundred times worse, and the Queen’s popularity has never been higher.”

“What about yours? Does the kingdom know anything?”

I pause. “They know you haven’t been seen for a few days. They know the former press secretary stormed out of tea with us. The tabloids are starting to bark, saying our wedding’s off, that the whole thing was a fickle fucking sham from the start. Look at me, Erin.”

I tilt her face up. She’s crying now, biting her lip, shaking her head weakly. She’s telling me *no, no, no*, fighting her basest instincts.

Ask me if I care. I’m going to remind her what we have, take her home with me, and show her why she’s never running away again.

“I don’t care how rough it gets. I’d dump my crown for you, love, without hesitation. What started on a lie, it’s too damned real to give up. We both know it.”

She’s too hurt. Too conflicted. She still won’t look at me.

I push my fingers gently into her jaw line, tip her face up, until she finally opens those beautiful eyes. Mine lock on like hawks, holding her gaze, showing her the want.

I’m not afraid to open up anymore. I’m showing her what no woman’s ever seen, the gnawing want for her, blazing down to my very soul.

“Erin...”

“Silas...I can’t. It’s wrong. We’re not right for each other...I realize that now. We’re too different. It’s never going to change, not in a hundred million years. We don’t belong together. I know it, and I think you do, too.”

“Enough. You’re wrong, love, and I’m going to prove it. Kiss me, then tell me what you just said isn’t bullshit.”

I don’t give her time to turn away. My lips crush down on hers, hungrier than they’ve ever been, relishing the sugary sweetness of her lips like it’s the last time.

Because if I can’t convince her, it might be.

I might be going back to Saint Moore empty-fucking-handed.

No. No! I won't let that happen, no matter how much heaven and hell I have to pay.

Our tongues touch. I take hers, twine it around mine, feeling the same electric heat we had the very first time. We're reliving every kiss in this one.

Every fight. Every tease. Every night we ever fucked, plus the very moment when fucking blurred into making love.

I used to hate that phrase, 'making love.' It sounds like some stupid flowery shit prudes use to convince themselves they aren't after just as much nasty, glorious pleasure as the rest of us.

But with her, the woman I have on my lips, I felt it a few times. I want – no, need – to feel it again. Have it over and over and over for the rest of my life.

It hurts like hell to pull my lips away, but I have to. Need to hear her answer. She's lost in my eyes again, too screwed up to speak.

“One word, babe. That's all you've got to tell me right now. Say you're coming home. Say we still have a wedding to go to. You want to be mine, I can see it shining clear as day in your eyes. Erin, love, it doesn't have to be complicated. Just tell me we can get past this, all the evil, stupid things that happened. We can be husband and wife. Prince and Princess. Real, not fake, so fucking real it seems like everything else in this world's a hollowed out ghost. You're feeling it, love, yeah? Tell me you are.”

It takes her a few seconds. Several terrible, heart wrenching seconds that almost turn my heart into a black mass of dripping tar.

Then she says it. “Yes! Okay, maybe we can make this work, you bastard. It hurts too much to lie. I love you.”

“Prince Bastard has a damned good ring to it, love, as long as that's what you're calling me in bed.”

“Better than Prince Hung,” she whispers.

The next time we kiss, I feel her smiling underneath my lips. This love tastes better than ever before.



A COUPLE DAYS LATER, we're planning to embark, returning to the kingdom, hand in hand. She's happy to be in my room and out of that cramped hostel. There's just one last unfinished item on the agenda waiting for us at the treatment center.

“Here we are again, Tom. You're holding all the cards for this interview, though, trust me,” I say, sitting next to my princess, holding her hand.

“Yeah, and they're all Jokers. Wilds. I still can't believe my daughter is about to marry a Prince. Right out of a fairy tale.”

Erin's father looks good for just surviving hell. He's lost some weight, looks like he could use some red meat to put color in his skin, but otherwise, he's doing better.

“Oh, daddy. It's surprisingly normal,” she says, squeezing my hand. “No glass slippers or evil witches here.”

I'm sure her dear old dad's read plenty in the tabloids and trash blogs. But he doesn't have a clue what we went through to get here, approaching our happily ever after, if only we can get his blessing.

“Your Highness, marriage aside, I owe you my life,” Tom says, nodding respectfully. “If it hadn't been for you, for this place, I doubt I'd be fit to see my daughter again. Much less walk her down the aisle. They do that in Saint Moore, don't they?”

I smile, straightening up in my chair. “We have our own traditions, yes, but there's plenty of room to make accommodations for the bride's family.”

“So, you're in, daddy?” she whispers excitedly, bouncing her knees a couple times.

We've spent the last two days fucking our brains out, catching up on what we've been missing. Damn if every

gesture she makes, every movement rippling her curves, doesn't make my dick throb for more.

“LA can wait.” Tom stands up, without so much as a tremor, walking over to embrace her. “I'd be a fool if I weren't there to see you off. Also, to remind His Highness that he's going to have hell to pay if he ever hurts you, disappoints you, or screws you over. I don't care if I wind up in a dungeon for spilling blue blood.”

He gives me a sharp look. One I respect. I nod, pulling Erin's hand fully into my lap, protective as ever.

“It's just Silas now, Tom. No more of that Highness crap. Save your threats for somebody who needs them,” I say, bringing my woman's hand to my mouth. “I know my reputation. I've played around and shamed myself more times than anybody will ever know. All that's behind me now. The only woman I'll ever need is right here next to me. I'll make her happy if it kills me.”

My lips brush the back of her hand. They're both smiling, staring at me, making the whole room light up with more than just the hot, airy Mexican sun seeping through the windows.

“I know you will, son. I've done my share of interviews before the Big C laid me low, and there's a good chance I'll do some more. I know what a changed man looks like. I'm staring at one now.”

It's ridiculous, but Tom's words mean more than they should. He's right.

I've changed, and it's all for her. The old Prince Silas with his gold booze and endless pussy is never coming back. May he Rest In Peace.

The new Silas, the man I've become...well, his story's just getting started.

It's going to be fucking incredible.

ROYALLY EVER AFTER (ERIN)

Several Weeks Later

“YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL, baby. I’ll make sure you don’t trip in that thing,” dad says, holding my arm, waiting for the massive cathedral doors to open.

“You’d better! There are probably like a hundred million people watching. I don’t want to give them something to laugh about my first official day as Princess.”

“Forget it. We’ll be fine.”

My nerves make me wonder. He tightens his grip on my arm, making me smile. He’s really regained his strength, plus several pounds this past month, returning to the vibrant man he used to be.

Everything else? Jesus, it’s happening.

I’m really here. Standing at the door to a thousand year old cathedral with my literal Prince waiting at the altar. Wearing this long, flowing, angel white gown with twenty-four karat gold trim all over it.

Then there’s the diamond tiara I’ll get after my ring. The heavy, jewel studded thing that tells me there’s no turning back the instant it goes on my head.

“Ten seconds, my Lady.” Dean stands at the side, one hand near the piece attached to his ear.

Two burly guards on both sides of the doors finally make eye contact. They start to pull the massive doors open with a squeak that would make an ancient tomb jealous.

I’ve got this, I tell myself, remembering rehearsal. Just listen for the cues.

The first one, there’s no missing. A dozen coronets blow the world apart, piercing the sky, proclaiming our love to the universe.

Dad starts moving before I do. I follow carefully, one foot in front of the other, down that long, rolling burgundy carpet that seems like it stretches a mile. There are too many people on both sides of the aisle to look at any of them too long.

Dukes, duchesses, priests, diplomats, and heroes. Famous celebrities, billionaires, scientists, politicians. All wearing suits and formal dresses that could easily give mine a run for the money.

The full orchestra fires up. Medieval stone walls and stained glass shake softly, sending the heavenly, unbelievable notes up to the domed ceiling and back down again. It’s an echo unlike anything I’ve ever heard.

I’d stop and admire the breathtaking beauty. If only I weren’t the star of the show, I could stop and enjoy it longer.

“Keep going, darling. We’re almost there,” dad whispers when we’ve closed half the distance.

I won’t let my eyes fix on him until they’re good and ready.

There he is, as if from a dream. Silas.

More dashing than ever, dressed in his royal finest, a navy blue dress uniform with a red sash and medals criss-crossing it like stars. He’s waiting for me with a smug, smackable smile on his face.

His tongue comes out, almost imperceptibly, rolling across this lips for a fraction of a second. Yesterday, he teased me

about tying me down and eating my pussy all night for our honeymoon. If he's doing it again, however silently, I *swear* I'm going to flip.

Dad's hand lets go a few seconds later. I have to walk the last few steps alone, up the tiny stairs, holding my breath as I take the steps.

Silas reaches out, grabs me, and pulls me up. "Christ, you're gorgeous. Almost too hot to take to bed, love. Almost."

Yeah fucking right, the wink he flashes says.

I won't even smile at his crap today, however much I want to. Cameras watch every move we make, perched from every corner. He's already violated several rules the new press secretary drilled into our heads during practice.

Keep it formal. Respectful. Subdued.

The last one, subdued, never made sense to me, anyway. There's nothing remotely subdued about this hundred million dollar display of royal luxury.

Queen Marina sits behind us on a temporary throne, ready to do her part. Silas takes my hand in his, and we turn to face the priest, just as the final choral voices behind the music die down.

"When two hearts become one, bound in royal blood, a kingdom rejoices," the priest begins. "A people lives by its sovereigns, and dies by their absence. Today, we are gathered here with full confidence that we will live. His Highness, in all his love and wisdom, restores his line and our nation by binding his heart to hers. Will you both hold your right hands and swear before God, before the Queen, before your very lives?"

We both lift our right hands. A choral note swells high. It's so drawn out my arm starts to hurt by the end, but I keep it up, my heart banging in my ears. I'll do anything for this handsome man next to me.

"Your oath is your word, true and immortal as steel and diamond. Your Highness, do you have the ring?"

“I do.” He reaches next to him, swiping it from the lavish pillow Victor holds out. Silas’ valet looks so much better than he did just weeks ago, when he had to use a cane while the stitches in his side healed.

“Will you claim this woman, today and forever, for your crown, your country, and your future children?”

“I will, and I do.”

His words echo proudly through this insanely huge place. Then he’s shoving the ring on my finger, instantly adding weight to my hand with its gold and oversized diamonds. Breaking tradition, he brings my hand to his lips, closing his eyes.

He kisses it while the priest frowns, trying to pretend this isn’t happening. I can’t help it, I let myself smile now.

What would this wedding be if there weren’t a few things uniquely Silas mixed in? It’s ours, after all, not just the country’s.

“Erin Warwick, will you wear this ring into the next life, for your Prince, your nation, and all the children that will come from this day?”

Silas squeezes my hand and flashes me an excited look. *Great*, like he really needs to think about baby making even more.

“I will, and I do,” I say solemnly, trying hard to keep this as formal as they’d like.

“Then you’re now man and wife, and Her Majesty will finish the rest.”

Two aides have to help her up. Queen Marina crosses to the altar, and we bow. I mean *completely*, down on our knees, so low I can’t even see when she grabs the diamond tiara off its resting place.

“By my title, my will, and my wisdom, I crown thee Princess Erin June Bearington,” she says, bringing it down on my head, her old hands shaking very slightly. “And speaking

informally, as one woman to another, you're as perfect for this country as you are for its future King."

Everything stops. Silas and I both look at each other, doing a double take, before we stare at the Queen.

She's just gone off script, wearing the most mischievous smirk I've ever seen on her royal lips.

"People of Saint Moore, this day is all about Silas and Erin joining in marriage, and I won't steal their light. I've chosen to do something that will make everyone remember and cherish their love forever."

About a thousand gasps and hushed, excited murmurs rumble through the crowd. Silas reaches for my hand, gripping it, pulling me up as he stands.

"Grandmom?" he says softly. No one has a clue what's happening.

Queen Marina leans into the mic, lifting both hands above her head to the crown. "I've served you all faithfully with my very best for sixty three years. Regrettably, my health is failing, loyal subjects. I won't give you anything less than my finest. My ministers will be briefed, and the paperwork has already been drawn up by the palace. By midnight tonight, I will formally abdicate the throne. It's only fair that my grandson should stand next to his beautiful bride, wearing the highest crown, a new royal couple for our kingdom in an evolving age."

The choir starts to sing over the murmur in the crowd. They've probably decided it's the ceremony's end, like it's supposed to be. Truthfully, nobody really knows what to do after the shock and awe Her Majesty just dropped. Her ex-Majesty?

I'm clenching Silas' hand while Queen Marina lifts the heavy crown from her head, shifting it toward Silas, who bows his head low.

It's on his head. King, in all but name only.

I'm going to have a heart attack. I don't know what to say, so I just stand there, while Silas shares one more look with his

smiling grandmother.

Then he turns to me, his eyes narrowed, that huge golden crown sitting just slightly crooked on his head. “Love, let’s not forget the most important part.”

I don’t remember what he means until he jerks me into his embrace. Fortunately, my lips do it for me.

We kiss, with more fiery passion than there’s been at this altar in hundreds of years.

He kisses me long, hard, and hot. He kisses me while the crowd goes insane and cameras tip over in the commotion, with guards rushing around, settling down the madness breaking out all around us.

The orchestra and choir both keep going because they don’t know what to do. It’s a beautiful, chaotic confusion that’s strangely fitting.

For us, it’s easy.

We’re finally official, and Silas isn’t going to take his lips away until heaven itself knows it.



Several Hours Later

THE OFFICIAL CROWNING ceremony can wait, or so we’ve been told. Silas insisted on it with the royal cabinet, and they gave him their blessing.

He’s chosen a secluded spot for our honeymoon, thank God, a different corner of the northern shore, next to the most amazing mountains I’ve ever seen and an extinct volcano. The royal helicopter has nobody in it except us, and our pilot, who’s going to drop us at the cottage and go.

We’ll be left alone to the wilderness and our own hearts for the next two weeks. Plenty of time for the media to remember how to breathe. More than enough for Queen Marina to tie up loose ends, and close out everything before Silas has the reigns.

The scandal with Serena never even got off the ground. The Republic Firsters are probably seething because nobody cared when they jumped on it, stealing the headlines for roughly two seconds, before wedding madness swept everything else like a tidal wave.

There's certainly something crazy sweeping through me right now, every time his thick, strong hand brushes my wrist.

He's going to kill me with desire before we land. Silas and I share looks that say a thousand words, numbing any need to shout at each other over the helicopter's blades.

I'm going to fuck your brains out, his eyes say.

Not if I melt yours first. That's what mine say right back, while I'm biting my lip, grateful that I'm down to just one layer of casual white royal fabric.

It's so intense I can barely stop to appreciate the gorgeous scenery, swelling up all around us.

"Three minutes, sire! I'll take us down," the pilot says over the radio.

A lot can happen in three minutes. Like smoke rising between my legs, the fire only he can see, tempting him to go as deep as he needs to put it out the minute we're by ourselves.

You're a knockout, he mouths. *Beautiful as sin.*

I'm a Princess now. Isn't looking pretty part of the job?

He grins. Devouring my sarcasm in that cocky, sexy, possessive smile.

He's going to eat me alive tonight. I'm going to adore every single second.

Silas reaches over, grabbing my hand as the chopper bounces to a stop. The pilot switches off the blades. We're unloaded in no time.

It's awesomely silent out here. There's a glacial lake at the foot of the mountains. Nothing but a few distant bird calls to remind us we're on planet Earth.

Turning around, I see him helping the pilot. He looks so ordinary, lugging our stuff in, everything the royal service hasn't prepared for us several days before. Silas jokes with the pilot like they're old friends.

Smiling, I know I didn't marry him because he's a Prince. I hitched my life to the man behind the title, gold, and diamonds, the one who's struggled to get a grasp on his kingdom simply because of who he is.

Yes, he's had his demons. I've watched him slay them, one by one, until he can see me with those clear blue eyes I love. Every glance, I'm swept away.

Silas waves to the pilot, and guides me to the cottage's porch. We both watch as the helicopter lifts off, disappearing into the sky, leaving us to ourselves.

He embraces me from behind, pressing his hard-on into my ass. "Finally. Love, you don't even know how hard it's been keeping it in my pants after seeing how you looked at me at the altar..."

"Yeah?" I twist in his arms, turning around, rolling my hands up his shoulders. "I think I might have some idea. There's something sexy about a man in uniform, and yours was the best I've ever seen."

"Too bad I didn't pack it," he says with a smirk. "Only brought a few changes of clothes. We're not going to need them with all the time we'll be spending naked."

"Aw, really? I thought we were just here for the scenery," I tease.

Growling, Silas runs his hands down my back. He stops at my ass, clasps my cheeks, and squeezes them hard.

"Fuck the gorgeous views, Princess. There's nobody around here for a few hundred kilometers. We can scale the volcano wearing nothing, if you'd like, as soon as I'm done fucking you raw."

Yes. Please. My eyes say it all.

He grabs my wrist and leads me inside, kicking the door shut behind us. Inside, it's rustic, cozy as a lodge, just I imagine. We wind our way through the old rooms to the master suite overlooking the lake. It's on the second floor, really just a giant loft with a bed, a few cabinets, a hot tub, and a lovely looking bathroom attached.

I stop when I see the bed. It's even bigger than the ones in the palace, with tall black pillars reaching up to the ceiling, lion heads carved in every post.

"Hmm. I see we'll have an audience," I say, sticking my tongue out.

"I wasn't joking about the restraints, beautiful. You're going to need them to hold your legs open after you've come on my tongue ten times."

"Silas...don't tease." I can't tell when he's joking.

He sounds so deadly, excited, and serious. I'm going to find out *how* serious when he grabs me, pushes me onto the bed, and starts tearing away what's left of my wedding dress.

Our lips collide the whole time. I can't keep my mouth off his. I'm moaning, panting, begging for his touch.

He's swallowing everything I give him. All my breath, my love, my fire, pressing the massive erection in his trousers against my bare pussy. The teasing doesn't end when he pushes me to the center of the bed, dips over the bed, and reaches into one of the heavy oak drawers under it.

"Legs out. Before that pussy soaks the sheets straight through." I surrender.

He takes my feet, one ankle at a time, and puts them in the leather loops. Each one goes to a pillar, stretching me wide open for his hands, his mouth, whatever he desires.

I'm losing it when he looks at me again. Silas presses his hand firmly against my pussy, but he doesn't slide his fingers in. He just teases my clit in slow, evil strokes while his lips press mine.

“Please – please!” I’m in heat, pleading, by the time he starts his trek down my body.

My back arches each time his mouth pulls at my nipples. He sucks them rough, plumping my breasts, grinding his thumb a little harder against my clit.

“No, Princess. Not yet. Got to make me believe you need it,” he growls, kissing down my belly, then across my right thigh. “Make me believe you *need* this mouth. Then I’ll make you squirt so hard you’re seeing stars.”

Oh, hell. Doesn’t he know he’s close to doing that without even putting his mouth between my legs?

I’m twitching. Moaning. Shifting my hips side to side, aching for his touch, just a few lashes of his tongue to give me sweet release.

His licks and kisses wrap around my thigh, circling ever closer.

Closer, closer. God, please, closer!

Every muscle I have quakes as he slowly, tauntingly moves to my wet center, replacing his hand across my mound with hot, feral breath.

“Did you think this Princess thing was easy?” he whispers, mischief whirling in his eyes. “Bet you didn’t know it means giving this sweet cunt up to me anytime I want it, Erin. Any place. Any fucking way. You’re about to forget that ‘no sex’ rule ever existed.”

Forget the rule? I barely remember my own name.

I’m about to explode. He pushes his face in just then, opening me with his tongue. Licking wild, sucking furious, taking my clit like he owns it, because he does.

Pleasure’s coming, stealing me away.

Going. Going.

Gone.

My body tenses up and my legs shudder. The straps holding them open do their job, their tension adding an extra

thrill to the orgasmic wave ripping through me.

My spine turns to flame. My hips pump, riding his face, over and over and over. I can't press the back of my head into the mattress anymore.

There's nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Nothing to do except scream, and let it wash over me.

This is a tongue fuck truly fit for a royal. Sheer, mind bending ecstasy in full control for the next five minutes.

His hands and mouth won't stop. Just when I'm coming down, they stoke my flames again, pushing me back to the edge.

He's licking me even faster this time. Even harder. My clit disappears into his mouth, throbbing against his tongue, and crackles like lightning again.

I'm coming so hard my vision goes red, then white. I see dark, fiery spaces in between.

Stars. Just like he promised.

Is nothing impossible for this man? The answer's probably *no*, because about ten seconds later, I feel a dam break somewhere mid-orgasm.

I'm coming again.

Coming!

Except, this time, there's a distinct heat. A wetness that soaks my entire pussy and leaks out of me onto the sheets, his face, everywhere I can feel it through the numbing ecstasy that's ignited my blood.

The bastard has me gushing. Another promise fulfilled, one that says my body will do anything for this man on command.

I don't realize I'm clutching the sheets, nearly ripping roles through them, until he moves away from my quivering legs.

Silas comes up wiping his face, his smile more sexy than ever. Of course, that also means more arrogant.

“Hope you liked your first wedding present, love,” he says, slowly taking down the restraints. “We’ll get back to these later. But I want your legs wrapped all the way around me when we fuck. I want you to pull my dick so deep I don’t see a drop of come slipping out when it’s over.”

There’s that heat again. Impossible, as it is incredible.

“You’re the King,” I tell him.

“Not officially,” he says, slowly undoing his belt. “That won’t happen until we’re home, and I’m formally crowned. You’d better believe it doesn’t matter in this bed. I’m fucking like a god, love. Like I own every single inch of you because we both know I do.”

I’m about to mouth off, try to deny it, when he drops his pants. That huge, magnificent cock coming into view always silences me.

It’s a thing of awe. And it’s about to be mine, as soon as it’s inside me, pumping its way to a few more earthshaking climaxes.

He’s completely naked, on top of me, dragging my legs up over his shoulders. Our eyes lock fierce while my chest rises and falls.

I want him more right now than any woman should. I want my Playboy Prince, my bastard, my husband.

I want to fuck him today, and then every day for the rest of my life.

“Oh, God,” I moan, just as he starts rubbing his swollen cock against my pussy. “Go, Silas. Please. Fuck me.”

“What’s that, love? Didn’t hear the magic word.”

He’s going to make me say it. I try to hold out as long as I can, stroke by stroke. But when he starts to dip the very tip of his cock into me, pulling away before I get his fullness, I’m helpless.

I surrender, and then some.

“Please.” My eyes pinch shut as he gives me another inch.
“Yes, fuck, *please!*”

My legs shake harder on his shoulders. He grabs them, holds them still, and gives me another feral look.

“I’m in a giving mood today. Must be that hot, tight married pussy wrapped around my cock.”

He thrusts deeper. Sweet heaven.

At least, Silas fucks me. It’s a slow building storm, strengthening one stroke at a time, lifting me a little higher each time he pushes into me. His hips crash into mine each time he pulls back and glides forward.

“Harder,” I grunt, teasing him.

“Harder?” He pauses, grabs my nipples, and pinches them tight. “Like this?”

He almost pulls all the way out. Then he slams himself into me so hard my breasts shake in his hands. I’m moaning again, enraptured.

His wife.

His Princess.

His whore.

He’s taken what I said like a challenge, and I’m in trouble now. The most decadent, tantalizing kind of trouble a woman can get herself into.

His cock slams into me so fast and hard I can feel his balls slapping my ass. Silas’ hold on my legs tightens, and he’s growling, fucking me over the edge.

“That’s right, love. You’d better come for me again. I’m not giving it up until you’re begging me to stop.”

Oh, shit. Hell!

I’m screaming. Clawing at his chest. My pussy pinches his cock so hard the stars return, beautiful as they are scary. Coming shouldn’t feel this good.

My heart shouldn't throb this intensely for any man. But it does, and it will forever with my Prince.

Our fucking becomes hotter, so swift and fiery, it's blinding. I'm deep in my zone, locked when he reaches between my legs, thumbs my clit, and lets his hand go berserk while he power fucks me into the next century.

Coming! Yes, it's insane, but it's happening again.

Somehow, I hear him growling his words in between his thrusts, savage and forceful. He's whispering in my ear, driving deeper with every word, beating his balls against my ass.

"Knew I'd make you mine the second we made that deal, Princess. Fucking knew it. Good thing you love it."

I do. And he isn't done.

His hips piston faster. I've barely recovered from the last orgasm before he starts on a new one, jackhammering his cock into me. It's bigger, hotter, and faster than ever before. My pussy tingles for his come, totally engulfed in flames, praying for the only thing that can put them out.

"Silas!"

He grabs my chin and pushes his lips on mine, holding my face. Crazy doesn't even describe what I'm feeling anymore.

"You think it's hot now? Just wait, love. I'll be making you sing when we're so old and gray they're printing us on the kingdom's money. I'm going to keep fucking you. Going to keep owning every beautiful piece of who you are. Going to put a baby in your belly soon, Erin. Then another, and another, and another..."

Oh...fuck! I grab him so hard I probably scratch his shoulders.

Neither of us care. Thinking about him planting his seed deep drives me over the edge.

My hips go wild, joining his in the frenzy, bucking back at his length as hard as I'm grunting. His cock drives deep, just to the edge of my womb, and swells.

Coming! Coming! This time together, fused together, twitching as one.

“Fuck!” Silas cries out, losing himself in me.

His cock heaves everything from his balls deep inside me, flooding me with his heat, his essence. My eyes roll back in my head. It’s so intense I can’t even breathe, let alone scream.

Time flies like mad. Soon, I’ll be off the birth control, letting him own me in the most primal way a man can for real.

For now, this is great practice.

“Christ, I needed that. Every second of you, love,” he whispers, drowning me in tender kisses.

I’m still coming down from my climax. Very slowly, he softens, and then pulls out.

Laying on his chest, he holds me in his huge, tattooed arms. We’re spent, at least for a few minutes, and it’s marvelous.

“Did you really mean what you said about how you knew the first time?” I ask, letting my eyes feast on his perfect body. Every contour, every muscle, is smooth and strong as steel, like God himself reached down with a chisel and sculpted him for me.

“Don’t think I’m allowed to wear the royal crest on my skin if I didn’t believe in destiny.” He smiles, resting his forehead on mine. “Fate. There’s something to it, after all.”

His smile is contagious. We kiss again, only breaking away when his hand gently cups my cheek.

“You’re meant to be my Princess forever, babe. Mine, with more benefits than I dared imagine. Love you, Erin. Love you like nothing else in the world, like nothing any money or power will ever buy. Love you so fucking hard and real it’s never changing. Never fading. Never going anywhere. Not in this lifetime, or the next.”

“Silas...I love you, too.” My heart flutters.

He’s right about the benefits – more than he knows.

It's amazing where life takes a woman. I never thought I'd wind up married to a Prince, shaking off the best sex of my life, surrounded by a gorgeous kingdom I've just started to explore and understand.

Incredible as it is, it's nothing compared to how his words have changed, down to their very roots.

'Princess with benefits' used to make me want to slap the smugness off his face.

Now? It's the magic phrase that sends my lips to his like magnets.

We kiss. Long and sweet. Tender as our love itself.

This stopped being pretend a long time ago. It's real, and I'm proud to belong to my Prince with benefits forever.

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A BILLIONAIRE BAD BOY ROMANCE

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DESCRIPTION

NOBODY WARNED ME CHARMING MEANS
INFURIATING, INTENSE, AND IRRESISTIBLE...

CLAIRE

I'm ready to slap my new step-brother clean across the face.

Brash, arrogant, and stinking rich doesn't begin to describe Ty Sterner. He's also sinfully sexy, and wicked talented at making my blood boil.

Ty thinks it's funny to chase me around like I'm the next notch in his bedpost. He lives to piss me off. But that isn't why my heart skips a dozen beats every time I look at him.

What happens if his crude jokes about us hooking up go too far? What if I admit I actually *want* this filthy talking playboy, and one little misstep lands me in Prince Not-So-Charming's bed for real?

TY

I can't decide whether to laugh my ass off or kiss her 'til her panties ignite. Little Miss Perfect's too hot and uptight for her own good. Knowing she's off limits just makes me want her more.

There's a twisted thrill to flirting underneath our parents' roof. And I want a whole lot more than teasing her cheeks red, or watching her eyes pop when I'm strutting around half-

naked. I want to rock her world into a screaming mess and leave her soft lips breathless.

Too bad this is the summer I'm supposed to get my crap together to build the family fortune. That's a distraction I don't need when all I really want to do is find out how perfect Claire feels between the sheets...

HIT THE FLOOR (CLAIRE)

Visiting Club Zing is supposed to be my last hurrah, a post-college escape before the long summer falls across Seattle, and ushers me into grown up land. It's supposed to be my last girl's night out before distance makes things a whole lot harder.

So, why the hell can't I keep my eyes off *him*?

"What's up, Claire? You're nursing that thing like you're about to go away to Saudi Arabia for a year!" My best friend Dana points to my Long Island iced tea and lifts her own. "Come on! Put it down and keep up with me, girl. This is *our* night!"

Sighing, I raise my glass and clink it against hers. "Cheers," we both echo.

Somehow, I'm not feeling it. I've never liked goodbyes. And I *really* don't like this other bastard stealing away the attention my bestie deserves, even if he's moving around the club like he owns the place, sculpted to leave more than a few pairs of panties scorched.

Who am I kidding? Is this seriously how it ends?

By now, I'd normally be holding back the tears and hugging Dana's shoulders while she takes her stompy boots out to the dance floor. I don't understand how she wears those things so gracefully – they look like something German

soldiers used to march in – but they always make her the center of attention when she busts her moves.

I'm going to miss her stupid purple hair and how she can't let go of the goth look, even though she's pushing twenty-two, just like me. Hell, I'm going to miss this place. Mostly, I'm going to regret wasting this precious time with my eyes glued to the devil by the bar, the giant towering above everybody else.

It's so obvious I can't hide it anymore. Dana grins at me after a long, dizzying sip on her drink. She spins around and follows my eyes.

“Jesussss, Claire! Don't tell me you've never seen the owner before? Haven't you seen him?”

“Nope, never.” I shake my head. “That's the boss man? He's so young...”

My friend waves a hand, flashing the bright purple nails that match her hair dye. “Pssh. You'd own this place if your daddy was a billionaire too. That's Tyler Sterner. Playboy for life and easy on the eyes when he's actually here doing his job.”

My brow furrows. Seriously? This guy barely looks older than we are. It's even more amazing I haven't seen him around campus or here on our earlier outings. He's got the kinda body any woman with a beating heart would notice *anywhere*.

He's at the end of the bar, slapping some older, balding man on the back and laughing. Two plastic looking girls are at his side in short skirts, their ruby red lips and pearly white teeth grinning at him like statues.

Massive is a gross understatement. He puts everybody else in his shadow, even the other well-built guys next to him.

He looks like something from another age in the neat suit jacket wrapped around his broad shoulders. An aristocrat, maybe, remembering all the paintings I studied for my art history minor.

Except country gentlemen didn't get this built in the old days taking strolls through the hills and chasing after foxes.

No way. Mister – what’s his face? – Sterner looks like he’s been pumping serious iron and eating big to get big in all the right ways.

The harpies next to him step aside for drinks, and I get a view of his tight packed torso. He’s a Greek god from head to toe, a six foot something goliath with a beast of a jaw and blue eyes that look like they’re there to put out the fires he’s bound to spark in every girl who looks at him. The quirk in his lips and the messy wave in the dark hair on his head matches the self-assured way he’s leaning back against the stool.

Something tells me looks are deceptive, as they usually are. This Tyler might look like Prince Charming, but I have a crazy feeling he’s more like the ultimate rogue with the way these chicks are eyeing him.

“Hey!” Dana reaches up and snaps her fingers in my face. “Seattle to Claire Frost – come in!”

It’s nothing new, she’s done it a million times before when I space out. I always push her hand away and get annoyed. Tonight, I just smile, knowing how much I’m going to miss her crap.

“There are plenty more hotties here who’d actually give us the time of day, if that’s how you want to roll this evening,” she says with a grin. “Check out that one!”

I follow her finger to the dance floor. There’s an edgy looking boy with a few too many piercings and a swirl of thick ink around his eye that makes him look like an Amazon warrior.

Ugh. Just her type – not mine.

I’m all for edge and ink, but I like to be able to feel a man’s bare skin too beneath his decorations. I nod, take a long swig of my tea, feeling the delicious vodka and rum bathe my belly in fire.

“You go on. Looks like he’s eager for a dance,” I say, flipping my wavy hair back.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Dana wags a finger. “Come on! Shake your pretty ass. It’ll be fun now that you’ve got the

good stuff in your system!”

“Dana, Dana, Dana!” I keep calling her name as she jerks me out of my seat and pulls me toward the dance floor, but nothing’s going to stop her tonight.

It’s our last good night at our favorite club. I’m heading north tomorrow to take a few weeks off at my mom’s house before the big internship begins. I landed a paid gig with Cascades Now!, an environmental lobby with an amazing reputation for landing awesome consulting work. It’s half of the equation I need to jumpstart my career – the other fifty-percent is coming from my mom, former three-term Congresswoman, Amanda Frost.

As for Dana, she’s off to Portland for her MBA. Really, I think she just wants to embrace the city’s weirdness. There’s no doubt whatsoever she’ll fit in great with Portland’s eccentric scene and endless supply of food trucks.

I’m trying not to think about the future. It’s uncertain and exciting and so damned unnerving sometimes I feel my stomach churn. Thankfully, the alcohol hits right as we step onto the floor, numbing everything in its sweet fire. Everything is a glorious distraction up there, and it’s easy to see why my friend is a dance-o-holic.

“Go, go go! Shake it like you’re going blind!” she chirps.

I laugh, wondering how many drinks Dana had before I showed up. We’re definitely going to need a taxi home after tonight.

I move my hips, mimicking her movements. The dress I’ve picked out is too tight to dance comfortably – or maybe I’ve just let all the senior year stress add a few too many inches to my butt. Regardless, I hit it hard, and the liquor in my system helps me feel like I’m not making a complete jackass of myself.

It feels good to move – especially when dancing helps me lose track of Prince Not-So-Charming. I don’t even see his freakishly perfect jawline hovering over anyone now.

And I'm not the only one who's lost track. Nobody's paying attention to me, as usual. Several eyes are on Dana, though, including the grown up emo kid who's been circling us on the floor like a shark, his silhouette whirling through the throbbing bass and neon lights.

"Hey, little mama, you got a name to go with those moves?" He finally sneaks past me, and he's hitting on her so obviously I start to laugh.

"I'm nobody's mama!" Dana pushes playfully against his chest, and then he grabs her with a grin, pulling her into his arms. "If you want to dance with a grown woman, then step the fuck up. Don't give me that crap. Show me you've got some skills yourself!"

I watch them whirl and twitch in each other's arms. Dana flashes me a drunken wink while I try to cut in with the small talk. That's the cue we've worked out for each other to make ourselves scarce, but it's always been Dana who makes off pretty. Or should I say makes out? Fucks and moves on?

Nobody ever dances with me for more than a minute before I freeze up or shrug the idiot off as a complete asshole.

I've never been into easy, forgettable dick like my best friend. Ugh, and she's already grinding up against him. For a second, bright red jealousy burns in my veins. I wonder how it comes so naturally to her – she's had a gift for free, uncomplicated lovin' ever since our freshman year in the dorms.

Whatever. I hope to God my grown up desire to play the dating field seriously before I jump into bed with some bastard will pay adult dividends. They've got to, right? I need to believe all this waiting around for the perfect man isn't for nothing...

I'm spinning, listening to people blabber drunkenly and laugh. The hard rock switches over to some techno stuff, and the lights go insane, doubling their speed. I'm not even wearing heels and I stumble, nearly losing my damned grip on the floor.

Plowing into the huge shadow in front of me feels like slamming into a brick wall. He reacts quickly.

His arms are around me in an instant. My cheeks burn first, and I've got about three seconds to figure out how I'm going to apologize for smacking into him before I look up. When I finally do, my heart stops.

It should've been predictable as hell, yeah, but when it happens, it doesn't soften the blow one bit.

I'm staring into Tyler Sterner's glacier blue eyes.

He looks at me for what feels like a whole minute as I start to stammer and tumble back. His lips – those evil, kissable, suckable lips! – pull up like horns, exposing some adorable dimples on his cheeks. Who knew Prince Charming had the devil's smile?

“Shit, babe, you look like you've never been out on the club floor before. You had one too many, or what?” He steps close to me again, throws his hands around my waist, and jerks me close like we've already been intimate. “What's the matter? Don't tell me I'm right. Can't believe an ass like yours doesn't have a few good moves.”

My mouth drops. I try to speak, but the words won't come. Flushed, stunned, infuriated doesn't begin to describe the shock turning my blood to ice.

I can't believe these are his first words to me – his *only* words – if I have anything to say about it.

“Come the fuck on,” he growls, starting to grind and sway with the music. “Move with me, baby. I wanna see *everything* shake through that thing you've got on. I like to see what I'll be bouncing later when I'm balls deep inside you.”

Jesus, and here I thought Dana's new buddy was way too forward. My brain can't process what's happening, and my confusion rolls out in a laugh.

I start laughing and try to double over, but he's holding me too tight. I hate admitting the asshole's hands feel good on me, but I guess that's part of the charm. If you can call it that – my Prince is about as charismatic as a swamp toad.

Does he seriously think he's too good to skip cheesy pickup lines? Does he always just jump right into how he's going to fuck a girl?

“What’s so goddamned funny?” He says, that stupid sexy smile on his face finally pointing down. “Don’t tell me you’ve been hitting E or some crap. We don’t allow that shit here. Listen, I’ll toss your ass out and find whoever the fuck sold it to you if that’s why you’re laughing your damned ass –“

I slap his chest. “I’m laughing at *you*, idiot. And I’ve had exactly one Long Island iced tea this evening. Not exactly an illegal substance, last time I checked.”

“Whatever. You here to laugh your pretty head off or dance? I’ll even forgive the idiot remark if you shake it like I think you can. You’ve got the right stuff, babe.” He stares me up and down like I’m a piece of meat, making zero effort to stop his eyes from lingering on my cleavage.

He bends me around in his arms, making me do a turn so he can get a perfect view of my ass. I’ve never felt completely *undressed* by a man until now.

The smart thing to do is target his face with my next slap. But his hands zip down my back and cup my ass, giving it a sharp squeeze, perfectly timed to the way the music starts to throb again.

Asshole! I shoot him a furious look, but it’s really directed inward. I can’t believe my body purrs happily with the raw, caveman way he’s grabbing my goods. I don’t understand what the hell he’s doing to me.

I jerk backward, breaking his grip. Tyler laughs, marches forward, and grabs me by the wrist as I’m trying to get away. “Okay, okay. We’ll take it slower, beautiful. Give me another try. I’ll keep my hands off anything hanging like ripe fruit while we’re on the floor. Promise. That shit can wait ‘til later when I’ve got you all alone.”

My hand twitches in his, hungry to deliver the slap that’ll get me the hell out of this place. Of course, I don’t do it. His

smile draws me in, and I catch Dana out of the corner of my eye, pressed up against the emo boy with her lips on his.

Sigh. I slip back into his kinder, gentler grip and start to sway my hips, about the most conservative tempo anybody can keep to match the song. I try to keep my breasts and hips well away from direct contact with his washboard body.

“I’m Ty,” he says after a minute. “This place belongs to the family, in case you didn’t know why everybody’s making room for us.”

I blink and look around while he folds his arms around me. Crap, I hadn’t even noticed. It’s true. Half the people are gawking right at us, like we’re skating on ice. Half the guys look fearful, or else so jealous they’re about to hit the ground and worship us.

I shrug, trying to hide the heavy weight on my shoulders. “Well, I guess a nice, private dance won’t hurt.”

He laughs. It’s rich baritone and it resonates deep in my ears, turning my blood to lava. “Babe, this isn’t exactly what I’d call private or dancing. Now, we can do the horizontal dance in my personal suite later if you want. You don’t know it, but I’ve had my fucking eyeballs glued to you all night, and they’re gonna melt right outta their sockets if I don’t see you naked. I’ll bet you turn into a fucking whore when those panties come off...”

His voice drifts into a growl. God damn. How does he do it? I thought my anthropology class taught me Neanderthals were extinct. Except, now there’s one with his arms around me, talking dirty in my ear, keeping his hands low enough to be polite – but still so fucking close to my ass.

Too close. And having them one inch away from crude and uncivilized makes me think savage thoughts to match.

What will I do if he puts his hands there again? How will I react if he goes further, pulls me into him, grinds his undoubtedly huge cock shamelessly between my legs? Who the *hell* am I becoming in this man’s filthy grip?

I jump. The music stops. He swoops in like he's aiming for a kiss, and I fight like hell to break his grasp. I need to get him off me before I lose my mind.

This is officially too much.

It's just as well too. Out of nowhere, two plastic looking bimbos come trotting up and grab his shoulders. There's one on each side massaging him with their long, bright nails.

The redhead on his left leans over, and I let out a little gasp as she touches the tip of her tongue to his earlobe. "You said you'd be off the dance floor by now, babyyy," she whines. "Is this girl joining in or no?"

"Hold up. I need another minute." He jerks out of their grip and steps up to me.

I don't know how the hell I manage to keep my palms folded down instead of hitting him, but I do. He's shown his true colors several times over tonight. But it's not hard to see it's who he is – a rich jackass who's made Club Zing his personal kingdom – just like Dana told me.

I feel like a fucking idiot for dancing with him. Jesus, I *let* him put his hands where nobody else's have ever gone before, even when I'd started to get hot and heavy with a few college guys.

"Babe, come on..."

No. I run the instant I hear his voice. I hop off the dance floor and push through tight crowds on my way to the table. Halfway there, I look over my shoulder and do a double take. The psycho bastard is actually *chasing* me.

I can't believe he won't take the hint. Or maybe he doesn't want to. Maybe he can't believe someone is actually saying no, showing him what a disgusting pig he really is.

Reaching for my glass in the unlikely event I need a weapon, I spin around and face him, just as he reaches my table. "Look, Ty, I don't give a crap if you run this place. Stop following me. I'm *not* interested in you."

I almost choke when I say the last part. My brain agrees, but my body twists, calls me out as a liar.

“Hold up. I’m sorry we went too fast. I didn’t mean to make you scared. I just figured you were used to the business that goes down here between a man and a woman on a good night like this.” He runs a hand through his dark hair. “There’s something I gotta ask you...”

For some reason, the gesture softens my heart a little. He looks genuinely hurt. I shouldn’t be hearing another thing he has to say, but I sigh and lean in, letting him bring his lips close to my ear.

“There’s room for one more in my private suite, babe. You wanna be part of my first foursome?” He reaches around and cups my ass. “I wanna make these other sluts jealous when they see what we do. I’ll fuck you ‘til you scream and break their fucking eardrums.”

That’s when I lose it. My hand flies up and lands on his powerful jaw. I slap him as hard as I fucking can. Giving in to the urge feels incredible.

I can hear the crack over all the club noises. His lips twitch and he steps backward, drawing one hand to the hot red welt blossoming on his cheek. It’s like time locks up.

For a second, we stare at each other. I swallow, knowing I’m in deep shit. But I wouldn’t take it back for anything. *Nobody* treats me like this – especially not this pompous, strange prick who’s obviously used to getting his way too much for his own good.

Ty tips his head back and starts to laugh. I think I let a growl slip past my lips, wondering if he’s some kinda sociopath. Nothing seems to get to him. Absolutely fucking nothing.

“Asshole!” It tears out of my throat. Too bad it doesn’t stop him.

He’s still going, chuckling dark and deep like I just leaned in and whispered the world’s dirtiest joke.

When he finally recovers, wiping his eyes, he reaches into his pocket and slams something down on the table. “Thanks for the laugh. You enjoy your evening, baby. Door’s open upstairs anytime if you change your mind about that foursome.”

He turns smartly and disappears back into the crowd. It’s good he moves fast. I swear, one more second and I would’ve whipped the glass right at his stupid smug face. My heart’s racing like mad, probably faster than it has since I gave up tennis my sophomore year.

I need to sit. Sliding back into the seat, I set down my glass and reach for whatever he’s left behind. I don’t know why I bother.

It’s an envelope. When I crack it open, I gasp. Inside, there’s at least three crisp one hundreds and a bunch of smaller bills. I consider stuffing it into my purse and taking off, leaving Dana a text to explain my disappearance whenever she’s done with lover boy. But I promised we’d go home together, and I really don’t want Ty the Jackass to ruin my last night clubbing with my best friend.

I hold up a hand, waving a server over. Ten minutes later, I’ve got two fresh Long Island teas in front of me and a couple shots of high end vodka.

“Fuck you, Mister-Asshole-Sterner,” I whisper, lifting the first crisp shot to my lips.

I don’t stop until the entire club is spinning.



“CLAIRE, holy shit!” Dana hisses. “You look like *hell*, girl.”

I crack my eyes open and feel a cool compress sliding over my forehead. The first thing I smell is Dana’s perfume, now mingled with the thorny scent of the emo kid. I look up and see her hair. It’s all messed up.

In my dumb state, there’s a pang of jealousy. Why can’t I walk out of a place like this just once with Dana’s sex hair? Then I remember the only asshole who wanted to fuck me tonight, plus two other girls simultaneously.

My head jerks. Dana leans down, wiping my brow like a concerned sister. I suppose she is.

“Jesus! Take it easy.” She frowns. “Don’t tell me you’ve been sitting here alone all night drinking?”

“What time is it?” I groan.

“Quarter to two. The bar’s about to close. Hang on, I’m going to see if I can still get you some water!”

I yell out to her, but she’s moving too fast. Jesus, my head keeps pounding. I know I’ve been out at least an hour. Fastest, swiftest hangover in the world – just my luck, right?

My stomach lurches as I stand up. I try to make it to the bathroom before she gets back, but it feels like my knees are jelly.

I manage to make it just in time. The bathroom is halfway down a long hall with a big fancy burgundy door at the very end – probably leading to the kitchen or some VIP lounge. I wash my hands and stumble out, but not before I crash into the second asshole of the night.

I look up. They say karma’s a bitch, but I think it’s *deja vu*.

Ty’s huge chest stops me like concrete, except this time it’s almost bare. He’s got a robe halfway open and draped around his shoulders. I catch a glimpse of some wild geometric designs going around his neck, above what looks like a tiger or panther in full roar on his breast.

“Fucking shit. Didn’t think I’d run into you again tonight, babe.”

I barely stop myself from sticking my tongue out. “I didn’t think so either – and I’m really sorry that I did.”

Predictably, the bastard laughs. God damn it. The laugh I loved at first now just sounds like nails on chalkboard. Well, if scraping an old blackboard could be deep, sexy, resonating –

Stop. I can’t let myself think another positive thing about this royal dick.

“Christ. I can smell the booze rolling off you, babe. You need a ride home or something?”

I shake my head furiously. Big mistake. It only makes the pounding in my head worse. While I’m frozen, he reaches up and tucks a few stray hairs back against my ears.

I’m drunk and hungover, but I’m not dead. My hand shoots up, pinches his forearm, and I rake my nails down him. Just like a feral cat.

“Fucking hell!” Ty growls, steps back, and hits the wall. “Don’t be a bitch. I was just trying to make sure you’re –“

“What? Okay? Yeah, I was, until you decided to get in my face tonight. You fucked up my last night in this city with my best friend!”

He tries reaching for my shoulder, but I dodge him. Looks like I’m not the only one drunk tonight. Except there’s the unmistakable smell of women all over him. Sickly sweet sex and perfume. He must’ve fucked them for hours.

My stupid brain wants to think about it too, but I won’t let it. I try to get away as fast as my feet will carry me.

Then my heel catches on an unwieldy step going up the short staircase and I tumble.

I brace myself for a lot more pain when I hit the floor – except it never comes.

I fall right into his huge arms like a damned fairy tale. Okay, now I’m *really* pissed.

Ty flattens me against the wall as I fling my elbows against his hard abs, screaming my frustration. It doesn’t faze him.

“Shhh. Quiet, babe. Just relax.” His voice rolls low, soothing, dangerously close to my ear. “Let me walk you out for a taxi. Just need to get a shirt on. I never got your name.”

“No!” Hellfire flows through my elbows again, and I stab him in the guts, as hard as I can.

I can’t even hope to hurt him. I don’t care if he’s trying to help. I don’t trust this jackass, and I need to get away before

he drives me insane. I shove my elbows into his rock hard abs two more times, squirming like a madwoman.

He's just stunned enough to let me go, and I practically crawl up the stairs. For some dumb reason, I stop and look back, using the banister to get back on my feet.

There's a wicked sneer twisting his lips. He looks at me like something he's just stepped in, shakes his head, and shrugs. "Fine, babe, do it your way. Go the fuck home. Get some sleep."

My stomach heaves. I'm terrified I'm about to lose the liquor left in my belly all over the place. I fight back the urge to vomit and watch him stomping back to his room.

I feel like total shit. I've made an ass of myself way too many times tonight, even if it was partially this dickhead's fault. I call out to him and stumble forward, back down the stairs, before I know what I'm doing.

"Wait!" My voice echoes down the long corridor.

He stops when he's almost to the burgundy door and turns, waiting for me. "Is there any way I can hit you back for the money? I spent it, and I shouldn't have."

Brutal guilt. Shame. Typical for a Frost girl, especially one who grew up seeing her mom slandered every two years for re-election. But I don't want to owe this fucker a dime, even if we're talking about my own internal good karma counter instead of money.

"You don't owe me shit," he growls. "I paid you for the laugh, just like I said. No different than any other entertainment tonight. You wanna give me something? Go home and rest like I told you. You're not Club Zing material."

"You're not my boss." I try not to shake my head, though it's impossible when this ham-fisted apology is the dumbest idea in the world. "I just want you to know I'm not a bitch. I'm not a bad person."

He looks me up and down. Slowly. His eyes zero in on my cleavage, and I flush.

“Does that mean you changed your mind about the foursome?” He steps close, and next thing I know, I’m back against the wall. Fighting but not really fighting as he moves in for a kiss. “Shit, I’d settle for one on one at this point. Drunk and pissed, you’re still fucking hot.”

Hot. Nobody’s ever called me that before. It’s the only explanation for why I let his vile lips connect with mine.

This isn’t a kiss. This is a fucking explosion on my lips. My entire body tenses up, muscles clench, everything below the waist writhes like I’m made of snakes. I moan just as he presses his tongue in my mouth.

Of course, I’ve read about sexual tension in books and seen it on the big screen. I just didn’t think it really happened, not like this animal spark igniting between us.

His tongue twines with mine and his lips move rougher, faster. My palms are on his back and my fingers go jagged, tearing at the skin underneath his thin robe. I can’t decide if I want to hurt him or make him fuck me.

The unbelievable hard-on I feel grinding on my thigh definitely says he’s willing.

I’m about to come completely undone when my legs kick hard. I knock my knees on his and shove my hands to the wall, twisting and flattening myself, crazy to get away before I do something I’ll *really* regret. The other shit that’s happened tonight is an afternoon sprinkle compared to this hurricane staring me down.

“Don’t!” I yell, pushing against him when he comes close. “Really. I mean it. This was all a mistake...I need to go.”

“That’s not what your body says, babe. I know a girl who wants to fuck when I see one. Hell, I can *taste* how bad you want it.”

I run. This time, I don’t stop. I’m like a hummingbird darting up the stairs and through the bar, grabbing Dana by the wrist.

“Hey! I’ve been wondering where the hell you went. I’ve got your water if you want to down it before they –“

“We need to go. Right now, Dana. *Now, now, now,*” I whisper, urgent as all hell. “Let’s find a cab.”

The rest of the night happens in a blur. Dana makes me crash at her apartment, and she doesn’t let me sleep until I take a multivitamin and swallow three huge glasses of water.

I keep telling her I’m okay. I whisper something about a guy being too aggressive, too close to me when I’m drunk off my ass.

I don’t dare tell her it’s Ty, or that I practically invited the last collision with the sex-crazed jackass.

I’m already stuck in enough crap. I can’t imagine telling her how good his lips tasted on mine.

At some point, she stops interrogating me and throws a blanket over me as I’m lying on her couch. I pass out and sleep like the dead until my phone screams me awake in late morning.



“CLAIRE, it’s Mom. Just making sure we’re still on for lunch?”

Of course we are. The universe has decided to make me pay for last night.

I inwardly groan, wishing I could pass out for a few more hours. I’m alone in Dana’s place. My friend went out shopping and left me an extra key to lock up if I decide to leave, as the note on the counter says.

“Yes, mom. I’ll be there.”

“Oh, good!” her high, almost sing-song voice makes my ears ring. “Don’t be late. I’ve got some *huge* news to tell you.”

Huge? As if *big* isn’t enough? I hope to God she isn’t going to say she’s launching her Senate run early. I can’t deal with the stress of that, especially the media storm it’ll bring, when my first summer as a real adult has barely started.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Mom pauses, oh-so-concerned. I’m surprised she can’t smell the vodka through the phone.

“Late night with Dana. Nothing to worry about. I’m just shaking off all the fun.”

“*Claaaire.*” She clucks her tongue in that haughty, disapproving way she’s always done. “You need to start taking better care of yourself. You’re out of college now. When I was your age, I was struggling just to keep my head above water. I didn’t have time for all night drunken –”

Blah, blah. Fuck you. And blah.

Shaking my head, I slam my phone at the edge of the sink and wash up, listening to her lecture me about all the thrills and dangers of being a young woman. I want to cut the speaker phone, or else drown the fucking thing in the sink.

“Mom, I know. I hear you. Let’s not talk about this, okay? I really want to have lunch and figure out the ride back to Tacoma. I haven’t seen you for a while, and I actually want to. I just don’t want you treating me like a total idiot.”

“Yes, Tacoma...” She trails off oddly, and I don’t really understand why.

Maybe admitting she actually counts freezes her cold in her tracks. Mom and I haven’t really been close since I was a teenager. Her last couple terms in Congress were a blur. There wasn’t much hanging out with her staying in DC half the year while I was stuck here for school.

Then when she left the US House and came home, she was always busy with something, and I can’t say the desire to reconnect has been crazy pressing until now.

“All right. You know I’m only hard on you because I love you.”

“I know. So, Carbonari’s at one?”

“No, no. I thought we’d try something new. There’s this great new wine bar a little north of the city.”

She gives me the name and I almost fall over. It’s a budget buster for me, and way beyond anything my frugal-minded mom normally indulges too.

Damn, now I really know she's contemplating that early Senate campaign. She's going to bribe me to soften the blow.

"Okay, I'll be there. Uh, you're paying, right?"

I exhale relief when she says yes, because I'd be going home hungry if she wasn't. It's a miracle I'm not ass deep in loans like my friends, but hitting the classes hard hasn't left me much time to work, and my bank account looks really pale.

Slipping out of Dana's apartment, I lock up and slide the key back underneath the door. Then I'm in my car, struggling for oversized shades to blot out the blinding sun.

My eyes don't want to let go of what happened last night. They're throbbing like mad, making me re-live all the stupid memories at Club Zing. My mind won't get off him the whole way to the wine bar.

I can't believe I kissed a total asshole. And I *definitely* can't believe I let him put his hands all over me, however brief. Jesus, what would've happened if I'd been so fucking drunk I said *yes* to Ty's gross advances?

Shaking my head makes my eyes feel better, so I'm practically swaying to the music buzzing out my radio the whole trip. Last night needs to be my last big drinking binge ever. A tall order, I know, because right now a glass or two of wine sounds awfully good, if only to take the edge off.

The place is even fancier than I thought. If it's not the Senate campaign, I wonder if she hit big in Vegas. Mom was gone there for a whole month up until my graduation. She's a gambler by nature, which I guess is what makes politics so appealing.

I can't say I'm immune to the same adrenaline rush – and certainly not to finer things. When I walk into the place, it's heavenly. The light potpourri of high-end wines blends with well-cooked steaks and starters. My stomach growls something fierce, reminding me I haven't eaten since a quick dinner last night, before meeting up with Dana.

"Honey! There you are!"

I turn toward Mom's voice and see her sitting in a stylish tall booth. And – what the hell? – she's not alone.

I can't get a good look at the guy next to her until I slide into the free seat. When I do, he looks vaguely familiar, but my brain can't place him. He's about her age, broad shouldered and generally well built with just a hint of a gut. His face is nice, except he's rocking some thick ass glasses that make him look like my Chem 101 professor.

“Claire, this is –“

“Gary Sterner.” He smiles, jabs his hand toward me. I take it, and he gives me a powerful shake. “I sincerely hope this isn't too rattling for you. Your mother assured me this would be the best way to make an introduction, so...here I am!”

I can tell by the way he's talking that this guy is a blend of distinguished rich guy and slightly awkward nerd. My stomach starts to tighten up when I think about why the hell's he's here at all.

“Don't tell me...this is your new campaign manager?” I blurt it out and guzzle water. Jesus, my throat's so dry from last night.

I just want to get this disaster over with, and find out how royally fucked our family's going to be for the next year.

Mom laughs, loud and a little childish. She gives my question a big fat no by wrapping her arms tight around the rich geek's neck – way closer than anything that would be professional or platonic.

I frown. Mom hasn't dated in ages. Hell, being a strong single woman who survived after being left by the anonymous deadbeat who made me was always a big part of her election narrative.

“No, honey. Gary's much more special than that.” She pauses and looks at him. Talk about puppy love. “I...I don't know how else to say this...”

Holy shit. I'm sitting up so straight my spine hurts. Mom's never at a loss for words.

“Claire, your mother’s a married woman now,” Gary finishes for her. “I know it’s sudden –“

“So sudden!” Mom squeals, squeezing his arm with her hands. “We didn’t want to make a big spectacle. Gary’s got way more cameras to worry about than I do. Claire, I cut my trip to Vegas short for this. As soon as he proposed, we headed up to Alaska on his jet. Had ourselves a small, private ceremony in Denali Park. It wasn’t even a ceremony, really – just us and a priest, maybe a few grizzlies roaming around behind us. It was beautiful.”

No joke, I can feel my heartbeat in my eyeballs. It’s like they’re about to explode. I grab my water and swallow the whole thing, tipping the glass up high so it blocks my view of them.

“Claire, honey? Are you okay?”

I don’t answer until my cup empties. The glass bangs the table hard when I set it down. I shake my head for like the hundredth time today.

“I’m...Jesus Christ, Mom! Married? I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone!”

She frowns. It pains my heart to see the big smile melting like that.

Fuck. I don’t like it, but I can’t bring myself to totally ruin this special moment. I reach past Gary’s hairy arm and pinch Mom’s.

“It’s okay. I’ll get over it. It’s just going to take some getting used to, that’s all.” I try to be reassuring.

Gary clears his throat. “Yes, well, I apologize again for dropping this on you without any formal notice. It was a whirlwind, Claire. One thing I’m never going to be sorry for is putting a ring on this little lady’s finger. I hope you understand – we’re really in love. I’m going to take the very best care of your mother.”

They lean in and kiss. There’s that stupid head shake again. My prim, upbeat, and always guarded mother is acting like a goddamned teenager. It’s seriously freaking me out.

I lift my hand and summon the waiter over for more water while the two love birds are at it. Mom doesn't even look up while I order a glass of good Malbec and another pitcher. Like, an entire pitcher of water, just for me.

"I don't get it," I say, stopping until they're both looking at me again. "Gary, you mentioned something about media? Jesus, I thought this whole thing was about my mom's Senate campaign."

Mom smiles and pushes a finger to her lips. "That's our little secret, baby. And it's one I'm not ready for quite yet myself."

Gary looks at her and winks. "Come on, Mandy. I think I know all about your ambitions, and I'm right behind you all the way. You're going to make us all proud."

Mandy – fucking Mandy? Is he serious? Nobody's called my mom anything besides Amanda or Miss Frost or Representative for as long as I can remember!

"Gary!" Mom clucks her tongue.

"Just teasing, dear, I'm sure that decision's a few years off. Your mother was talking about my own little paparazzi issues, Claire," Gary says as I start massaging my temples. "Since 1997, I've been the founder and CEO of –"

"Spree," I cut in. "Fucking Spree. Of course."

Mom gives me a stern look at my language. Whatever. It's just as well because my wine shows up along with two other glasses they must've ordered before I arrived. Perfect distraction.

"We've been using your site since I was a kid," I continue. "God. Your company's a household name. That must mean you're loaded, right?"

Mom's mouth drops open. Gary laughs and clinks his glass gently against hers, giving the sparkly champagne inside it a swirl. "It's okay, Mandy. The girl deserves some slack. It's not every day your mother marries a billionaire online mogul without warning."

Christ. He can say that again. I have to stop and drink half my Malbec before I'm able to speak again.

“So, how long have you guys been dating?”

“It's been – what? – seven or eight months?” Mom looks at Gary and smiles. “We actually met at the big industry dinner in DC about a year ago. Gary came to me personally for some help moving things forward in Washington. I was on my way out and happy to take some risk with his drive to grow Spree because it meant more jobs and more revenue. One thing led to another and...well, here we are today.”

Yeah, here we are. Just where the hell is *here*?

I can't place myself in this reality anymore after they both set off this bombshell in my face. What's really insane is how sure and lovey-dovey they seem. At first, I thought it might be a marriage of convenience, something old people with years in business and government do. America doesn't have blue bloods, but it definitely has aristocrats.

And yet, the man sitting across from me with his brilliant features and graying hair is a *much* different kind of royalty than anything we've ever been. A Congresswoman's salary doesn't mean insta-millionaire, especially when she's not taking kickbacks. Mom stayed fairly clean for a politician.

Her new hubby, on the other hand, is a billionaire. Billion with a capital B. I can't fathom it, but I'm going to have to try.

This is the new normal, isn't it?

“Claire, are you sure you're okay?” Gary's tone is almost fatherly.

Holy shit. Fatherly. That's right – he's officially my new *step-father*, something that didn't hit me in the face until now. Staring at the huge diamonds on Mom's finger helps drive it home too when she turns her hand and they catch the light.

“I'm fine. I'll be okay, I mean. It's just a lot to take in after a long night out.”

“Of course it is, honey. Don't worry. We'll all mull this over at a big family dinner soon enough. I just wanted to give

you a chance to find out in a nice, relaxed atmosphere.”

Ha ha, Mom’s so funny today. The way my heart’s beating, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to relax again. I look at Gary, narrowing my eyes.

“So, what’s your story? I hope Mom isn’t like your fourth wife? Have you been married before, Gary?”

Another scolding look from Mom. I feel kinda bad, but there’s no fucking way I can be polite. Not when my whole world keeps crashing to smithereens. My brain racing a trillion miles an hour strips away the mind-to-mouth filter. Naturally, that makes me think of the asshole and his smothering kiss last night.

Gary laughs, patting my mom’s hand. “It’s okay, Mandy. Really. I like curiosity. Claire, you’ll be pleased to know your mother’s only the second woman I’ve ever called my wife. And I intend to make sure she’s the last.”

I raise an eyebrow, breathing an inward sigh of relief as more water shows up. I pour it and start sucking it down. My body needs it, plus it might just keep the nuclear reactions inside me from going off.

“What happened to number one?” I ask in between sips.

“Skiing accident. It was terrible. I still think about those times – where does it all go?” Gary shakes his head. Finally, someone else’s turn to do it. “I was a young man with a startup and a five year old son in those days. There wasn’t time to mourn. The only saving grace is I wasn’t such a popular guy then – the media left my family alone. I wasn’t on their radar yet. It was up to me to raise my son alone while I built my company. I’m pleased to say it all worked out. Mostly, anyway.”

I nod. Okay, maybe Gary’s not such a weirdo with a silver spoon hanging out of his mouth after all. I gnaw on some bread while they make goo-goo eyes at each other again.

Shit. I hope the spark wears off at some point like all relationships. It’s going to be a *long* fucking summer if I have to see this all the time.

Munching isn't helping my stomach much. I have to really focus on drinking my water and trying to remember what Dana taught me about meditation from her yoga classes to keep from spitting wine up all over the table.

"Honey, you're *sure* you're okay?" Mom gives me the look of death, demanding I tell her the truth.

"I think I need to rest. Let my brain recuperate after it's been blown right out my ears. I hope you don't mind if I cut this a little short. I just want to go home."

Gary laughs and looks at me. "You're perfectly welcome to join us at our new home, Claire."

New home? Oh, shit. I hadn't even considered that, but it does make a scary kinda sense.

Mom nods. "It's way better than our old condo. I think you'll like the house – Gary had his maid set up a room for you, Claire. You'll find everything you need there, and if anything's missing, just shout. I'll be putting the old place in Tacoma on the market soon too – it's peak buying season, after all."

I throw down my napkin and stand up. I really want to whip it right at them and scream until every wine glass in this fucking restaurant breaks.

It's one thing to have my whole world turned upside down, but now they're telling me the only thing I can really count on – *home* – is somewhere else?

"Don't worry about driving. We'll take care of your car," Gary says. "I already told my driver to wait for you out front. I figured you'd need a little time to be alone and get settled in. You'll find my place in Bellingham very comfortable, Claire. My chauffeur will have you home and be back here to pick us up in no time."

Jesus. Bellingham's like an hour north on a good day. They must be planning to sit here for a good long while and drink, maybe make out or something nasty I definitely don't want to see

I do the only thing I can in this situation. I plaster on my biggest, fakest grin and shake Gary's hand.

"That actually sounds good right now. Are you sure you'll be okay getting my stuff home? Everything I brought off campus is in the trunk."

Mom beams – probably relieved I'm making a graceful exit instead of an explosive one. "Of course! We'll take care of everything, baby. Gary's a good man. When he proposed, I told him you're my number one. Our marriage doesn't change that."

"And I told her I want the whole enchilada," Gary says, reaching for my hand. "Mandy's family is mine now, Claire. I know it's going to take some time, but give me a few months, and you'll see I'm right. I always am."

I give him one more weak smile and get the hell away before I'm drowned in their affection or the billionaire's arrogance. True to his word, there's a sleek black sedan waiting out front with a neat looking driver, who gets out and opens the door for me as soon as he sees me coming.

My only regret as I slip into the car is that I didn't have more water, and more wine.



ONE THING'S for sure – Mom and new Step-dad aren't bullshitting about the size of the house. When the car rolls through a gate that's like twice as tall as I am, I know I'm in trouble.

There's a guard shack. An honest-to-God security checkpoint just for billionaire Gary, and I guess that includes Mom and me too.

The man in the guard shack smiles and waves us through, just as friendly and perfectly behaved as the driver. The place looks like a modern castle sitting on the coast. Powerful waves churn just over the hills, and I see one of the cleanest Washington beaches ever below.

On the other side, it's flanked by the most blinding, beautiful green the Pacific Northwest has to offer. The

incredible foliage hanging around the house reminds me all our rain has its advantages.

“Miss Frost,” the driver says, almost like he’s about to salute me when we pull up. I step out through the door he’s holding, gawking at the monstrous palace for a good thirty seconds.

Then my stomach twists again, and I’m forced to move, if only to get inside and use the bathroom.

The key Gary gave me works. It’s a card, just like at a hotel, and apparently there’s an app to let your phone unlock the door too. I wouldn’t expect anything less from a tech mogul.

Luckily, there’s a bathroom nearby. It has about all the fine finishes I expect. I do my business, wash up, and run cold water over my face. What little I’ve seen of the house so far makes me feel like I need to purify myself just to be here.

When I step out in the hall, the first thing I hear are footsteps. Thinking I’m alone, I jump. But that’s stupid, I tell myself. I already know Gary has a housekeeper and who the hell knows what else – and I’d better get used to it awfully fast since this is my new home now.

He also mentioned a son...and didn’t really say much else about him. Is he living here too?

I head down a long hall with these awesome murals, hoping it brings me to the kitchen. It does. The massive refrigerator has a whole shelf filled with drinks – mineral water, fancy juices, kombucha, and some other tasty looking imports I’ve never seen before. It all looks good, but I know I need more water.

Always more. My stomach won’t forgive me until I’ve replenished everything the last two days have drained from my system.

I head through the other opening in the kitchen, ready to explore at least this little part of the mansion. There’s a dining room, and then a hallway leading to what looks like an

awesome living room. There's leather furniture, the biggest glass windows with a perfect view of the ocean, and –

Oh, hell. There's a young man standing right in the middle of the room, dripping wet from a workout, shirtless. He's ripped and tattooed as all hell. It looks like he's just come in from a run, or maybe using the gym – wherever that is.

I set my drink down on the nearby counter nervously and hold my hand up to wave. If he's Gary's son, I never thought I'd be meeting him like this. I hope it's not too awkward.

Only one way to find out.

“Hi, there. I'm Claire.”

The boy turns around. His piercing blue eyes dart right through me like a bullet to the head.

“Fucking shit,” Ty says, breaking into a princely smile.

Fucking shit is right. I barely have time to reach out and catch myself next to my drink before I go crashing to the floor.

LITTLE MISS PERFECT (TY)

I can't believe this chick's standing in my living room. It's living proof that there's a god in heaven, and apparently he wants me to fuck this girl right through the floor. Nothing else explains why the only woman who ever said no to me in my own club is here, looking at me like I just stepped off a UFO.

I'm about to give her some serious shit for walking in on me like this, but her knees are shaking. I know a woman who's fainting when I see her. Our poor housekeeper, Joan, used to have the same damned problem before she got her insulin under control.

I rush over just in time before she crashes on Dad's Turkish rug. I gotta suppress a smile as I catch her. She feels too fucking good against my almost naked body. Obviously, I don't wanna upset Little Miss Perfect anymore while she's reeling, but fuck, I've already done that just by standing here.

She's comatose in my arms. Not exactly how I wanted to feel those sweet curves against me again, but what-the-hell-ever. I reach for the mineral water next to her, unscrew the cap, and splash it right in her face.

That wakes her up.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" She screams, batting me away.

When I'm sure she's able to stand on her own two feet again, I let go, and give her the space she's flipping her shit

over. “Making sure you don’t bruise your pretty face on the damned floor. It’s harder than it looks, even with the rugs. Trust me, I’ve slipped on my ass here before.”

Watching her face, it’s like a fuse in slow burn. When it hits the charge, I see the explosion in her eyes, the horrible realization about who I am and why I’m standing in front of her.

Believe me, it’s a disaster for my sorry ass too. I knew dad remarried some former Congress queen, and I’m supposed to meet the new family soon. I knew the woman had a daughter.

But I didn’t expect it to be this delectable piece of ass that got away from me last night. Having a step-sister this hot introduces me to some sick torture I’m just starting to comprehend.

Fuck me. Maybe it’s not a miracle she’s in my house after all. Maybe it’s a devil’s curse – Old Scratch come to collect my karmic debt for all the girls I’ve fucked and walked away from.

“*Sterner. Sterner.*” She repeats my last name over and over, stretching a hand across her face like her skin’s boiling. “Jesus Christ. How could I be so stupid? Why didn’t I put it together until now?”

I smile, shrug, and mimic her gesture. There’s still a lotta sweat dripping all over me after my workout downstairs. Training always leaves me beat and damp when I do it right, and this chick’s the reason I hit it extra fucking hard this evening.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me your name last night? I was trying to help, you know. We could’ve avoided this embarrassment.”

“You were trying to fuck me!” she screams, getting up in my face.

Those sweet tits beneath her shirt plump up and bounce real nice. She looks good enough to slam against the wall and devour with my hands, my mouth, my dick, no matter what she’s wearing. And that’s rare, especially when I’ve been on a

strict diet of club girls who just wanna suck me off because I'm hung and rich.

And in the cold light of day, some of those chicks are a lot less fuckable.

Not the one in front of me, cursing my name, though. It's not even possible. She's hot twenty-four-seven, morning or night, rain or shine. My dick twitches, thinking about all the shit it wants to do to her in all those conditions.

Claire. I burn her name into my memory, wondering why the hell it's landed in my lap when I tried so hard to squeeze it outta her at the club.

She's shaking her chestnut hair, blinking those big brown eyes to match, the same way I've seen her do like ten times by now. "I can't believe this."

I step up and extend a hand, trying to give her a proper handshake. She slowly takes it and looks sick, but of course I'm not gonna let her off that easy.

"I know, babe. I can't believe we're never gonna fuck. Somebody's got a sick sense of humor to bring our parents together. That's for damned sure. Can you believe your new step-brother's a badass motherfucker, *Sis?*" I flex my muscles and rub myself against her.

She jumps back like I'm on fire. I can't help but laugh. Humor's all I've got to take the crazy fucking edge off – not that it helps much when I feel how hard her nipples are.

"Don't you dare call me that!" Claire purses her lips and wags a finger. "Jesus. Are you always so crude?"

I turn around and shrug, crossing the room for the Gatorade I left sitting by the window. "Maybe, if you're a fucking prude all the time. Shit, I was hoping you'd lighten up and come alive outside the club. Guess you carry that stick up your ass wherever you go, huh?"

Her eyeball twitches. The girl looks like she's gonna explode.

“You’re...you’re...” It’s cute. She’s really at a loss for words.

Go ahead and say it. Yeah, I’m a rat bastard, and I’m easily entertained too. I’m pushing her to her fucking limits and loving every second.

I stand behind the sofa, hiding the savage wood I’ve got popping in my shorts. It wants inside her like a battering ram. My dick’s dumb – it can’t comprehend there’s a major taboo blocking us from getting down and dirty. Or maybe I’m the idiot for just now seeing a few more fireworks when I think about holding her down and slamming my cock as deep as it’ll go.

Step-sis or not, there’s no damned way I’m letting her see how much she turns me on. This attraction’s just a game as long as she’s in this house, and I’m the one in control.

“Well, spit it out. I’m what, babe? The biggest swinging dick who ever crashed into your life?”

Fuck it. I wanna set her off. I step past the couch sporting my massive boner, but she’s too pissed to look below the waist.

“I was going to say the biggest piece of shit I’ve ever met.” The words come out like she’s foaming at the mouth.

“Well, we’re in the cesspool together now. Better get used to it,” I tell her. I’ve had my fun, and now it’s time to diffuse the situation before she bolts the fuck outta here and never comes back. “Tell you what, Claire, you forget about the last two brushes we’ve had and I’ll do the same overnight. I’ll give Dad the cozy little family breakfast he wants tomorrow morning. You’ll settle in and do the same.”

“I’m not listening to *your* suggestions,” she snaps. “I’ll do whatever I want.”

I shrug long and hard. Not just to brush her the fuck off, but because it feels damned good after a heavy workout.

“Your funeral. I’m just trying to make the most of a shitty situation, and I’m not hearing any good ideas from you.”

“Shitty situation!?” She screams, balling her little fists at her sides, shaking them like rattlers. “Stay the hell away from me. I don’t care what’s going on between our parents, Ty. Let me make this loud and clear, right now – I’ll *never* be family to you. I don’t even want to your friend. We’ve spent all of half an hour together, and you’re the last guy I ever want to deal with.”

“Cool.” She blinks in surprise as I take a long pull from the blue juice in my bottle. “No, really. You’re bitchy. Direct. Honest. I like that. I’m not much for bullshit. I threw my cards on the table, and so did you. Now that we’ve got that shit outta the way, we can figure out how we’re gonna live under the same roof without driving each other absolutely fucking loco.”

“Argh!” She punches the air one time with both her hands and turns.

She’s had it with my shit, and I’m not real inclined to deal with her either. Seeing her flip her back and give me a nice view of that hot little ass as she stomps away feels a helluva lot better than more talk anyway.

I follow her, keeping my distance, watching as she stops by the main entrance and freezes. I wanna bust another gut, laugh in her perfect face, but I don’t. I stand there and wait, feeling the sweat drying on my body.

With a heavy sigh, she spins, knowing I’m there. “Are you going to point the way to my room, or do I have to figure it out myself?”

I stick my thumb out. “Down one floor. You’ll see a big door for the laundry room. That’s where you wanna turn, and then go all the way around the corner to the next hall. You’ve got the one with the purple walls and the beach view, right next to mine.”

“Huh? We’re neighbors? In this huge of a house?” She croaks, and I half expect to see her wither right in front of me. “Jesus Christ.”

Surprisingly, she takes it in stride, and I watch her sashay angrily down the steps. She pulls open the door to the lower

floor and her footsteps are softer, fading 'til it's hard to believe she was really right in front of me at all.

I don't follow her down there to my room because I've got to shower and wrap up some other shit.

It's a little too warm in the house. I need to find Joan to make sure the temperature controls are set just right. This place is so fucking big it always takes an adjustment or two when the seasons are shifting.

For the first time this year, I'm actually looking forward to summer. Having Claire behind my wall's gonna make it a lot more interesting.



THE NEXT DAY, I'm the first one in the dining room. Don't have a damned clue what time our parents got home.

Shit, *parents*. Plural.

It's been so fucking long since I've thought about that word. It's alien to everything I know. And whatever the hell happens, the prissy Congresswoman Dad married for reasons I'll never understand will never be my ma.

She died skiing on the slopes outside Olympia before I barely knew her. There's never been anybody but Dad, busy CEO and father-of-the-year. Or at least that's the way he presents himself to the smiling reporters.

The real Gary Sterner raised me. I respect him the way a peasant pays respect to a hard ass tyrant.

Whatever. It's his right, I guess, and it's not his new lady's fault that she saw something in my old man. I swear I'm not gonna give her too much shit as I wash up and head down to the dining room.

I've got Claire for taking the brunt, after all. And you'd better believe I want to give her a whole lot more than total crap. I want to give her everything I got, hard and deep and raw. I want to fuck her breathless, fuck her 'til she's biting my shoulder, slam into her tight wet cunt 'til my dick's so numb I can't even feel it.

I stop and lean on the staircase's banister for a moment. Gotta collect myself. This thinking's dangerous, and I know it.

Wish I could figure out what the hell it is about this chick that keeps lighting me on fire. Every time we're in the same room, it's like there's a storm building underneath my skin, thunderheads so fierce and primal I'd be scared if it didn't make me tingle so damned good.

Love at first sight? Fuck no.

I don't believe in that shit. Lust at first sight, on the other hand, just might have some serious truth behind it.

My lungs pulse relief when I get downstairs and see she's not there yet. It's just Dad, sitting on his throne at the head of the table like he always does, and a dark haired lady at his side I can only assume is Amanda Frost.

No, Amanda Sterner. My new step-mom. Shit.

"Tyler!" She stands up when I come in like I'm the damned President or something. I wonder if it's the same way she bolted up at the State of the Union speeches back in DC. "We've been waiting for you kids. It's so good to finally meet you!"

She puts her hand out. Dad's watching me like an eagle about to swoop in on its kill.

I skip the handshake and give her a hug. She clings to me tight, pleasantly surprised by the gesture. I hope like hell my father's just as pleased – maybe he'll lay the fuck off and cut me some slack. It's gonna be hard as hell behaving myself with Little Miss Perfect due any time.

"Pleasure," I say. "How was Denali?"

"Ty, why don't you sit down and grab a plate?" Dad cuts in, before she can answer my question. "We don't need to stand around gabbing like rednecks when we've got this wonderful spread. Have you seen Claire?"

"I met her yesterday," I tell him, dropping into my seat. "She was tired. Seems like meeting you was a lot for her to take in."

His lips twitch. I smile, wondering who the fuck's really bottling shit up the most and practicing their best behavior. Not just me, apparently.

“Oh, I should've gone down myself to check on her,” Amanda says. “Maybe I should anyway, just to make sure...”

She starts to get up, but Dad lays a protective hand over hers. “Nonsense, Mandy. I'll send Joan to give her a wakeup call. I don't blame the poor girl for sleeping in. She's been under a lot of pressure.”

Dad's about to tap the button for the intercom on the wall behind him to call our housekeeper, when Claire comes trotting in. She looks neater today. She's wearing some fresh shit her mom must've picked out and stashed in her room.

It's a nice white summer dress. I'll be fucked if it doesn't make her tits look like heaping scoops of vanilla ice cream. My dick's been reasonably well behaved this morning 'til now.

I'm fucked the minute I take a good long look. It instantly pops up and starts straining in my pants, giving me the mad desire to carry her outta the dining room, find a quiet spot to throw her on the floor, and bury my face between those perfect fucking globes while I piston between her legs.

“Claire!” Amanda jumps up again, beaming. “I'm so glad everybody's finally in the same place. Sit, sit. The food's nice and hot.”

Nothing like a hot breakfast to smooth things over. I stack my plate high with pancakes, sausage, and extra scrambled eggs, watching Claire sitting across from me. She gingerly picks a few pieces of cantaloupe and slaps them onto her plate before she finally meets my eyes.

Brave girl. Sexy girl. Woman I can't resist.

“You always eat like a bird, or is it just the summer heat?” I stuff a bite into my mouth and point my fork at her.

“I'm still getting over my stomach trouble yesterday. Just having something light.”

“Ty.” Dad's evil eye twitches.

“He’s right, honey,” Amanda cuts in. “You really should have a little protein. I imagine you know a thing or two about eating healthy, Tyler.”

“Ty. We don’t do that Tyler shit around here.” I tell her, soon as she looks at me. “Yeah, I try to keep it lean and healthy when I’m training. Other days, a guy’s gotta eat. It’s the best season for it, after all. Love my protein.”

“Training?” Claire speaks her first word of the day to me, cautious and questioning. “What do you play?”

“I’m into this underground MMA shit. Nothing like getting up close and personal with some psycho fighter to test your strength. It’s good for this body and great for my charity. My club hosts matches sometimes, with most of the proceeds going to a good causes.”

“Good causes,” Dad growls, stabbing at his food. “I think a better cause would be focusing on expanding your business, son. Do you realize how much more you’d be able to raise for folks in need if you made Club Zing a franchise?”

We lock eyes. It’s the same goddamned shit we’ve been through before. On the surface, Dad wants me to make something of myself, become my own self-made millionaire so I’m not forever in his shadow.

But I know at the root it’s the same bullshit. He wanted the perfect son. He thought he could raise one part-time, fill the gap left by ma’s death with endless maids and tutors.

Obviously, it didn’t fucking work.

He got me instead.

Drinker. Playboy. Fighter.

Not his little prince, hanging on his every word and jonesing at the chance to take over his multi-billion dollar empire.

I don’t hide what I am. I get down and dirty in the ring when I’m not fucking some slut’s brains out in the nearest room. Got no apologies about it neither – I’ve busted a few teeth and blooded noses in my time. I’ve left bruises on my

opponents so hard they'll be feeling them for weeks. And I've taken my share of pain too.

Yeah, it's fucked up, but I'm not gonna stop. The bastard across the table can't make me with his guilt trip and fatherly glare, and neither will these two freaks joining the family. No, make that one tight wound freak and her *very* fuckable daughter.

"I know I'd raise a lot, and probably turn into a flabby old fucker too. Not interested, Dad. I'm planning to live a good long life and stay fit. Work hard, play hard. Don't tell me you wanna have this argument again?"

I watch his fingers writhe as he grabs his coffee and brings it to his lips. If we were alone, the cup would be half-depleted by now, losing half its shit on the table when he slams it down like a stone. I'd be grabbing my plate and running off to my room, leaving his sorry ass screaming after me, pouring out all the impotent rage I set off in his skull.

"I don't want any arguments today, Ty," he says, stuffing his emotions. "I wouldn't dream of ruining our first family breakfast together. We'll just have to agree to disagree."

Amanda plasters a big grin on her face. Yeah, she's a tough old bird, but she's got some of her girl's looks too. She must've been quite a number back when she was Claire's age.

"So, how about the Denali wedding? You got any pictures, or was it all just done on the fly?" I'm really pushing my old man's self-control.

He shoots us the biggest, fakest smile I've ever seen. "Only a few. You'll all see them later. Truth be told, we couldn't contain ourselves. There wasn't much time for a proper photographer. When Mandy said yes, it was right off to the park. We had to get it done."

"And it was perfect." Mandy slides her hand into my dad's.

Claire looks at me, an eyebrow raised, while they kiss. Little Miss Perfect and me are on the same side here – grossed out and seriously suspicious.

I can't figure out what the fuck's going on. Nothing about the insta-wedding computes. I want to believe the Congress queen's tapped some unseen, softer side of my dad that's been dead since I was a kid, but I'm not gonna fall for it yet.

"So, Amanda, tell us what it's like being in the belly of the beast," I say, changing the subject. "Is Congress really the clusterfuck we see all the time on TV?"

She blinks. Claire stifles a laugh. Dad looks at me like I've just moved up on his shit list.

"Ty, don't be rude."

"What? Don't say you're gonna blame me for taking a sudden interest in politics." I look around the table with the same bullshit look that used to drive my teachers crazy in high school.

Amanda shakes her head vigorously – another thing she's got in common with daughter dearest. "Trust me, I get it all the time. It's inevitable when you've served three long terms and survived the campaign trail. If I didn't have a thick skin by now, I'd be nothing but bones."

Her eyes flash bright and she flicks her hair back. "Honestly, Ty, the game we're playing isn't so different. I'm sure you understand after growing up with a powerful businessman for a father. Heck, you're managing a club yourself. You understand compromise, work, and good old fashioned 'getting things done.'"

I snort. "Wasn't that one of your campaign slogans?"

"Very good, young man. Looks like you're as smart and attentive as your father." She watches me shrug.

The weird compliment rolls off my back. Fuck, how hard is it to watch the news? It's not like there aren't a billion bullshit ads every two years while assholes are out politicking.

"You're on your way like my Claire. I'm so glad neither of the kids in this family are drunk on the youthful idealism that trips up so many young people."

“Mom...” Claire waits ‘til she’s got her mother’s attention. “You’re being a little cynical, don’t you think?”

“I think she’s a realist. That’s fine and fucking dandy by me.”

Little Miss Perfect flips her face toward me and gives me a glare that says *I didn’t ask you, asshole*. I don’t even look at Dad because I know he’s on his last warning stare right now.

“Come on. Don’t let my language shock you, sis,” I tease. “Surely, your ma’s heard some serious shit talk on the campaign trail and up on the Hill. How many reps does New York send to Congress? Those fuckers alone talk like animals.”

“God damn it, Ty!” Dad’s fist hits the table, and everybody jumps. “One morning. That’s all I asked for.”

He wipes his brow and turns to his new wife. “I’m very sorry, Mandy. I warned you about my son. My biggest regret is never being able to get his potty-mouth under control. I’m sure the dirt goes straight to his head too. It’s a shame I neglected to shove some soap in his mouth when he was little.”

Amanda sniffs and smiles politely, like she’s at a loss for words. Dad lingers a moment longer, then rips himself up off his seat, and goes stomping toward the stairs. He learned a long time ago that sending me to my room doesn’t do shit – and it’s not even an option since I hit my twenties.

“I’m afraid Claire isn’t the only one who’s been under some stress lately. This marriage is such a *huge* shift for everyone. I’d better go check on him.” Amanda’s chair scrapes the floor, and she stands up on her heels.

Well, at least she’s not looking at me like I just took a dump on the table. Neither is Claire, surprisingly. The chick looks totally stunned, almost sympathetic.

I should be happy someone else finally sees my father for the jackass he is, but it doesn’t matter. Her tight, twitchy little lips wrapped around my cock are all I can see when she looks at me like that.

“Hey, I’m so sorry to cut this short. It’s wonderful to meet you, Ty. I’m sure we’ll all get to know each other better once everything calms down. We’ve got the whole summer.”

Amanda nods apologetically, and then she’s off like a bullet.

The woman catches herself before she crashes into Joan, who’s come to clear the plates. The old maid gives me a sassy look. I’m lucky she finds my shit amusing and doesn’t think I’m a total devil. She’s the closest thing I’ve had to a mother since my real one died.

“I’m so sorry!” Amanda barks, steadying herself on the wall so she doesn’t topple over on those tall black heels. “Kind of in a rush.”

“No need to apologize, madam,” Joan says, clearing a path for her.

“Oh, that reminds me – you kids both have the day off, don’t you? Why don’t you take some time to get to know each other? It’s beautiful out there!”

I follow her smile to the window behind Dad’s empty spot. She’s right – it’s really a gorgeous summer day. Blue skies, not a cloud in sight, the ocean rolling, stabbing a thousand middle fingers at the heavens.

Amanda trots off and heads upstairs. Claire and I are alone and quiet for about a minute, just listening to Joan hum gospel to herself while she clears the plates, loading them onto the nearby cart.

Damn do I love that woman and her music, even if I’ve never been the religious type. I let Joan’s soft hymns float over me and don’t dare look at Claire again ‘til she’s done. Even I have limits for how fucking awkward it would be to have my cock at full mast while I’m listening to the soft, sweet stuff that used to lull me to sleep.

“Well? What do you say, *Sis*?” I emphasize the word, loving the way her eyes spark with anger when she hears it. “How ‘bout a little family bonding time?”

“No way.” Claire’s cheeks go red.

She's pissed off, embarrassed, confused. I can't blame her, but I sure hate having my ass turned down. I'm not used to no, and it sits about as well with me as a punch to the jaw.

Her chair screeches on the floor just like her mom's, and then she's up, taking her glass of orange juice with her.

"You're crazy if you think this breakfast changes anything. After seeing your dad blow up, I can kind of see where your crap comes from, Ty. I feel bad for you." She lowers her voice. "But let's just get this clear – there's *no fucking way* I want to spend any time with you. Certainly not alone. I saw what you're like at the club. You're a drunken, crazy, womanizing *creep*."

Fucking shit. It stings more than I expect, lights a spark I haven't felt since I was a goddamned gawky teenager asking out a senior chick to prom my sophomore year. The older girl said no, and she was the last one ever 'til today.

"Okay, Sis. You wanna treat me like a goddamned stalker criminal, then I'll fucking act like one!" I get up in her face for a second, flatten her against the wall as she gasps. "I read you loud and clear. This creep's gonna fuck right off. I thought it'd be nice to sort this shit out, maybe try to find some common ground. But you're absolutely right – we don't fucking need to, and I sure as hell don't need your shitty sympathy. You can shove it up your perfect ass and spend the day alone. I can do the evil eye too, Sis, and that's all you're gonna get from me all summer."

I let go. She blinks, and doesn't move a muscle. Turning sharply, I head into the hall.

I don't even feel bad about scaring the shit outta her for like the third time since we met.

The only thing that makes me burn is my own stupidity. I've been a fucking idiot to think I'll ever feel *anything* for this woman except a blinding urge to fuck her, or else rip her goddamned head off.

There's no common ground between us. There's nothing. The bitch is right – if it doesn't involve my dick pushing in her

pussy, then we don't need to explore. We just need to stay the fuck outta each other's way.

CALM AND STORMY SEAS (CLAIRE)

I didn't know whether to scream or slap him. He gets in my face, sad and scorned and angry all at once, and then he's gone in an instant, leaving me hating him more than ever. I also feel like the biggest bitch in history.

Guilt blossoms in my stomach like a heavy, bitter lump. But then I remind myself that Ty's used to getting his women on demand, however he likes. I won't oblige him. I'm not going to play nice when he hasn't given me one good fucking reason to.

I can't pretend. I'm not going to suck up to him and bring myself agonizingly closer to sucking what's probably a magnificent cock between his legs.

Just thinking about how close we've been the last few times makes me blush.

I head downstairs and sit at my laptop, trying to read some stuff my new boss has sent over. It's a nice escape for awhile, but I can't stop looking out the window.

The beautiful day lends a terrible distraction. Right now, I don't want to be reading about how fat cats are wrangling to bring down every inch of Cascadia's pristine wilderness. I want to be out in it, running along the shore, feeling the warm sand flush between my toes. Here in Washington, these are the rare days you're supposed to pluck from the tree, gorge on every golden second that breaks the eternal rainy gloom.

Damn it. I last about an hour, and then I can't take it. I'm going stir crazy.

Slamming my laptop shut, I grab a water bottle and head out to the huge twelve car garage. My rusty shitbox of a car looks as out of place as I feel in this house. It's a decaying tumor wedged between three shiny new Tesla cars. I wonder if they all belong to the billionaire, or if one of them is Ty's.

"Hey, what the fuck?" A gruff voice behind me makes me spin.

Ty's standing there in shorts and a wickedly tight t-shirt, an umbrella tucked underneath one arm, plus a bottle of sun screen. In the other, there's an open bottle of rum. I smell it on him, spicy and infuriating, the rum's natural hues blending with his rough, masculine scent.

"What're you doing out here? You're drunk."

He laughs like it's a joke. "I'm going to the fucking beach. Just like you, sis. Forget the bullshit I said earlier. I'll walk. Maybe we'll meet somewhere up ahead."

My mouth drops. With the way he's slurring his words, he's in no state to do anything, let alone navigate rugged patches of Pacific coast. He's putting me in an impossible position, doing a complete about-face from the venom he hit me with earlier.

So, you're not just an asshole, I think to myself, but an asshole who likes mind games?

For the millionth time since meeting Ty Sterner, I have to decide whether to shake my head or whack him across the cheek. Doing both sounds really good right about now.

"You can't go anywhere like this. Put the rum down and go back inside," I snap.

Instead, I just stand there, watching as the arrogant smirk on his lips melts and he turns around.

"Eh, what-the-fuck-ever. I tried, babe. See you on the flip side."

My eyeballs almost pop out as I watch him stagger over to one of the fancy electric cars. He pulls open the door to the shiny white Tesla car and crumples in the driver's seat. The asshole's drunk, but thankfully he's so wasted he can't even find the keys in his pocket. He swears when he realizes he doesn't even have them, and I start to laugh.

"What's so fucking funny?" he growls, stepping out and slamming the door behind him with a bang.

"You're such an irresponsible dumbass, Ty. I almost feel sorry for you. Almost."

"I told you I don't need your sympathy. What I need is a ride to the goddamned beach. Now, you gonna let me chill in your car, or are we gonna waste a perfectly clear Washington evening seeing who can piss the hardest?"

I sink my teeth into my lower lip. He's an asshole and an idiot.

I can't believe I'm about to do this, but leaving him here to roll around drunk or even hurt himself under the influence isn't something I want on my hands. Honestly, he's sad too, pulling on my heartstrings in a lost boy kinda way.

"Fine. Follow me and get in. I swear to God, if you touch anything in my car or lay another hand on me, you're out. I'll pull over and kick you to the curb. I don't care if you have to call up the chauffeur or fucking hitchhike home. You're only my problem as long as you behave yourself."

Grinning, he throws his hands up, gives them a shake, and then pushes them behind his back. "These hands have knocked twenty guys out cold. I know how to control them. You worry too much, Sis. I won't turn a single hair on that sexy brunette head gray."

Rolling my eyes, I get in my car and wait for him to lumber into the passenger seat. It takes a minute to make sure he's got his seat belt on, and then we're off.

Passing through the gate with the guard shack humiliates me just enough to forget about Ty's stupid antics for a second. Amazingly, the guard smiles, whispers a few pleasant words,

and reveals nothing. I can't believe he isn't secretly wondering what this peasant girl with the old beater is doing on his billionaire boss' long driveway.

It's a ten minute drive down the sprawling coast. It's almost all part of Gary's estate. I can't believe how many miles of coastline this crazy family owns, but I'm beginning to figure out billions can buy just about anything.

So why can't they buy happiness? Is that old cliché really true?

I keep looking at Ty. I can't figure him out. He's either an asshole wrapped in an enigma, or an enigma bound up in a total asshole.

He hasn't said a word since we got through the gate. He's staring out at the Pacific's roaring waves, little sailboats lining the distant horizon. The hand on his forehead tells me the rum is finally getting to him.

"Do you always drink like this?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I play hard when I can. Life's short, babe. Got my training in yesterday, and I'm all about relaxing now, especially after that fucked up family sit down this morning. I'd have needed a couple stiff drinks after that shit any day."

He's right about that. I'm feeling so much better just being out of the house.

"Is that why you stormed off this morning? Look, I didn't mean to be such a bitch. But I haven't gotten over what you said –"

He waves a hand. "You will, Sis. I don't say shit I don't mean. We're stuck in this fucking house together. Both of us are cursed to watch while our parents fuck up their lives with this stupid marriage. We can either learn to like it, or lump it all goddamned summer. All I know is, summers here are way too short for sulking. I wanna forget about this bullshit for the rest of the day and soak up some sun. You know I'm right."

Even as a drunken fool, he's too confident. I want to wipe that know-it-all look off his face.

Too bad the asshole's making sense too. Maybe it won't hurt to give him one more chance. He's obviously troubled.

Neither of us asked for this mess. We've been thrown together in the same box like two stray cats. I can't believe Mom didn't consider the tensions I'd have with this step-brother I never asked for. Then again, it's not her fault I ran into this asshole before I knew he was even family, let him get his lips and hands all over me...

"Hey! Right there!" I'm snapped out of my thoughts by Ty leaning into me and pointing. "That's a perfect fucking spot. There's a little dock and some sweet views, better than the boathouse a couple miles back."

"Okay! You know I'm trying to drive here, right?" I shake him away off me, rolling my shoulders.

I turn onto a little service road and follow it up to the beach. Ty pops his door first and flops out, bouncing onto his feet and running toward the shore.

He's left me in the dust. Once again, I feel like a complete idiot, and then an even bigger one when I'm trying to catch up with him.

"Wait, wait, wait!" I call. He doesn't stop until he's just a small figure up ahead.

I can't decide if he's ignoring me or just unable to hear me over the ocean's roar. Shaking my head, I start to slow down, deciding to admire the beauty instead.

God, this is stupid. Worse than chasing after a loose dog.

It is, and I'm way past caring. If he wants to run right into the shimmering blue waves and let the sea carry him away, it's not my problem.

Oh, except I'll be more than a little liable if anything happens to this drunken asshole. I doubt my brand new billionaire father with the explosive temper will let it go lightly if I brought his son to the sea to drown.

A couple seagulls squawk overhead. My cue to start running. I have to catch up.

There's plenty of sand between my toes now, but not like I expected. I never got a chance to change into my sandals before the dickhead took off.

Where the fuck is he?

He's disappeared into a long sandy path through some tall brush lining the hills overlooking the beach.

My heart's racing. I'm starting to get seriously freaked out. I follow it for what seems like forever and start to second-guess myself. It's getting narrower and a little more rocky, so I have to slow down, much to the relief of my poor lungs.

I haven't been working out like I should for the last year. I make a mental note to do something about it – assuming I can find this jackass.

He beats me to it. Ty comes up behind me when I'm not looking and tackles me to the ground. I hit the sand with an *oomph* and roll, slapping at his face.

“Asshole! You got us lost!”

He grabs my wrists like they're nothing and pins me to the ground. That brash, rage-inducing smile I'm starting to recognize as his trademark lightens his face.

There's something hard against my leg. It better not be his cock, or I'm going to scream. Mainly because it doesn't freak me out nearly as much as it should.

Apparently, my flesh still can't understand that such an amazing body belongs to a complete freak. I *hate* wanting him, and I don't care that it's all on a primal level I can't control. It's too fucking much.

I push against him as hard as I can. He falls backwards and lands on his butt, laughing. There's no way I managed to move him, he's just lost his balance. Lucky me.

“Lost? I come here all the fucking time. This is my spot. Perfect place for drinks too.” He reaches into his pocket and fumbles around.

Heat flushes my cheeks when I see it's just another little bottle of rum. For a second, I wondered if it was a condom. He

pops the cap and takes a long pull before handing it to me.

“What? Did you think I lured you out here to fuck my own sister?” The look on his face says he knows damned well what I was thinking. “Come on. Have a nip. I can’t be a selfish prick if I like to share.”

I rip the bottle out of his hands. The sharp stink hits my nostrils like pickle juice. For a rich boy, you’d think he’d be drinking something nicer.

It’s disgusting, infuriating, and out of place. Just like him. Damn, just like us.

I wait until his eyes are locked to mine, and then I hold it out, tip it upside down, and empty every drop on the ground.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” His arm shoots out, rips the little bottle out of my hand, and throws it several feet away when he sees it’s empty. “You’re still treating me like a total asshole!”

“That’s because you *are* one,” I snarl, crossing my arms. “You scare the utter shit out of me, put your hands where they don’t belong, and then you litter this nice beach to top it all off. Seriously, Ty, what the hell am I supposed to think? You’re not acting like a Nobel prize winner.”

Ty laughs while I’m shaking my head. Slapping him stupid doesn’t seem like it’ll do the job – I want to fucking punch him right between his gemstone blue eyes.

“I started to think there was another side to you this morning. Your dad treated you like crap at the table. But you’re really the same – both of you! You’ve got his habits. You treat me with the same respect you’ve got for the rest of the world, I guess. None at all. You obviously don’t care about anything around you.” I point to the fallen bottle.

The playful smirk on his face melts. Those baby blues turn angry, dark and cold like an iceberg threatening to gut anything that comes too close.

“You can shut your mouth now, babe, ‘cause you don’t know shit. Come the fuck on, Claire. You think I need a lecture in your hippie enviro-shit? I did a charity fight last

winter for conservation. Gave the money to a group that's got a brain in its head just to piss my old man off. You're just about to start interning for a bunch of crazy asshole idealists. You can't tell me you're a true believer in all this group's shit."

No, I'm not true blue. The bastard has me there.

Sure, I want to see the state's natural wonders preserved. I know Cascades Now! has a reputation for extremes. Mostly, I'm excited because they're going to give me experience and throw a few bucks my way – everything I want out of my first post-college gig.

"Of course not," I hiss. "I don't believe in everything they do any more than you support everything your dad's done with Spree. Or maybe you *do* think it's okay to dump your crap out here when nobody's looking?"

That does it. Ty jumps up, stomps right past me, into the brush. He returns a second later, holding the empty glass flask in one hand.

"You wanna get personal, Sis? I can do that shit, yeah, but I'd rather just fucking go." Without asking, he reaches down, grabs my hand, and jerks me onto my feet.

I follow him down the windy path back toward the beach. The Pacific's churning waves should be a comfort, but it just puts me more on edge. Bright evening sun dances off the waters – too bright. It's reflective, blinding.

The asshole a few steps in front of me is the reason I forgot my sunglasses too.

"Personal?" What the hell are you talking about?"

He doesn't answer me until we stop next to a tall blue canister. He drops the glass bottle into it, and it hits the bottom with a resounding clap. Guess there aren't a lot of visitors on this private land.

He stops and stares at me, his arms folded over his huge chest. Jesus, I can't stop staring at him, even when I'm steaming mad. Ty's got an angel's body – a guardian angel's –

and it takes so much effort not to let my eyes glide down him too long.

I shouldn't be so hot and bothered. Okay, maybe *bothered* because he's punched all my wrong buttons. But I know I'm in trouble when he steps up, closing the distance between us, and I can't stop sneaking little glances at his powerful hips.

The shorts he's wearing accent everything. His bare legs are as built and muscular as the rest of him, and I know that hard ass at the top lets him run like the wind.

Does he shake a girl straight down to her bones when he's between her legs, driving deep and hard? Fucking this animal must hurt. Probably in all the best ways I can imagine.

And believe me, my overactive, inexperienced virgin brain is going wild.

Ty stops with less than a couple inches between us. He must've seen me peeking because his eyes are all over me, lingering on my breasts. I'd regret not wearing something a little more conservative if I wasn't busy regretting this whole damned thing.

He reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder, starts to turn me before I can protest. "Spin, babe. You've got sand all over your ass."

He gets two or three quick strokes down my back and over my butt before I dart away. *Fucker.*

I can't blame him for looking because I was doing the same, but I'm drawing the line at him ever getting his filthy hands on me again. "Don't be a pig."

Ty comes closer, his handsome face cast in arrogance again. "Pig? Let's talk about that shit for a second. You're right about one thing, Claire – my old man's an asshole. You won't hear me arguing otherwise. I always wondered what the fuck caused him to ride my ass so hard. Could never tell if it was just chasing money, or because losing Mom so young fucked him up."

My head tilts and I study his face, wondering where he's going with this. "Maybe you should worry more about the

road you're going down, Ty. That's something you can control."

He breaks the gaze and walks right past me. I walk fast, trying to catch up, stepping into his footprints in the sand.

Did I actually hit a sore spot – or is he just waiting to jerk me around again?

"Before today, I thought my old man was one-of-a-kind. Greedy, narcissistic, cut throat. Willing to do anything to take the empire he's built with his bare hands to the next level. I'll never be the perfect son, and it's too fucking late for him to mold me. But he's got the rest of his life to mold Spree into what he wants."

"Why today? What changed?"

"Meeting Amanda. Straight up, your ma's different, lower on the totem pole in some respects. Still, that woman had to pull some seriously sneaky shit to sweet talk my old man into marrying her. She's landed herself a fucking whale for financing future campaigns. Not too shabby for a politico, right? Fuck, you'll go far if you're half as big a snake as mama. Maybe you can find yourself Prince Charming, some dude who's loaded to make it easier for you to stand around and lecture everybody else."

Wow. I come to a dead stop. I'm almost speechless.

Ass. Hole.

When the words come back, they come fast and hot. So do my fists. I fly forward and start hitting him over and over. He grabs me, stops me so easily, grabs my wrists and twists them like I'm a child. It's as infuriating as the laughter pouring out of his evil sexy lips.

"Knock it the fuck off, babe. Throw me a fucking bone and don't play stupid. You're a smart girl. We both know what this marriage's all about. Are you pissed because I opened your eyes, or because I threw something you already knew in your face?"

"I'm pissed because you're the most condescending, insulting jerkoff in the entire world!"

“Ah, the whole world,” Ty muses, loosening his hold on my wrists and lowering them to my waist. “You must get around a lot for a Congresswoman’s daughter. Shit, here I thought North Korea still had some bigger pricks than me.”

I flap my limbs, arms and legs pumping, putting sorely needed distance between us. It’s my turn to start walking. The beautiful daylight wanes fast, and not just because he’s once again made a complete ass out of me. I stare at the thick clouds rolling in from the Pacific, doubling my steps to make it to the car before it starts to rain.

I don’t dare look back. Ty doesn’t even chase me or say anything until my old car comes into view, an ugly metal lump totally out of place on this gorgeous beach. It doesn’t matter that the scenic value is about to plummet with a Washington rain coming ashore.

“Hey.” Ty’s voice hits me from behind, just as he grabs my shoulders. “I didn’t know you were so sensitive. Never meant to make you this pissed. If you want me to walk home, I’m more than happy to –“

“Just get the fuck off me and get in the car!” I scream, spinning and slapping him away. “I don’t understand you!”

“Feeling’s mutual, babe.”

“No, it’s not. I didn’t decide to zero-in the moment I first saw you and treat you like complete shit. I don’t get why you’re doing everything you can to get a fucking rise out of me. Is it just a sick game? Are you hitting on me? Playing me for kicks? You’re supposed to be my fucking brother!”

He laughs, arrogant as ever. “Don’t fucking flatter yourself, babe. You think I’m so desperate I’d fuck my own little Sis?”

Of course I do, even if I’m afraid to say it. He’s proven he’s Prince Asshole, with all the dangerous looks of Prince Charming. I can’t rule out *anything* on his agenda.

“Bullshit!” he roars at last. “You really don’t know me, do you? I’m Tyler fucking Sterner. Every goddamned day’s a pussy buffet at my club. I can and *will* fuck everything in

Seattle before I'd ever lay my hand on you. Even if you weren't little Sis, you're not the kinda chick I take to my bed unless I've got one or two hotter girls on the other arm. You're a side dish. Nothing more. Get the fuck over yourself, Little Miss Perfect – pussy like yours is a dime a dozen.”

Tears sizzle in my eyes. I hate him so much.

He's stabbing me in the heart again and again, reminding me what a worm I am compared to the almighty billion dollar golden boy. He's a stain, a disease, and if I had any goddamned backbone, I'd leave him behind. I'd head back to Seattle and scrimp together whatever money I can for an apartment, exit this sideshow Mom's snuck into my life.

I should reach down and scoop up some sand to plug my ears so I don't have to hear his crap the rest of the drive home. Either that, or scoop up some dirt and throw it right in those perfect blue bastard eyes. I want to fucking blind him the same way he's doing to me.

Facing the ground, I put my hand over my brow, hiding the tears.

I've got to keep moving, while my legs still work, or I'll never escape this torture. I get in the car and slam my door before he can answer.

It takes everything to fight the tears back. It helps to know that I really *am* a better person than this pompous, indulgent shit who won't stop looking sexy as he wipes his feet all over me. And because I'm better than him, I'm not going to abandon his twisted ass out here in the middle of nowhere.

Ty lingers outside for about a minute, until I honk the horn, giving it a long, hard push. The sound blasts out to sea, now taking rain from the clouds overhead.

He looks at me, shuffles over, and gets in. His eyes are softer, more sober looking and less cruel. I can't resist revving the car, letting the engine voice the growl that's tearing me apart from the inside-out.

“Claire, look, shit got outta hand.” Ty's voice sounds softer than I've ever heard it. “I didn't mean to insult your ma or

your intelligence. You're a smart woman – bright enough to stay the fuck away from me. Nobody else does that. Normally, I'd have your panties as a souvenir by now, and I'm glad I don't. Not just because we're in this fucked up family arrangement, but because you stood up to me. It's all this poison talking, this shit I can't get over about the marriage. You understand? I was a kid when I lost my mother. When some strange woman walks into my dad's life without warning, what the hell am I supposed to think?"

I don't know the answer. I can't figure out whether there's some sick truth to what he's saying, or if my mom's truly gone head over heels for the first time in my life. And even if the bastard next to me is right, it stings even worse.

"Here's what I think," I say, slowly circling through the sandy parking strip, heading for the main road. "You don't like my mother. I'm not too fond of your dad. Hell, Ty, I'm not a fan of *you*."

His lip purse, just enough for me to notice. His gorgeous blue eyes flash icy dark for a second, and then he's glaring at me, angry like I just spat in his coffee.

I don't get it. It's not a big secret – we're enemies. Step-rivals. One big, dysfunctional family.

How can he be so damned oblivious?

"You really hate my ass, huh? After I just gave you an honest apology?" Ty snorts. "So much for smoothing things over. I'm an open book, Claire. I won't hide a damned thing from you. Yeah, I've given plenty of shit, and I'm gonna keep giving you more because it's what I do. It's me. If you can't handle me the way I am, then we're gonna be strangers after all."

"Yep. Honestly, I'd rather keep my distance than be roped into more of your head games!" I snap. "We can't control what our parents do. For one very brief second, I thought maybe you were right, maybe we could find some common ground. But you've ruined that today. You proved it doesn't work. I think you're delusional to think anything else. I'm not your step-sister, Ty. I'm just another bitch who came along for the

ride when my mom decided to crash your dad's wonderful life."

I try to keep my eyes fixed on the road. Still, there's no ignoring how his fists flex, making his huge biceps bow up. Jesus, what guns he's got strapped to his shoulders. If most fit young men are carrying rifles, then he's got cannons.

It's a joke when most men say it, flexing and prancing around like bulky peacocks. With Ty, it's God's truth, otherworldly perfection sculpted from head to toe.

Unfortunately, there's an asshole inside the body of this Greek god, and now I've laid all my cards out.

I'm barking at him here like a cornered animal. I'm not afraid to let him know how bad he's hurt me, pissed me off, but I can't let him see how my heart races a little bit faster every time I take a nice long look at him.

There's dead silence for the next mile, maybe more. He's done talking. Cautiously, I look over, staring at him while he's got his head turned to the window, aiming his deadly blue eyes out at the stormy Pacific.

"Ty..."

"Shut the fuck up." He spins his face around, and it's lined with anger. "Just get us home. I don't need any more of this horseshit before my big fight."

"Fight? For charity? I didn't know you had one coming up."

"None of your business. I thought about asking you to come, but there's no fucking way now. You can't stand me getting in a few words here in the open. There's no goddamned way you'd handle watching me pummel Fat Boy to the floor."

Oh my God. And he's the one who called me sensitive? I can't tell if he's really that stung, or if this is just one more mind game. If I give into the urge to smack him across the face, as hard as I possibly can, I'll probably wreck this car.

“You’re right,” I mutter. Every syllable threatens to lodge in my throat and choke me. “I’ve got my internship starting this week. I don’t have time to watch you beat on some other big ape. Time’s all I’ve really got, Ty. I need to make money and get my career going. I’m not a billionaire’s kid like you.”

My inner filter’s officially crumbled. Gone.

I don’t dare look at him as he shoots me one last death glare. For a second, I’m half scared he’ll reach over and suffocate me with those monstrous hands.

Then my brain does it for me, turning against me, forcing me to imagine what those rough, huge paws would feel like all over my body.

Great. Being around Prince Asshole Sterner collides with my virgin insecurities.

It’s sick. Taboo. Wrong.

It’s also lodged in my head like a bad song on loop. All I can think about for the rest of the drive is how good it would feel to hate-fuck this savage sonofabitch, blowing off the smothering tension between us, and probably a lot more too.

So much for ever having a normal sex life.

I don’t realize how hot my blood’s pumping until we’re past the guardhouse, heading for the garage. The oversized opener attached to my visor isn’t working for some reason. The car idles as I awkwardly tap the big button several times.

Ty’s arm jerks past. He pushes my hand down with a growl, rips the black box off my visor, and then punches a neon green square next to the big button.

“That one opens the garage. You’re hitting the fucking panic button for the guards.”

Hot, brutal red stains my cheeks. I’m too embarrassed to make another sarcastic comment. By the time I pull in and get ready to snap back, my door pops open, and Ty leaps out of my car.

He doesn’t even stop to look back as he jogs to the house door, rips it open, and disappears inside.

I don't move for at least a solid half hour. I'll fucking die on the spot if I run into the prick in the halls. My entire body can't stop shaking, and the tears come, furious and blinding hot after their delay.

Is this what a panic attack feels like?

I'm clueless. The storm sweeps over me for the next ten minutes while my brain flashes through my parents, their sudden wedding, and this new home that'll never feel anything like *home* should.

This place is a fucking prison, no matter how many luxurious acres it is. And Ty's just another inmate here to taunt me, to toy with me right down to base biology. Why, why, *why* does my fucked up brain want to kiss the lips that won't stop telling me I'm worthless?

You know that old cliché about uptight good girls melting their panties and losing their minds for the worst badasses around? Yeah, I'm living it.



“SHUT UP! You better open those legs a fuck of a lot wider if you want what I've got pounding your pussy, babe. Don't you fucking scream 'til I say you can.”

It's his voice.

At first, I think I'm having a sex dream. Not just any sex dream, but an honest-to-God pussy creaming wet dream about my evil step-brother.

“Oh, Ty!” A woman's voice bubbles through the darkness. “*Oh, my*. Fuck, that feels so —“

She gasps. I open my eyes, listening to Ty's rough growl. I can practically hear him throwing her skirt up and burying his face against her skin.

I sit up in my bed. He's not in my room, but the voices are so close it sounds like it. More shifting, movement just outside my door. It takes me a few seconds to realize he's outside in the hallway with some random slut, and she's pressed up against my door.

Oh, hell no. *This* can't be happening.

The clock next to me glows 2:00 AM. Normally, I'd be furious to have someone wake me up in the middle of the night. I used to give my roomies hell about it back at the dorms.

But I turned in so early after our fight on the beach that I feel like I've slept for eight or nine hours.

"Ty, Ty!" her infuriating voice chirps again, hot and heavy, moaning his name like she's worshipping him.

Maybe she is. The wet smack of lips pressing and hands roaming around forbidden places tells me he's got another poor girl wrapped around his wicked finger.

I'm about to jump out of bed, fling the door open, and throw my slipper at him when the girl giggles. She sounds a little further away now. A second later, the door to Ty's room next door opens, and then clicks shut.

That's right. This house is bigger than half the hotels I've ever stayed at, and yet we're locked in close quarters like rats. Don't get me wrong – the rooms are huge, spacious, and totally private. But I'm still next to him – *him!*

I'd rather be sleeping next to Mom and her new billionaire boy toy, or whatever the hell he actually means to her. Hearing them fuck through the walls wouldn't be half as gross as what's about to happen.

A body slams against the wall behind mine. The woman keeps laughing and laughing, hissing pure pleasure through her teeth. An image of Ty holding her plush against the wall flashes in my mind, the perfect position for shoving his face between her legs.

I have an eerily good idea what they're doing. But what the hell's up with me?

I don't realize I'm against the wall on the other side, pressing my ear to it, until hot blood rushes through my temples. The stranger's high, soft feminine gasps are coming faster now. If I lean really close, I can hear the wet, steady slap

of his mouth on her flesh, his growl stabbing through it every so often like he's starving for this.

There's no denying the way she starts to shriek and tries to cover it. He's eating her from the bottom up, holding her lips open and fucking her pussy with his tongue, refusing to let up for a single second until she explodes on his mouth.

"Jesus, Ty! Just a little more," she begs. "Oh. *Oh!* I think I'm going to –"

One second of pure silence. Then there's a hard, tense banging on the wall as the girl's fists flop on her sides, all she can do to keep from screaming so loud everyone in the house will hear it.

Gawh! It sounds like she's screaming through his fingers.

Everything below my waist gets hot and tight. A trembling hand goes to my chest. I'm panting, just as breathless as the bitch getting her brains fucked out one wall away, listening as my arrogant, nasty, inked-up step-brother forces her to climax.

Obviously, I knew Prince Asshole could fuck like a pro, but hearing him do it is something else.

Her hips are rocking against the wall and she keeps making little sharp sounds. She's coming, dragging her clit on his tongue, grinding her pussy into his beautiful face. Maybe he has a mean hand clapped across her lips to make sure she doesn't scream too loud.

I'm not sure.

Shit, I'm not sure I'll ever be the same again with my hand sliding between my legs, listening as they both break for air. Spreading my fingers on my panties, I cup my mound, discover it's even wetter than I feared.

I hold it there and try to focus on my breathing. Every single breath hurts. It's jagged, hot, heavy and confused as everything swells and winds up inside me.

And they're not done yet. I'm not that lucky.

"Holy fuck balls, Ty." She's got a dirty mouth. It's not hard to see why my filthy step-brother chose her. "You've got a hell

of a mouth. Do you want me to return the favor, baby? I can –“

“Shut the fuck up. You can suck my dick back to life after I come in you a couple times. Open your fucking legs.”

God. Damn. It.

I don't know why it's a surprise, but he's an even bigger bastard in the bedroom. He's commanding, brash, ordering her around like she's a hired whore. I don't think a man like him ever needs to pay a woman for sex, though. She's probably drooling all over herself just for the privilege of running her fingers over the bloodthirsty tiger inked on his chest.

“But, Ty –“

She's silenced by the heavy plop of clothing dropping on the ground. It's probably Ty's – maybe what little he hasn't stripped away yet. Closing my eyes, I picture his magnificent body in front of me.

Naked. Throbbing. Tattooed. And all mine.

No, it's not mine tonight. It's hers. It shouldn't make me aqua green, shouldn't poison every drop of my blood with filthy jealousy.

But it does. I rub between my legs, playing with my clit, feeling the same agonizing shame I always do when I touch myself. Except tonight, there's a thousand times more emotion screaming through my blood.

I hate myself for listening to this piece of shit ravage her. I hate him for waking me up with his insatiable dick. And I *really* fucking hate him for making me stand here like a pervert, two fingers drawing the cream that drips out my pussy up to my clit, rubbing it like there's no tomorrow while I listen to them kiss.

“Get on the bed. I need to be inside you right the fuck now, woman.”

Next thing I know, there's a sharp squeal of springs. The slut gasps as he eases inside her, picking up steam. His thrusts come faster than I expected.

They don't have slow, loving sex. I wonder if that's even possible with a man like Ty. No, this is straight up fucking, using her to jack himself off and empty the tension in his body the same way a starving man devours a meal.

It's sick. It's emotionless. And for some lunatic reason, it's totally hot. I'm out of fucking control – even worse than the woman who sounds like she's got a pillow stuffed in her mouth as his hips pound hers into the mattress.

Thud-thud-thud.

It's the sound of the bed clattering and my own ruined heart. I hate him. I want him. I don't know whether to bang on the wall and tell him what an asshole he is, or just stand here and keep touching myself while he brings her off again.

Obviously, I make the easy choice.

Her gurgling, cooing mess reaches a sticky crescendo and the bed jerks harder. "Give it up for me, goddamn it. You better clench hard on this dick if you want me to come with you."

I can't believe his bed is any crappier than mine. But it sounds like a freaking antique with springs that have never been oiled as he pounds her ruthlessly, throws her into orgasm.

My fingers stroking desperately at my clit go wild. Leaning on the wall, I bring my free wrist up to my mouth and bite it, all I can do to save myself from the biggest embarrassment ever.

She's coming for the second time. Then I hear Prince Asshole roar, bury himself deep inside her, and growl like some feral creature. His bed screams so loudly with the sound of him fucking and coming, I swear it's shaking the entire house.

I bite my wrist hard, fall to my knees, and suffer the strongest orgasm of my life. Whimpering, screaming, and barely breathing, I come with them. I give into the fucked up degeneracy Ty's unlocked, obliterating my own ego for more than a minute as my body writhes, quakes, and sweats through the spasms.

My pussy's still throbbing when it's all over. I can't move until I hear the bed in the other room squeal one more time, probably from him flopping down next to her to rest.

When I can finally stand up, my own hot teeth marks are branded in my arm. Christ.

I'm probably going to need to wear long sleeves when I go to work tomorrow. Ty's talking softly to his sweetheart for the night. Meaningless small talk. I can't possibly believe she means anything to him.

She's – what did he call it? – pussy that's a dime a dozen? Just like me. Supposedly.

My stomach lurches when I come off the high. I've got to suppress the urge to vomit. I'll just die if I need to step out of my room and cross the small space in the hall to my private bathroom.

Why the hell can't it be built right into the room like a master bath?

I can't let him know I'm awake. Hell, both of them. If I get a good look at the fuck buddy who's been eating out of his hand tonight, I'll either cry or scratch her eyes out. Then I'll wind up getting carried out of this house, kicking and screaming, and probably create a media scandal so bad the billionaire has me thrown into the nearest mental institution for life.

The urge to throw up passes, and I manage to crawl back into bed without making too much noise. Still can't tell if the walls are paper thin down here, or if Ty was just fucking her so hard I heard nearly everything.

I lay there, and roll over, trying to stifle the noises and go to sleep. It's quiet – but not for long.

About two seconds after I close my eyes, the bed squeaks again in the distance. Ty's rough voice filters through the wall, but I can't quite make out what he's saying being further away. It's probably something crude, some dark threat telling her all the despicable ways he's going to toy with her body tonight.

The low creak and pillow talk sharpens. He's fucking her again, grunting and cursing, pounding her so hard the headboard's slapping the wall.

Fuck. I'm never going to sleep tonight. If I'm lucky, I'll get up in time to clear my bloodshot eyes and wash the stink of sex and shame and desire off my skin.

His fuck-fest next door is completely indifferent to my suffering. There's nothing left to do tonight except reach for the nearest pillow and cover my head, drowning out the lewd noises behind the wall as much as I can.



“RISE AND SHINE, honey!” There's a knock at the door, and my mother's voice sounding way more...motherly than I've heard her for years. It's how she used to wake me up before spending half the year in DC.

Stumbling to the door, I straighten my clothes, hoping like hell Mom can't smell last night's sweat and lust steaming off me when I yank the door open.

“Claire! You haven't showered yet?” She cocks her head.

“Still getting used to the house, my new room here,” I say with a smile. “It took me a long time to fall asleep. Thanks for the wakeup call!”

Mom rolls her eyes and pushes past me, giving the first-day-on-the-job outfit I've laid out a long look. She gives me an approving nod while I reach for my phone, then I hear her walking ahead of me into the bathroom, laying out the towels and things.

“Mom, I'm a big girl. I don't need you setting me up like this.”

She turns around and barely lets me squeeze past her into the bathroom. “I'm just being helpful. I don't want you turning out like the boy who shares this basement. I saw him come in late last night, and that thing he brought home.”

She twists her nose. My eyes go wide and I try not to laugh. “Wait, you *saw* her?”

“At the breakfast bar this morning. The little tramp was eating my yogurt in nothing but yoga pants and a tank top.” She shakes her head, and I cough. “Ty left with her early. It’s a good thing too – I’d hate to have seen Gary’s reaction to his son’s latest antics.”

Gary. I start to open my mouth to ask my mom again if she’s *really* into him, but something stops me.

Who am I to judge her love – if that’s what’s really going on here? I don’t dare follow Ty’s twisted logic and assume the two tied the knot for pure self-interest.

“I’ll be up in a little bit,” I tell her. She gives me a friendly nod and heads upstairs.

I’m not sure how to feel about being babied like this either. Not gonna lie – after last night, it’s kind of nice, seeing how I’m feeling like crap and I’m still a hot, sticky mess after listening to my step-brother and his girl.

The shower feels good. It’s cool, rejuvenating. I scrub the fancy body wash and salts into my skin. For a few glorious seconds, I almost think it’ll let me help wash away last night’s shameful eavesdropping.

Upstairs, there’s a nice spread of food left by the housekeeper, Joan. I eat a bagel and some fruit, making small talk with Mom. When it’s time to go, I grab my keys, my purse, make sure I’ve got my phone, and then I’m out in the huge garage.

That’s when I’m hit right between the eyes by another surprise. My car is gone.

I spin around and almost run smack into my mother. “Jesus, Mom, you’re never going to believe this.”

Mom gently pushes me back outside and follows me, setting a hand on my shoulder. “What? That you’ve got a hot new ride to go with the job?”

No fucking way.

The shiny new hybrid sedan sitting in the space where my beater was parked is worlds away from anything I expected to

drive in the next five or ten years. My knees don't want to work as I walk up to it and get a good look.

It's the sexy, polished kinda vehicle you'd expect a billionaire's daughter to drive. Bitter shock forms a lump in my throat. I think I'm going to be sick, keel over and hit the floor, if my goddamned heart won't stop racing.

"Well? Do you like it, Claire?" Mom's right behind me, whispering excitedly in my ear. "Gary sends his compliments."

I spin around and we lock eyes. Her smile melts a little when she sees the crazed expression no doubt plastered to my face. "Gary? This was him? You...you shouldn't have done this."

"Nonsense. I thought it was a wonderful idea. If you want people to respect you, dear, you need to go to work in something that says you've already taken a piece out of this world." She holds up a small Washington keychain with a couple keys and a remote attached. "Here's the keys. Catch!"

My hand darts out just in time to keep it from slamming on the hard cement. I'm still standing there in my best business blouse and pants, acting like an indecisive moron.

"Claire?"

"Mom, it's just...it's so fucking weird."

She gives me a stern look. "Language. You'd better watch that before you get to the office. Now, honey, we both meant to surprise you. That's part of the fun. But if it's going to interfere with your performance, I can drive you myself..."

"No. I'll take it. I just don't like the idea of owing this guy you married anything."

Mom belts out a sarcastic laugh. "Oh, Claire. He's not buying your loyalty. He's not buying anything except a better future for his new daughter. Baby, this is pocket change for him, no different than you or I buying a bottle of nice wine. He's done you a favor. Don't worry that it took a lot out of us or anything like that. If we can easily build a better life for ourselves, our *whole* family, why shouldn't we?"

I don't have a good answer.

That's it, then. This is the new normal. Staring me in the face with its shiny coat of paint and souped-up leather interior.

"Mom..." I don't even know what to say except the obvious. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, honey!" she leans in, giving me a tight squeeze. "Gary will be home tonight. You can thank him later. I want you to stop worrying or feeling guilty about this, baby. You drive down there and blow them all away. If you start to impress them today, you'll own anything you want tomorrow."

Wow. I haven't seen Mom in full "inspire me" campaign mode since her last re-election, but today, she's beaming. Full of wisdom I'd brush off as rhetoric if there were anyone here besides me she were trying to impress.

We exchange one more smile and then I'm in the unfamiliar car, backing down the driveway. The newness smells so amazing. It's clean, pure, a good match for everything else in this strange new life. Everything except the asshole I can't stop thinking about.

I crank the car's satellite radio high as soon as I'm past the guard shack. The station plays some of my favorite rock songs, a welcome distraction that helps keep Ty out of my brain on the forty minute drive to the Cascades Now! headquarters.

It's near Arlington, a little ways north of Everett and Seattle, south of Bellingham. It's nice not having to fight the city traffic driving up from our old place in Tacoma. Yet another reason to love the new house, as weird as it is.

The office doesn't look like anything special. It's simple, small, about what I'd expect for an environmental lobby. I step out of the car and fumble with the remote, making sure the new car's locked.

Maybe Mom is right. Today's mine. This life's mine.

I don't have to let anyone get in the way – not even some ginormous muscle head who keeps me up fucking with nothing but a wall between us.



THAT EVENING, there's a knock on my cubicle wall. I swing my chair to see a tall, lean guy in a nice gray suit holding several manila folders.

"First day on the job, and you're already showing us we've been stupid not to hire a girl who knows Congress sooner." He steps inside my space as I flash him a smile. "I'm Dan. Office manager while my dad's hobnobbing in DC."

"Oh, you're Mister Jacobsen's son?" I'd been wondering where the older man who'd interviewed me had gone.

"Guilty as charged. Listen, Claire, I don't tell every new girl I'm impressed, but I really mean it here." He opens the folder in his hands and starts flipping through it while he's talking, obviously excited. "I mean, hell, if we can get half these groups on board, we'll double the funding we need to fight the new business center going up on fifteen hundred acres of prime Cascades wilderness."

I clear my throat and mumble an apology. Half the business project's financing is from none other than my brand spanking new step-father. Talk about a conflict of interest.

I don't even know how to approach the subject with my new boss. I'm in no hurry, either, despite the way I know it'll cause a collision sooner or later.

Dan adjusts his glasses and cocks his head at me. Damn it. I'm a terrible liar, and even worse at covering my tracks.

"You're not worried because your mother just re-married one of the corporate jackasses we're taking to task, right?" He gives me a knowing wink.

Fuck. I'm more than a little relieved he's being so nice about it, but I'm not sure my poor heart can handle any more excitement today. There's been plenty of that the last couple days, and I could really use a break.

"Oh, Mister Jacobsen, I'm sorry. I didn't know whether I should bring it to your attention or just –"

He holds up a hand. "Please, call me Dan. Claire, you've got nothing to worry about. Have you met your new neighbor,

Eddy?”

I glance over the wall next to me toward his desk. Yes, the portly middle aged guy introduced himself as soon as I sat down. Seems nice enough.

“I’m sure old Eddy didn’t tell you he’s Governor Lambert’s nephew, right?” I hear my neighbor laughing uncomfortably through the wall.

My eyes go wide. The former Governor leveled more Washington wilderness than anyone before him thanks to some special contracts with his corporate buddies, as I’ve learned from my research. My new employer is still reeling from the aftermath, trying to turn back the clock on the mess he created.

Dan steps close to me and leans in. I get a big whiff of the spicy cologne he’s wearing like a second skin. “We keep that on the down low around here. Eddy’s one of our best, and he’s got nothing to be ashamed of. Just wanted to let you know, Claire. We care about your work, your ethics. Nobody else’s. I don’t care if your mom married a robber baron, and neither does Pops.”

I sit up straight, trying not to beam. I’ve got to hand it to him – he’s just lifted about a hundred pounds off my shoulders.

“I won’t disappoint you, Dan. I’m here to learn everything I can from this organization. If that means going toe-to-toe with some family interests...well, I’m game.”

“Keep it up, and you’ll be on our permanent staff before you know it.” He leaves the folder behind for me and starts to head out, giving me one last wink.

I turn back to my computer, head abuzz with all sorts of things.

Despite the thick glasses and the even thicker cologne, he’s kinda cute in a trim, geeky way. He just doesn’t make my heart race like –

Damn it. There you go again. This isn’t healthy, I think, warning my rebellious brain. You’ve got to stop thinking about him. Pick up some earplugs on the way home.

I'm totally serious. I'll sleep with plugs in my ears and my phone curled up to me on vibrate rather than hear Ty fucking his latest conquest again.

I still can't believe how he took her. They were at it for hours, smacking lips and twining flesh, rocking the bed springs so hard I swore they'd break.

Jesus. I can't stop thinking about him. And yeah, I definitely can't believe my own filthy desperation, the way I was drawn to the wall like a magnet, rubbing myself to bliss while they fucked.

It's not just that he's crude, arrogant, and he's treated me like trash every time we're together. He's totally off limits. There's something horribly addictive about it that warms my blood.

If I can't control the heat surging through my veins every time I think about Ty Sterner, then I need to make sure I never, ever act on it.

One kiss almost unraveled everything. And if there's a second kiss, or – God forbid – we go further, I'll never live it down. I'll ruin myself and this whole screwed up family.

No man's worth my reputation, I keep telling myself. Not even one who looks like a Prince and talks like a convict. *Especially* not a man with a brutal knack for invading my every waking second.



LATER, at home, I eat a quick dinner with Mom and Gary. They ask me all about my internship.

Gary doesn't even mention the new car until I do, and then he brushes it off like it's nothing. I know he's a billionaire, but my brain has a hard time reconciling my strange new reality.

We talk about my job, Alaska, the times the Vice President made a drunken ass out of himself at the private parties Mom attended in DC. Anything light and positive, really.

Everything except Ty, who's conspicuously absent.

I'm digging at the last of my garlic potatoes when I get the stupid idea to ask about him. "So, uh, where's big brother?"

Mom freezes up and Gary's laughter over the VP's secret antics goes dead silent. His lips pull tight in what resembles the world's most uncomfortable smile.

"Forgive me. I'm afraid my son hasn't given up wasting his days on practice for those barbaric fights he loves. I doubt we'll see him until tomorrow."

Gary's obviously had a lot of practice making excuses for Ty. All the zen-like cool in the world doesn't keep me from noticing how hard he stabs his fork into his next bite of steak.

Mom saves the day by going back to DC, telling us all how grateful she is to be taking some time away from that God forsaken place. I laugh along with my parents, but I'm not sure whether to believe her.

She never talks about her campaigns until they're imminent. For all I know, I'll be wearing a pretty dress and taking time off next year to stump for her Senate seat.

Ugh.

It's a joy when Joan comes in to clear away the plates and serve coffee. I take mine downstairs in a big mug, asking for decaf. I've got to be careful to allow myself more time tomorrow morning, before I'm due back at the office.

By eight o'clock, I've taken my shower, and there's no sign of Ty. I cuddle up in bed with a book, more tired than I realize. I slip into a sleep that doesn't break until my phone wakes me up at dawn.

I'm almost dressed and ready for breakfast when there's a knock on my door. I walk over and jerk it open. Standing in front of me is the Asshole-in-Chief. Shirtless, ripped, and heavily inked. The snarling tiger on his chest matches his expression.

"Here. You asked me about the shit I do, and I'm gonna give you a chance to find out. I've changed my mind about this crap between us – I want us to have an understanding." He

pushes a little scrap of paper into my hands. It's a small envelope.

I'm at a loss for words. I always am, except when he's digging his fingers into all my buttons. It's hard not to stare at the towel around his waist, knowing he must be naked without it. Naked *and* standing in front of me like it's just another normal brother-sister visit.

Ha. Ha ha awkward ha.

"Ty," I say his name, and he cuts me off instantly.

"Just look at what I gave you and decide what you wanna do, Sis. I've already forgotten the shit that went down between us. It's ancient history."

He turns and starts walking to his room. I'm too stunned to talk until it's too late, and the magnificent view of his strong, grabbable ass moving beneath the towel doesn't help.

"Wait!" He slams his bedroom door shut.

There's no sign he heard me, or cares to listen if he did. I gently close my door and begin tearing at the envelope.

I see a date and time – Saturday night. The place – Club Zing. Also, something sensational about blood being spilled, a knock down drag out fight for a good cause, and all the gloves coming off. There's a small glittery ticket with the words VIP stamped on it.

Heaven help me.

KNOCK OUT (TY)

I knew something was wrong when I fucked the hell out of Maggie and woke up feeling like I hadn't gotten pussy for a week.

No, adding a second or third chick to my debauchery wouldn't have done shit. Neither would heading down to the gym and knocking the shit outta my favorite punching bag 'til my arms go numb.

It's her, goddamn it. *Little Miss Perfect.*

Sister. Bitch. Stranger.

Addiction.

Maggie milked my dick dry, and I couldn't even focus on her. My balls wouldn't blow 'til I imagined Claire under me, biting her soft little lip and digging her nails into my back.

Fuck, that lip. I wanna sink my teeth in. I'd kill a man to bite that soft, rosy flap of flesh. And if I told you what I'd do to plant my cock between her legs and slap my balls off her ass, I'd probably be captured and tried for war crimes.

Shit, shit, shit.

My head pounds like a fucking junkie all day while I take a good, hard run along the family's shore. I run for miles, up and down the coast, letting it rain all the fuck over me.

Running's always been a good cure for a lotta shit. Just not this. My knees burn and my heart pounds like it's gonna bust,

but I still can't stop thinking about her.

Christ, I'm hard as granite even while I'm running. I don't think it's possible to see Claire in my mind and stay soft. Not unless I've fucked her, the only thing in the universe that'll put me outta this misery.

I hate losing control, and I *really* abhor being strung around by a wet daydream.

I lost my goddamned mind on that run. I lost it to her.

Sweat poured down every inch of me, my skin overheating despite the seaside coolness. By the end, I'd lost my clothes and I was completely naked. I had to strip to keep from self-combusting.

Yeah, running naked gives my old man one more scandal to sweat. By some miracle, none of the assholes out on their yachts noticed a nude guy with tats jogging like a maniac up and down the ten mile stretch of prime Pacific coast. And I kept running too, plowing the sandy beaches 'til my toes hurt like they were stepping on glass, watching the ocean devour the setting sun.

I must've been out all fucking night, feeling the chill wafting in from the sea. It wasn't good for me at all with a fight coming up this weekend, but I had to try something. My options are running *really* fucking thin since I told Little Miss Perfect to fuck off and keep her distance.

I was pissed at her, sure, and now I'm even more pissed at myself for trying to cut her out. I thought I could forget. Since our last fight, I've tried every damned thing I know to scrub the little Sis I never wanted from my crazy skull.

Predictably, nothing fucking works. Nothing that doesn't involve my raging dick getting a full rough introduction to her sopping wet slit.

By morning, a twisted sorta peace has fallen over me. I know what I need to do.

There's no choice but to fish the ticket outta my pocket I was gonna give Maggie. I made up my mind while I was taking the longest, hottest shower of my life, trying to blaze

away the ocean cold and get my body's thermostat back to human range.

I stuffed it in an envelope and marched it to her door without looking back.

She stared at me like I had a second goddamned head growing outta my neck when I shoved the envelope in her hands. Her eyes were all over me, big and beautiful and disbelieving. I had to be careful to suppress a smile.

Wasn't easy keeping my eyes off that prissy office blouse on her either. Shit, even now, I can't stop thinking about lifting up her skirt, ripping off her top, and bending her over the nearest desk for a fuck that'll teach her a thing or two about my business end.

I'm haunted. I'm obsessed. I'm fucked.

Of course, she didn't say a word. Barely had time to stammer in that cute and infuriating way she does. I didn't wait for her to get anything out. I pushed what I came to deliver into her hands, then slammed my door shut and stewed 'til I was sure she was gone.

Now, I'm looking at the ruins of my life, and coming to the grim conclusion I *need* to fuck this girl. I'm done without finding out how tight and hot she feels riding my cock. I can't fight, can't function, can't even settle into my own house with her one wall away. I can't be happy getting my dick wet in other chicks, not when I know the best piece of pussy I'll ever have in my life's right next door.

My bed's still a mess from the most unsatisfying sex of my life. Yeah, Maggie's got the looks and she took my hateful thrusts like a champ, but my balls haven't stopped aching because they know damned well what they want.

Who they want, I should say.

I fucked the last woman in my bed rough and loud. I fucked angry, fucked her with steam whistling through my blood, rutted her soft wet cunt so hard my frustration nearly ripped a few condoms.

I know damn well what I really wanted too while I was railing my club girl in a way she'll never forget. I *wanted* Claire to hear it all.

I'm such an asshole I wanted to keep her up, rob her of sleep, anything to make her wonder what it'd feel like to have my cock owning every inch of her fuckable silk.

How fucked is that? It's pretty far down the road to hell. And if there are a few demons circling like vultures, waiting to usher me in with their pointy pitchforks, I don't give a single fuck.

Everything I care about begins and ends with her holding onto that ticket.

I don't even know if Little Miss Perfect's gonna give me the time of day, much less show up to see me beat the guts out of another dude. My asshole father dropping a new car in her lap's just icing on the shit cake, the fucked up confection we've made with this rampant hate between us.

If she tells me to fuck off forever next time I see her, I won't be surprised. I'll understand.

But there's not a single chance my dick's gonna stop throbbing as long as she's in this house, one wall away, warm and wet and way too perfect.

There's only two choices here. Counting them on one hand just makes me wanna form a fist and smash it through the nearest wall. But I can't ignore it. I can't do shit with this fork in the road except roll the dice and choose a side.

It's simple. I'm either gonna fuck my own step-sister before the summer's out, demolish her high and mighty act forever on my dick, or else I'm gonna end up drooling in a straitjacket.



I KEEP a low profile for the next few days. Making the rounds at the club earlier in the evenings, then waking up early to train. I skip every bullshit family dinner.

There's no point in seeing Claire 'til she's ready to tell me what the fuck she's decided about my invitation. And there's

definitely no reason to subject myself to more evil eyes from my old man, and more fake sympathetic looks from Congresswoman Golddigger.

I wash down my Gatorade with a few shots of thousand dollar bourbon snuck outta my old man's liquor cabinet. It's all I can do to get some shut eye during the day, or else keep myself from marching right through the wall and demanding an answer from Sis.

Sis. The word alone tells me she's untouchable. But I won't take no for a goddamned answer.

Hell, the taboo is half the reason my cock turns into steel every time I think about taking turns with my mouth, my hands, and my dick between her thighs. If she gets one taste of me, she'll never go back.

One kiss. One squeeze. One wet, growling fuck.

That's the goal here and it's all I need. I refuse to let myself wonder whether or not she's a virgin – thinking she is brings my balls dangerously close to rupturing. If she's ever fucked another man, then I'm gonna fuck every single trace of him away forever when I get my hands on her.

I'm not only gonna fuck her a few hundred times by autumn – I'm gonna hear her beg for it.



THERE'S a gentle rap at my door early Friday morning. I hit the sheets after a late night at the club. Two drunken shitheads got themselves bloody over some girl, and I had to break it up personally, then hung out past four in the morning for the police report.

The grog instantly fades from my head as I shoot up. I readjust my shorts as I'm walking to hide the massive wood that's been rampaging through my dreams. Tearing the door open, I almost can't believe she's really there.

But she is.

Smart black skirt, baby blue business blouse, and a wavy top that gives her that hot nerdy school teacher look I love on

my babes. My dick tries to do a fucking somersault in my boxers.

“You coming to find out when we’re leaving, or what?” I try to hide the hopeful tone in my voice.

She lowers her pretty brown eyes right away and I know it’s not good news.

“Ty...why do you have to make this so hard?”

Fucking don't, I want to say. Don't let me. Don't breathe a goddamned word unless it's about how you're coming with me to the big match.

“I’ve decided you’re more of a hothead than a total asshole.” She pauses, probably stunned by the rosy red blossoming on her cheeks.

“Hothead, huh? Fuck me sideways. That’s good news, right?”

“It is,” she says softly, digging her small teeth into that lip I want to rule with my tongue. “Look, you’re probably not a bad guy. But if our last few encounters taught me anything, it’s that we always end up pressing the wrong buttons. I don’t want to piss you off again and cause another crazy argument. And the truth is, I don’t know *how* to avoid pissing you off.”

“Easy,” I growl, grabbing at her hand and pulling her inside. The door slams shut behind her with a quick jerk. “You chill with me, look pretty, and laugh at my jokes. I’m not asking for the fucking world, especially when I’m just looking for some sisterly love and support.”

She frowns, throws her hands up. There’s a little flinch in her wrists as she comes dangerously close to touching my chest.

No, it’s not my imagination, fueled by this raging hard-on I’ve got for the chick in front of me. She can’t keep her hungry eyes off me. I watch as she takes her sweet time trying to regain control, find her words.

“Ty, I’m not saying we have to be enemies...”

“Then what the fuck are you saying? Talk straight. I don’t like this dance.” I fold my arms, all I can do to keep from throwing them around her and heading straight for the hot ass underneath that skirt.

“We can’t be friends.” She blinks slowly, finding the courage to look at me. “We both know there’s too much tension between us. God, it’s more than just the constant bickering. You know what I’m talking about too.”

Her eyes are bright, searching, pleading to come much closer to mine. Know it? Fuck yeah, I do.

Unlike her, I’m way past ignoring it. I stop her right there, close the small space between us, and rip my t-shirt shirt off.

“Know what, babe? I know you’re bullshitting me, pretending you don’t want to see this shit in action.” I flex my muscles, bowing up like a fucking peacock.

God help her, she smiles, lights up in the middle of all the confusion and anguish pulling at her face.

“Come the fuck on, *Sis*. We’re family. We’ll never be picture perfect, but we don’t need to kid ourselves. Be straight – just for once in your life. Forget prim and proper.” Fire shoots through my veins, and I push her to the wall, running one hand through her hair. “Be honest.”

“I – I can’t...”

My free hand goes straight to my dick. I wait ‘til she looks down, and then I give all ten angry inches in my boxers a squeeze, letting her see it jerk in my fist, drool the pre-come I wanna gush inside her.

“You want me, babe. Admit it. After all the blowouts we’ve had, after all the times we’ve locked horns, you’d still be all over this unruly bastard in my pants if I wasn’t your step-brother. This bullshit marriage is the only thing that’s stopping us from breaking the bed.”

“Ty! No, no.” She shakes her head ferociously, trying to get away. “See, this is what I’m afraid of...”

“Don’t be scared. Embrace it. We gotta talk about this shit out in the open if we ever wanna move past it. I’m no psychologist, but I know sticking our heads in the sand like goddamned ostriches won’t fix shit. It’s okay to want this body, Sis. It’s okay to think about me fucking you. I’ve had the same thoughts – and I want more than fantasies.”

Her face darts up and her mouth drops open. I smile, feeling like the millions in my trust fund just for getting that shit off my chest, out into the open. Doesn’t do a damned thing to stop the blood roaring in my cock.

I try to focus on picking Claire’s jaw off the floor so I don’t get my hands on her skirt, giving into all the depraved shit I’ve been thinking about nonstop since she came into this house.

“Stop worrying, Claire. We’re not gonna fuck. Not really.”

Yeah, right. I can’t believe the words coming outta my mouth. I fully intend to mount her and find out if that sweet cunt’s just as tight and hot as the rest of her. But I’ve gotta throw her a white lie, just a little one, before she runs off screaming, overheats, and blows herself to kingdom come.

“I don’t understand where you’re going with this, Ty. This...this is officially *too* fucking much.”

Shit. Every f-bomb firing off her tongue ties my dick in knots. Her dirty mouth soils the prissy good girl, shows me there’s more inside her than the flagpole up her ass.

I step up, place a brotherly hand on her shoulder, tightening my fingers in her soft flesh. Mostly so I don’t head for the perky tits just inches south, or slide up underneath that skirt I want gone like nothing else.

She’s gotta be soaked. Even with her face twisted and on the verge of tears, she’s looking at me like every girl has before I carry her to bed for the night.

“No, it’s not too much, Claire. This is what we both need. I *need* to see you watching me pop this bruiser’s jaw outta alignment. You can run your eyes all over me. Go ahead. You don’t gotta feel guilty about it. You need to take a good, long

look, just like the sun, and let your eyes burn so you can't see me this way again.”

She's trembling. I angle myself so my raging dick isn't right against her belly and wrap my arms around her, pulling her in. Jesus, she smells so sweet. Soft. Feminine.

“Is that really what it's going to take? How do you know it won't make things worse?” She looks like she's going to die just acknowledging I've uncloaked her feelings.

“It's all we've got. Who knows how fucking long this sham marriage will last – months? Maybe years? Hell, maybe the rest of our mom and pop's natural lives.” I can't imagine it, but stranger things have happened. “Do you really wanna do this dance forever? Make these awkward faces across the dinner table and scream at each other on the beach because we can't fuck? What the hell do you think your hubby's gonna say some day when he sees you can't keep your eyes off your rowdy step-brother?”

She cracks. Claire's sniffling when she pushes her face into my chest. I feel her tears against my bare skin. Something about that gives me a tiny shred of guilt.

Shit. I'm a manipulative sonofabitch. But I'd never hurt her.

No fucking way.

I'd lift up the whole fucking world and body slam it cold if *anybody* ever hit her with a barbed tongue or a malicious fist. No, I don't know what'll happen after I end up snatching her panties like I think I will.

All I know is I won't break her heart, and I've never been so sure about something in my life. Shit, I can't even think of doing it, especially if she opens her legs and finally lets me in.

“Think on it for another day. Just one,” I whisper. “When you come home this evening, let me know if you're coming to the fight. I'll drive you there myself. Hell, you can take a cab and leave a note if you want. Just be honest with yourself for once, babe. Open up and do exactly what you want.”

She jerks, tearing herself away from me. This time, there's no stopping her. The conversation is done. Claire yanks my door open and stumbles out into the hall, tripping all over the heels she's got on.

I feel bad about that. But I also can't stop imagining those office shoes digging into my ass while her legs are wrapped around me, fucking her into sweet submission like the wild bull I am.

"I'm going to be late for work," she snaps. "I'll...I'll let you know. But I swear to God, Ty, if I decide I don't want any of this, then stay the hell away!"

Her finger darts out. Her eyes are watery, angry, and red. I'm standing there shirtless, with the worst boner of my life stretching my tight boxers, leaving no doubt about my true intentions.

I give her a nod. She turns around and heads for the stairs, and this time she doesn't miss a step.

At some primitive level, I think she realizes what I'm doing. I haven't just asked her to be my little Sis at an underground brawl she's got no interest in.

Moral support? I don't fucking need it. I'm used to doing everything myself. I know what the old man thinks of my shit, and I resigned myself to blazing my own path a long time ago.

This isn't about that. This is about an invitation to sort out our problems with raw, hard, frequent fucking. It's the best medicine – hell, the *only* medicine – I've ever known since my balls started pumping come.

I sink backward against the wall, so wound up I'm about to explode. I'm gonna run and punch and swim myself into a goddamned coma before she comes home. We both know what's on the line.

And the idea I might actually get what I want makes my muscles tremble 'til I stop and clench everything from head to toe.

If Claire gives me a yes tonight, then she might as well sneak into my room, strip off everything except those bitching

heels, and straddle my face.

If she says yes, it's only gonna feed the fire. It won't really resolve shit between us.

Yeah, I'm a bastard for lying, but she's a smart girl. We know damned well there's no extinguishing this shit once it gets going without us all over each other, every fucking hour.

I grab my dick one more time and lick my lips, heading for the gym. I've never wanted to know what a girl tastes like this bad while I'm warming her up to fuck.

Before the weekend's gone, I swear I'm gonna find out.



I DON'T HEAR SHIT. I shouldn't be surprised.

By evening, right before I'm supposed to head to Club Zing for the match, I'm going berserk. I'm scared for my opponent in the ring, and whatever skanks I find after it's done.

I'm gonna fucking kill somebody tonight, and it's all because of *her*.

Little Miss Perfect, the only woman who can't be bothered to give me the goddamned time of day. Little Miss Perfect, chickenshit as she is hot, the most infuriating bitch on the face of the earth. Little Miss Perfect, who won't stop burning up my balls, even when she's leaving me high and dry.

I'm seething. I nearly rip my clothes dressing, feeling the lust and disappointment come raging into my knuckles.

There's a knock at my door, and for a second, I stop. Could it be?

I fling it the fuck open and my heart dives like a hawk. There's my old man standing there, a sour look on his face.

Goddamn. This isn't the night. If he wags his finger at me, I swear I'll break the fucking thing right off.

"What's up, Dad?" It's all I can manage without letting out my volcanic smoke.

“Message from Claire, relayed through Mandy. She asked me to come down here and tell you myself.”

Now, my ears are up. I step aside, letting him into my room. He hardly ever comes into this space, and he can't hide his disdain either. He takes one look at my messy bed and the gloves I use for practice, and turns up his nose.

Fucking asshole. Messenger or not, some things never change.

“Your sister says she'll be at your club tonight. It's just taking her a little longer than usual to get home from work. She's doing overtime today for the internship.” He says it like it's supposed to mean something to me.

“Whatever, Pops. So am I. You think these charity things aren't good for business? I'm all about giving as much as the next guy with a heart, but it's good for building the club's cred too.”

“Ty, come on.” He slowly blinks and rushes back toward the entrance, ready to leave just as suddenly as he arrived. “I know all about the PR value a little charity brings. Spree raised fifty million a few months ago for –“

“I know. You crowed about it all over the press while I was celebrating my last birthday.”

He stops, turns, and sniffs. “Now, Son, you know I'm a very busy man. That's the price for lifting up our name and giving us this lifestyle. Someone's got to do it. There's no need to get angry.”

Not you, the fuck's preaching between the lines, throwing it in my face like he always does. He doesn't think I'll ever match his lofty heights.

Well, fuck him, I don't need to. I'm gonna live my life as more than a slave to the shareholders, and I'm sure as shit never marrying a gold digger looking for a few more cash injections to fluff her political career.

“I wasn't getting pissy about it. I'm a big boy, Dad. It's not like I need you to light the candles on my cake. Don't need your help running my club either. I know what works.”

“Of course you do, Ty. I’ll be right behind you whenever you announce an expansion in the near future.” He cocks his head slightly, knowing I’ve refused that shit a thousand times. “Try not to bring your sister home drunk or damaged. She’s a good girl. Much too good for this family, I’m afraid.”

There’s no point to screaming in his face. I grab the door and slam it so hard in his face it rattles the whole basement. I’m lucky it didn’t break the frame or splinter the wood – wouldn’t be the first time.

I wait ‘til my old man’s footsteps are on the stairs before I move. Shit, I haven’t even had time to think about what he said.

She’s gonna be there. She’s accepted my invitation. That’s something, yeah? Even if she’s either too busy or chickenshit to say it to my face.

Fuck. It’s happening.

I finish packing up my shit, polishing my little speech to the donors from a few notes I’ve scribbled on my desk, and then I’m gone. I’m not gonna blow tonight and squander this chance to get my lips all over the hottest chick I’ve ever met.



THE WEEKEND TRAFFIC going into Seattle slows me down. I’m roaring into my private parking space with less than ten minutes to spare. My boys meet me at the door and start ushering me to the back.

Ed, Mike, and Tommy keep this place in one piece when I’m away. They’ve been my brothers since high school, and the only thing that keeps this place from running on auto-pilot without me are their own egos butting heads. That’s why I’ve put the big Swede over them as head manager, a guy named Karl.

It’s like half a dozen people are trying to talk at once amid the endless clatter of their phones going off.

“Shut the fuck up, guys! One at a time, and nobody speaks if it’s not important,” I finally say, coming to a dead stop in the

middle of the hall, ripping off my shirt and pants. I strip down to nothing but the trunks I'm wearing into the ring.

Nobody says shit. Yeah, that's what I thought. Just a bunch of overeager friends jockeying for my attention. I'm used to it by now, but it still gets grating before I head into the ring.

"I'm ready to go. Karl!" I point to the muscular Swede with blonde hair and baby blue eyes just slightly duller than mine. "You're telling me what's what. Is everything out there set, without any problems?"

"Sure is, boss. The turnout's looking fantastic. Fat Boy wanted to say a few words before you climbed in together, but it doesn't look like there'll be time for that."

I nod, remembering my opponent's moniker. I don't study up on this shit beforehand because I like a surprise, a challenge. I don't use those silly fucking wrestling names either.

Maybe it's a good thing the guys on the receiving end of my fists do because it always seems to go over well with the crowd. As for me, I'm just Ty, undefeated owner who keeps bringing these hungry bastards in, trying to knock me out.

They always lose, and that's not changing tonight. I'm the one who wins, and so does my club and the charity we're raising cold hard cash for.

"What about the chick I texted you about?" He shakes his head like hasn't gotten the message. "Find her and make sure she's safe and sound in her VIP box. That's Claire Frost, my new step-sister. I gotta know she's safe and sound, without any hitches."

"I'm on it." He breaks and starts running down the hall.

A couple guys are at my side, and they walk with me toward the big door leading into the storage area behind the bar. It's the only place big enough to accommodate the ring and several hundred chairs. The back of the club's an old, heavily remodeled theater, and it could've seated twice the crowd in its prime.

My boys open up the big door and I walk through with my fists in the air. People flip the fuck out and come close to bursting their lungs, guys and their gals alike. There's lots of scanty clad sluts in low tops and even lower skirts lining my path. They all reach out and brush their drunken nails over my skin while I walk past. They must think I'm a lucky fucking charm, or else they've got some magic touch that'll make me climb into bed with 'em later tonight.

Most nights, they'd be right. Many times, I've simply gone down the ranks and chosen two or three girls for the night.

But if Claire's out there, just like she said, then...there's no fucking way. There's just one woman I'm interested in bedding tonight, and I'm focusing all my energy on her sweet ass like a goddamned laser.

I bound up the steps and swing through the ropes. Fat Boy's already in his corner.

He's about five years older than me and he's got a gut like a medicine ball. Chubby or not, the dude has arms and legs as big as mine with huge veins popping out. Reminds me of those gorilla-like Russians you used to see competing in weight lifting world championships.

The spotlights shine blinding bright. The crowd's screaming. Those lights are hot too, like miniature suns beating down on my skin in the desert. I start to sweat as I look around.

The referee comes out in an old timey striped shirt, shoving a microphone into my hand. He's more announcer than referee, but again, everything's about appearances here. Whatever it takes to rile up the crowd, keep the money flowing, and make *damned sure* the name Club Zing winds up burned in their frigging skulls is game.

“Yo, the air's humid as fuck up here,” I growl, letting the reverberations sweep over the crowd and bring them to silence. “I said – it's thick. Swampy. Suffocating. Ladies and gentleman, I'm gonna give you a fight that'll blow your hair back, and I need each and every one of you to make it *rain* tonight. Let's cool this motherfucker down.”

Laughter rings out. I've still got my money clip strategically placed on my trunks. I rip it off and walk over to an attendant, not far from the side that gives me a direct view of the VIP seating.

"You hear that shit?" I wait 'til he holds up the collection plate.

That's right. We use collection plates, just like in church, except ours are silver plated and managed by boys who'll start cracking the skulls of anybody who thinks about stealing one red cent.

"You hear that, ladies and gentleman?" I slam fifties and hundreds in, one after another. "That's the patter of rain, friends. Tink-tink-tink-tink-fucking-tink! But why the hell's it so lonely up here? Why the fuck am I the only bastard making noise? I'm not looking for a little sprinkle tonight. Fat Boy and I need a goddamned deluge! Stand up, open your wallets, crack your purses, and let it *fucking pour!*"

I scream the last line. The crowd goes wild. In the commotion of people standing up, milling around, and digging for their cash, I see her. My eyes lock.

Claire's there in her box, sitting next to Karl. She looks totally out of place in her professional blouse and skirt. She's dressed too smart for Club Zing, but just smart enough to set my dick on edge.

Fucking shit. Her soft pink lips pull up in a bashful smile. I wonder if she can see my dick springing to life, pressing against my trunks. Hell, if the crowd weren't going apeshit, they'd see it too.

I decide right then I don't give a fuck. Not one.

If the thousand people jammed in here want to see the hard-on I've got for my Sis, then they will. It only matters to Claire and me. We're the only ones who'll remember after the fight. The instant I get down to business with Fat Boy, they'll forget all about what's flexing below the belt.

"Keep it coming, you crazy motherfuckers!" I roar, listening to my voice break in the speakers. "I wanna hear

your pockets turn inside out before this night's over! I wanna see moths flying outta your clothes!" They love the shit talk, so I pour it on.

Then I tear my eyes away from Claire. It's not easy because I can still feel her locked onto me, even when my back's turned. Unfortunately, business calls.

I walk up to Fat Boy and give him a shallow, respectful nod. He stares at me glumly.

Fine, jackoff. Be that way.

Some of these guys are like that. Charity events aren't supposed to be career builders, but some of these assholes treat it that way. Any man who punches out Ty Sterner, heir to daddy's billions, is guaranteed some wild media ass kissing.

"I hope you've brought your game, big ace. Club Zing doesn't quit rockin' 'til one us is flat and we've broken a few records with our money storm." I spin around, facing the crowd again. "Don't stop! Keep it the fuck coming! We've got some sick kids out there tonight who need that shit way more than any sorry fucks here do."

Tug at their conscience. Pluck their heartstrings. Bully them 'til I get the nod from Karl out in the boxes – the one that lets me know we've shattered our old record.

It's persuasion 101. And it's going to a good cause too. We're supporting the local children's hospitals tonight, and everything we raise gets split between research and boosting quality of life.

Fat Boy's still not talking. Usually, my rivals get in on the act and join me, but I don't think this fucker's here for charity. He's here to rumble for glory, and nothing else.

The referee crawls back in the center, waiting for me. I give everybody one more roar of thanks, push the mic into the ref's hands, and watch as Fat Boy lumbers up to the center.

"It's the moment you've all been waiting for!" The old man in the pinstripes shouts. "If you've been here before, folks, then you already know the rules – there aren't any 'til a man goes down! Anything, and I mean *anything*, can happen

tonight! Will we see our boss pull out another big win, or is this the first night Club Zing gains a new reigning champion?"

More explosions from the crowd. It's so loud my eardrums are about to break. Good, because that means more money flowing in too. There's a direct, no shit correlation between decibels and dollars. Judging by the noise, tonight's gonna be a bank buster.

I take one last quick look at Claire, surrounded by all the chaos. Her eyes are big, excited, pleading. I can't tell if she's getting into the fight, or if it's the hunger she showed me the other morning on steroids.

"No more talk! Keep those dollars flowing, folks, and pop your last few cents when it's all over." The ref pauses and looks at us carefully before he says the last important line. "Let's. Fucking. Go!"

Ref gives us both a nod and steps back, sinking toward the edge. He's really there for show, and to officially put an end to the fight when I've laid out another bastard.

There are no rules in this box short of killing a man.

Fat Boy looks like he wants to do exactly that. The big bastard lunges and swings, strong but slow. I dodge and get off a few good whacks at his side.

I can practically see the steam shooting out his ears. He hops up and charges me like a bull. This time, he's a little faster.

It's like a screaming meteor slamming into me. I hit the floor, and the next thing I feel are fists landing on my face. It's seriously like a three hundred pound bear squatting on my chest, holding me down, pounding me right in the fucking face, over and over and over.

Thinking about Claire all the time's put me off my game. I've left myself open.

I rock up with all my might, punch him right in his saggy gut. Fat Boy grunts and topples off. His weight works to my advantage while I'm struggling to get on my feet. The

audience starts to scream when I stand up, and the whole damned world's spinning.

Something hot and thick trickles all the way down to my chest. I realize he's given me a bad nose bleed, something no other man in this ring has ever managed.

Fuck.

I can't let it stop me. I charge the asshole just as he's getting up, beaming his dark boar eyes at me. I should have a dead bullzeye on the back of his head.

I'm ready to pound him flat now if I have to, ending the fight early. It's not ideal for donations, but the crowd just cares about the excitement. They'll spend the rest of the night re-hashing a five minute fight and throwing down more money at the bar if it's exciting enough. Then I can throw a good portion at the children's fund.

The boulder in front of me moves. He rolls right into me when I'm coming at him, and I go crashing on the floor, one inch away from smashing my tender face.

Mother-fuck. I should've seen it coming.

I also should've known Fat Boy isn't moving an inch further than he needs to. Before I can force my bruised elbows to get my ass up, he's on me again, throwing his fists into my abs. He hits me so hard I choke, knocking my wind out, holding his ass on my legs so my desperate attempts to break out are total failures.

Christ. He's gonna fucking do it, I realize, as soon as the blows I'm trying to block start getting through, smashing me in the face.

There's a ringing sound like the end of the world. Everything goes black.



I'M DROWNING. Falling into an empty, desolate, bottomless pit. For some reason, I'm not that concerned about being beaten or even dying.

What really, *really* pisses me off is the idea that I'm about to leave this world without ever having Claire. I need to taste her. Need to feel her. Need to fuck her.

I can't let it end like this. I can't go down. I can't humiliate myself and leave before I've done everything I mean to in this life – starting with *her*.

Is there more to this weird shit between us than lust? I need to think about it, and I mean seriously fucking think. But not 'til I gasp awake and find myself with my neck snapped to the side, drool and blood streaming out my mouth.

The referee's face is crooked, upside down. He's standing over me, giving Fat Boy an uneasy look, like he's about to call it so the fucker doesn't murder me.

These fights are rough, brutal, and borderline illegal because it brings us crowds like nobody else. Too bad my whole damned operation will be in hot water if anybody suffers a serious injury here tonight, much less a dead owner.

I think about my asshole father, standing over me in the hospital, gloating like the summer sun. Congresswoman wifey'll be at his side, giving me that fake sympathy she does so well. And she'll have all the confirmation that I'm scum underneath it, a fucking moron who couldn't stand flirting with danger.

All because I had to satisfy my ego against my billionaire father's.

I think about Claire. She'll never fuck me if I don't win this fight, and I can't blame her. It's not about being pounded to a pulp by a stronger man.

The only one beating me right now is my own fucked up lack of discipline and self-control. It's everything she scorns, and all because my dick's begging my brain to let him jackhammer between her legs twenty-four seven.

I can still move, so I'm not dead. I have to fight. I can't fucking give up.

Fat Boy's tiny eyes whirl with dark excitement. He's cold, stunned, frozen in disbelief. The bastard probably can't believe

he's done it, beaten Ty Sterner on his own turf. The asshole has a few heavenly seconds where all the incredible possibilities of winning flash before his eyes.

That's all he gets before I bolt and uppercut the fucker's jaw with both fists, before the ref can call the win.

I hear the crack. It's loud and sharp as lightning. If I haven't broken his jaw, then it's splintered at the very least, and he's probably lost a few teeth.

The audience surrounds us in a deafening, chattering blanket as I jump, landing on top of him. Something primal rips through me. My senses are so overwhelmed I can barely see, but I don't need to as long as I can feel him underneath my fists.

I punch him in the guts and keep on going 'til I can't feel my own arms. It's a miracle I'm able to get up and fight like this after losing all my oxygen, but this fucker won't manage because he's not as lean and buff as I am. His bulk fucks him over.

The primal thing tears out my throat. I'm hollering like a chimp with rabies as I beat the bastard blind, holding back from killing him only because I think about the same scandal that'll erupt if I put his ass in a coffin. I have to protect this club.

My lungs won't work. My heart's about to crack my ribs with its damned thunder. My muscles are gone, and there's just stones fixed to my bones, hard and unyielding.

I fall down next to Fat Boy, face-to-face, staring into his barely conscious eyes. "What the fuck did you wanna say to me? Before the fight?"

He growls. I land one more punch and his head lolls back. "Just fucking tell me. Do it."

"Wanted to say it's me. I was gonna be the man to beat you. Ty...fucking...Sterner." The last part's like a whisper.

He stops trying to get me off him and goes flat, his huge body softening beneath me. The referee comes over and starts slapping the ground, doing the final countdown.

Shit, shit. I roll off him and struggle to get up. I manage to hold myself in a push-up position with my exhausted arms, anything to keep this from going to a draw.

Slap-slap-slap. The ref's palm keeps hitting the floor, and I lose count.

I barely realize it when he's standing up, speaking into the mic. "Ladiiiies and gentleman! It's been hella close, but we have our winner. It's Ty Sterner. *Always* undefeated." He pauses for a second, but adds one thing over the crowd's hurricane force scream. "Undefeatable."

UNDENIABLE (CLAIRE)

I've never seen anything so brutal in twenty-two years on this earth.

Just a second ago, Ty's beautiful blue eyes were fading, winking out like dead stars. His head was turned my way all through the commotion, even when the man was on top of him, beating him senseless. I can't believe he saw me through the pain and the blinding spotlights, but his eyes were searching.

Searching for me.

Karl, the Swede, was laughing before, chuckling and slipping me drinks when the match started. He went dead silent as soon as Ty went down. I never knew hundreds of people jammed into the same small place could be so deathly quiet.

Everybody forgot to breathe until Ty pounced and began punching the big man like something possessed him. I sat glued to my seat, watching my step-brother with a whole new worry.

His eyes were different. They flashed crazy, angry murder, alive with the same ruthless energy in his fists. I watched him smash the other boxer to bits, and it scared the hell out of me.

I'm still afraid he's going to kill this guy and wind up in jail.

Obviously, I didn't have a clue what I'd gotten myself into. When Ty said fight and slipped me those tickets, torturing me every hour, I came because I couldn't resist. I couldn't lie and brush off the attraction, the fire threatening to burn me alive whenever I'm in his arms.

I expected something rowdy, clean, and civilized. I didn't expect to see men bloodied and brought to the brink of death.

Guess the tough guy thing isn't just an act, a rich son slapping his richer asshole dad in the face. No, the crap happening in front of me is as real as it is dangerous.

It should disgust me, send me running, prove that everything I've feared is totally right. But it doesn't.

I can't help but swoon when I realize he's won the fight. Karl climbs the seat next to me, screaming his lungs out. When he's finally done, he reaches into the cooler at his side, and passes me another wine cooler. I'm screaming too, even as I twist off the cap, yelling like a mad woman until Ty's finally out of sight, the attendants helping him off the stage.

I normally don't drink this much. Hell, I'm normally not this violent. I don't know what I am anymore, and I'm not sure I'll figure it out before I give into this throbbing urge to feel my step-brother's lips on mine.

I'm confused. There's something in the air tonight, something thick and sultry and otherworldly. I can't even describe it better than that.

"Hang tight with me, Claire," Karl says. "We'll get into the bar much easier once we let the crowd clear out."

He grabs my hand and makes me settle back into my chair. Probably a good thing. As soon as I stood up, my body rocked. I'm seriously tipsy, drunk like I haven't been since drinking with Dana.

I'm glad Karl's here to help. With this many drinks flying around, amping the crowd up alongside the testosterone and adrenaline, it might be dangerous going out there alone without all my wits.

I take a good, long look at the blonde haired man at my side. I've got to admit, he's kinda cute in a rogue way. He doesn't have the body Ty does, and the buff arms sticking out his sleeves don't have a single stripe of ink.

My mind's screaming through all the excitement. The big Swede's looking better with every new sip I take. Good enough to be my escape from throwing myself at my own step-brother, if I really want him to be.

I'm drunk, dizzy, and burning like never before. Honestly, I'm terrified of what I'll do when I'm alone with Ty again.

I can't really give into these insane urges, right? Jesus, I'll never live it down if I let him fuck me, if I let myself give away my virginity and my body to a fucking relative. No, we're not blood related, but he's technically my brother. That makes it wrong enough.

I have to keep my mind off the taboo. I just need to focus on having fun, treat it like any other girl's night out, maybe invest a little more energy in the handsome man at my side.

Except he's looking more and more like a disappointment with every step we take. I don't know what I'm going to do with Ty, but I know I don't *really* want his co-worker. Getting my V-card punched by a total stranger's worse than the asshole I know.

Karl flashes me a thick smile and grabs my wrist, this time a little more forcefully. "There's more waiting for us in the VIP lounge. We'll catch up with your brother later. Come on. Looks like it's all clear."

I follow him down the winding path and then upstairs, evading a few drunken stragglers bobbing in the halls. We head back toward the closed room where I ran into Ty fucking those whores the first night we met. There's another door just before it, not far from the restrooms. Karl jerks me inside a smaller, darker room that feels like a grotto.

It's elegant, dimly lit, and the walls must be awfully thick. I can't hear a damned thing in here, not even the hundreds of people milling around in the lounge.

There's only one other couple in there with us. The look up, give us an uneasy look, and then return to their drinks and hushed conversation.

Karl holds out an arm so I can pass by and take my seat at the small VIP bar. "What'll it be, Claire?"

"Something stronger than the wine coolers. We've still got like four or five hours until closing time, right?" He smiles and nods.

Yeah, I really want to drink tonight. It's either that or fuck my step-brother raw. Maybe a few drinks will help clear my head before I make the mother of all mistakes.

Karl lingers near the bottom shelf, as if he's showing off his backside. It's nice, but I've seen better. He comes up a minute later with a massive bottle of vodka and some pomegranate grenadine. He pours them together and shakes it up like a pro. His muscles ripple as he preps the drinks, and I'm all kinds of conflicted.

I grab mine a little too eagerly and knock it back. Karl laughs, pops the vodka bottle, and pours more into my glass straight. "Something tells me you don't need the sweet stuff."

Staring like an idiot, I lean back and smile, tossing my hair. "I know how to put it back. Most valuable skill I learned in college."

Actually, it's not far from the truth. I spent my last year drinking with friends just as hard as I studied, and I'm dangerously close to carrying the same habits into the grown up world.

It's been such a long week. Why not get a little plastered and spend some time here before I need to confront my damnably sexy step-brother?

Why not cut loose and stop worrying this confusion boiling my brain? God, why not find out if there's more to this blonde boy with the sexy accent besides a nice distraction from Ty?

I can't make up my mind. One minute, I wish he'd lay me down and fuck me before Ty does, and the next I'm steaming

for nobody else but big brother.

God. What the *hell* is wrong with me?

I slam my empty glass on the counter. “Another.”

Karl laughs louder. His eyes are on my tits and I don’t even care. He stares, not even hiding it, and I give my body a nice long stretch. It’s refreshing to cut away from all the family drama, plus the new job.

This night isn’t going like I expected. My head’s so warm, burning up with alcohol now. I’m about to add some more fuel to the fire.

Two more shots, and everything whirls, melting into a blurry puddle of drunken goodness. I’m starting to worry why I haven’t seen him yet. Ty was supposed to greet me shortly after the fight – does he even know we’re back here?

My diligent bartender holds the bottle up again when my glass empties, but I put my hand up. “Where’s Ty? Is he really going to be okay?”

“He’s being checked over. We always have a medic standing by for these events in case anyone ends up seriously hurt. I think you understand, Claire, what we’re doing here is risky, but we do everything we can to minimize the chances of any lasting injuries.”

He slams down his own drink. Grabbing the bottle, he steps out from behind the bar and takes the stool next to me – a little too close for comfort. Still, I give him a smile as he refills my glass. This time, he’s not taking no for an answer, and neither is the pleasurable urge to drink more building in my head.

“Are the fights always so violent? I’m amazed he hasn’t broken bones by now.” In fact, I’m wondering if an undiagnosed brain injury explains Ty’s crude, impulsive behavior.

Karl tightens his lips and waves a hand, dashing my concerns. “*No*. The boss knows what he’s doing. He’s trained for years, and he doesn’t slack on anything. I’m not sure why Fat Boy had the edge for a little while. That’s never happened

before. Tyler's mind has been somewhere else lately. He's not himself."

Not himself. The Swede's words stop me cold. I remember how my step-brother stared at me while he was in the ring, his eyes blazing with a determination even fiercer than I'd seen when he was right in my face the other morning.

We were so close. I touched his rock hard torso, and I didn't want to stop.

Closer than any real brother and sister have any business being. It's suddenly cold in the lounge, or maybe the vodka's heat overloads my stomach. A shiver rolls off my back.

Karl's big arm goes around me and pulls me close. I'm so shocked my face almost hits the bar.

Okay, it's been fun fantasizing about him. He's obviously a safe and sane choice stacked up against Ty. But with my mind drifting back to the asshole who's the entire reason why I'm here at Club Zing tonight, I don't think I really want to sleep with Ty's underling.

I gently reach out and give his arm a push while I pull away. My other hand reaches for the vodka, just what I need to cover up the awkwardness. *Ugh.*

Okay, scratch those crazy thoughts about getting closer to this guy. I don't trust him. I kinda want to get up and go out on my own.

"I think I need to take off soon, Karl," I say softly. "I need to find Ty."

"What's the matter, lovely?" There's venom in his voice. "Don't you ever want to do anything besides talk about your brother?"

"I...I don't know."

I really don't.

Karl laughs coldly. "Ah, you're quite a tease, aren't you? I've dealt with women like you before. I fucking know what you really want, princess. Let's go."

Snarling, he grabs my wrist and pulls me off the bench. I'm too blitzed by the latest vodka pouring into my veins to fight back. Shit, I barely realize what's happening, only that my knees are moving on auto. I can't stop as he leads me through a metal door next to the private bar, into a chilly room stacked high with liquor crates.

I thought we were isolated before, but now? *Not good.*

The door clicks shut and he pushes me against the wall. I'm about to scream when his hand covers my mouth. His breath stinks. We lock eyes.

What the fuck's going on? Why's he gone all Jekyll and Hyde? I remember all the drinks he knocked down during the fight. The only time he even paused was when it looked like Ty would lose.

I've heard of mean drunks before, but I've never really *seen* one until now. He called me a tease too. Surely, he can't really believe I owe him something, much less sex?

I try to clear my mind and look at him, hoping I'm badly misjudging all this. But then he speaks, and the cruel tone in his voice confirms my nightmares.

“Don't bullshit me, girl. I know you're the reason he's losing it. Boss wants you bad. He can't focus. He's going to get us into trouble if this continues. Now, I see why you make him crazy. I see what a nasty little tease you are.” His free hand reaches down, and I sense him fumbling with his belt, or maybe the zipper to his jeans. “Let's make this fun. I'm going to give you the fuck you've been begging me for with your pretty eyes all evening. I'm not just doing it for our pleasure, Claire. This is doing the whole club a favor, everything Tyler's worked to build.”

He draws his hand off to finish dropping his jeans, and I'm too drunk to scream. My stomach rolls violently. I wonder if throwing up all over him will get me out of this, or if I've screwed up so bad my first time is going to be with this wasted maniac.

He shoves me against the wall again – this time harder. His hands go places. There's no pleasure, only sickness, pain when he squeezes my nipple. My mind tosses and churns between hate and horror.

I feel him everywhere – on my breasts, around my back, cupping my ass, between my legs. I moan, and he mistakes it for pleasure, but really I'm crying for help. I'm sick to death. Scared.

I'm about to black out when the door snaps open and a wild animal comes crashing into the room.

Or that's what I think, at first, in my fucked up state.

Next thing I know, I'm backed into a corner, watching the screaming men at my feet. The bigger one completely covers Karl and holds him on the ground, flattening him while his fists go at the Swede's face. I recognize the wavy tattoos flowing down his shirtless back instantly.

Ty.

“You sneaky sonofabitch!” My brother's voice explodes, and several wine bottles break in the commotion, falling onto the floor from the impact of his fists. “Did I fucking tell you to touch her? You were supposed to be the one asshole in this place I could trust not to make a move!”

His voice is slurred from the beating during the fight, but he takes Karl easily because he's sober. Ty doesn't give him a chance to answer. His fists keep coming down, this time without any gloves. There's nothing between the Swede's face and my step-brother's bloody knuckles.

Karl moans, tries to sit up and plead, tell him it's all a big misunderstanding. Ty pushes him right back down.

It's worse than watching the fight. There's no referee here, nothing to save the bastard who tried to force himself on me from Ty's righteous blows. My heart flips.

I'm drunk, but I know he did wrong. I want him to pay for it – suffer for what he would've done. But then I hear the sickening snap as his nose fractures, and I think I'm going to be sick.

“Ty...” I whimper meekly. It doesn’t get through.

He grabs Karl by the collar and hoists him up, but only for a second before smashing him down on the hard floor again. “Pick your sorry ass up and get the fuck out! You’re done here. Drag your fucking carcass back to Europe, and I won’t press charges. It’s not a choice. I’ll make sure you never work in this goddamned city again!”

His voice rumbles low, booming, savage. Scarcely human. I don’t try to squeak out another word, even if I want to.

“No, no, no, boss,” Karl blubbers. “She’s a tease. She brought me here. Boss, please! *Boss!*”

I cover my face with one hand. Fuck it. He deserves everything the mad dog protecting me wants to give him.

Karl never gets out another word. Ty picks him up and drags him across the room, through a narrow space formed by boxes stacked to the ceiling. A door I hadn’t seen before swings open in the back. I catch a glimpse of some loading docks, and that’s where Ty throws his manager.

Well, *former* manager. The door slams shut while the man is still screaming, and he whirls around.

Now, I’m face to face with the devil himself. But if he’s a devil, then Satan has the coolest, most beautiful blue eyes anyone can imagine.

I feel like I’m facing a firing squad. Only, instead of catching a bullet, I’m going to catch nothing but pure hell, or else a twisted ache between my legs.

“I’m sorry as fuck about this, babe. He’s never acted like this before – or at least I’ve never caught him. Shit, it’s always the ones you trust.” Ty shakes his head.

I see he’s got a bandage on his temple, and his skin’s gone slightly dark in several patches on his face. Fresh bruises are blooming from the fight.

I can’t believe what’s just happened – what I’ve barely escaped. Rage floods my brain in one blast.

“I didn’t need your help. I would’ve screamed.” I ball my fingers into fists, amazed at the words coming out of my mouth. It’s pure defense. “There was another couple out there who would’ve heard us, broken up what he was doing. Thanks, but no thanks, Ty. I appreciate your help, but I don’t *need* it. You’re *not* my knight in shining armor, and you’re definitely not my prince.”

God. I sound like a total lying bitch, and maybe I am.

But I *need* to be. I can’t let myself actually fall for the six-foot-something lunatic standing in front of me, looking like he wants to either rip my head off or pick up where Karl left off.

“Shit, you’re drunk. I never should’ve let you outta my fucking sight for one second.” He grabs my wrist, and for about the fourth time that night, I’m led around by a man.

Fire explodes in my belly. I yell, try to fight. It doesn’t do me any good. We burst out of the room and he marches me through the VIP lounge, toward another not-so-secret passage in the club.

“Ty! Ty! Let me fucking go! I *can* walk on my own, you know.”

“I don’t know shit when you’re like this. The only fucking thing I know is that I’m never letting another man lay his hands on you, even if he’s not a sinister little pissant like my dearly departed Swedish manager.”

We’re going down a short, dark hallway now. The EXIT sign glows red above a door. As soon as it’s open, I smell exhaust fumes and hear rowdy laughter. We step out next to his car, perfectly parked in his reserved spot behind the club.

“No way! I’m not going home right now.” I stand up on my heels and glare at him. “I’m going back inside. I’ll shake this off so I’m good to drive in a few hours. I can’t let our parents see me like this...”

His eyes narrow. I should be expecting him to grab me and throw me into the car, but it’s something else when he really does it.

I'm a screaming, bawling mess, totally going to pieces. Too drunk to pop the lock and get out again too. *Mercy.*

Catching a quick flash of my reflection, seeing what I've become, is all that calms me the hell down while he slides into the driver's seat.

"We'll take our time. I'll sneak you in. Your ma's oblivious, and Dad's got his head too far up his own ass to notice anything. Stop worrying all the goddamned time. You're in good hands with me."

Am I? I feel like I've got a boa constrictor around my throat.

Before, I was just confused, drowning in all the storming emotions he ignites inside me. Now, I'm livid.

He's doing it. Again.

The ever-cocky asshole steering us through downtown Seattle's controlling my fucking life. Sure, he saved me tonight, but then he has the arrogance to tell me he'll decide who gets to lay his hands on me?

Where does he get off? *Where?* Or does he just get off on bossing me around like I'm really this little-sister-wannabe-lover combo he can't decide what to do with?

I'm fuming, trying to focus on breathing without passing out. My stomach heaves every time the car lurches, and I fight just to avoid getting sick all over his fancy leather interior, which is even nicer than the one in my new car.

Shit. My car!

"Hey, dick, since you're taking me for a ride tonight – who's going to get my car home?"

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye and sneers. "I've got connections. I own a whole fucking nightclub, babe. My old man's the richest man for several hundred miles. You really think I haven't sorted out the logistics of that shit about a second before I decided to get your ass home?"

He makes me feel so small. If both my hands weren't tucked close to my angry belly, trying to hold everything

inside, I'd slap him clean across his stupid smug face.

But I guess we've been there, done that, haven't we?

Nothing gets through to him. Nothing.

I can't make him respect me. I can't decide if I really deserve it. All I can do is settle into my seat and let him punch my ticket to another rung of hell. The only thing I know about my destination is that I'm bound to suffer, *guaranteed* to bottle up my emotions while they eat me from the inside out, this fucked up love-hate thing we've got going that smolders like slow moving acid.

"You always have all the answers, don't you?" The saner part of my brain's screaming *shut up*, and it wants me to bite my tongue. But it comes out anyway.

Ty stomps the accelerator a little harder.

"Yeah, I do. I know how my world works, as much as I fucking can. Shit, you saw what happened back there when I miscalculated. I almost got you literally fucked by some piece of shit who's not fit to stick his dick in the nearest blender!" His fist comes down on the steering wheel – hard.

I blink, trying to comprehend what I'm hearing. It's bitter and violent, even by his standards. There's something else too.

Is Ty Asshole Sterner actually feeling...*guilty*?

I didn't think it was possible. I didn't think he had a conscience. He seemed like a wild beast before, a force of nature, certainly not a man with thoughts and feelings and regrets behind his inked up muscle.

"Huh? Are you really saying you're...sorry?"

He just drives for a few seconds. Then he looks at me and narrows his eyes. The shadows dance with a few fresh bruises on his jaw.

"Yeah. Sorry some asshole I trusted turned out to be a piece of shit."

I snort. I should've known he wasn't *really* going to give me an honest, heartfelt apology. Still, he's gone quiet, serious,

and the bright blue eagle eyes he's got fixed on me haven't moved a notch.

“But that's only half the issue. Claire, you're right. With you, I'm a controlling motherfucker. I'm jealous. Loose cannon doesn't begin to describe the way my damned heart beats whenever I feel another man's eyes on you. Let's be straight – any asshole who swoops in for a kiss would've gotten the treatment I gave Karl. That's what anybody with a swinging dick's gonna get as long as I'm around. You're making me fucking crazy. I won't let *any* man fuck you, even if he brings you roses, candy, and martinis for the privilege. We both know the only dick worth having between your legs is mine.”

My ears start ringing. I'm still a little drunk, and my brain struggles to truly process what he's saying.

I'm not sure if I should be flattered or completely horrified.

The car jerks, and for a second all my worries are dashed by the fear that he's going to drive us right off one of the high ocean cliffs overlooking the coastline up to Bellingham.

By the time I remember to breathe, we're heading down a small service road, into a dense forest. He pulls over, kills the engine, and brings us to full stop.

“Ty...this is crazy.” My voice sound so small. “We can't really do this, you know. We can't, our parents are married, we're practically brother and –“

“Sis?” He says it and sends needles dancing up my spine. “I don't give a fucking shit. It's not like we're blood related and we'll make mutant babies or something. I've been fighting this shit since the minute I laid eyes on you. I've never been so obsessed. I can't shake it. Absolutely fucking can't. And you know that? Pussy's easy come, easy go in my world. Only, for some crazy reason, yours is stuck on my mind, twenty-four-fucking-seven like a jackhammer drilling into my skull. Stop pretending you don't want this.”

He unbuckles his seat belt and leans in close. My heart's swollen with all the bitter lies I keep trying to tell myself, trying to tell him. It hurts because they're not true.

I *do* want him, dammit. We both know it.

And now I remember how fucking good his lips feel against mine.

Ty's kiss crashes into my lips and swallows me up like a tsunami. His heat sweeps over me, and I can barely remember to kiss him back before he starts growling into my mouth.

God, that growl. He's a feral man, and that's what makes this so insane, but the heat in my body doesn't lie.

It shouts down the crap I've tried to tell myself. Lust is a thousand times louder. My nipples are like pebbles underneath my shirt, and everything beneath my waist coils tighter, tighter, ready to *snap* if he doesn't dig in and unwind the tension.

My mind races at light speed while his kiss quickens. Ty's got his hands around my back now, shoving me close, pulling me over the divider between us. I bend around him, as naturally as if we were always designed to fit.

"Fuck, babe," he snarls, fisting my hair. "You ready to admit you want this yet? Or do I have to prove how damned good it'll be?"

No. I'll deny it a hundred times if it makes him set me on fire like this. But eventually, kiss by fiery kiss, I'm going to give in.

The good girl inside me stomps her feet and whimpers as he kisses me again. I try to squirm back toward the steering wheel, but Ty's hands won't let me maneuver away, won't let me resist. He holds me down and pulls my soft locks again.

This time, he bites me. It's hot, unexpected, and just a little bit scary.

The scant kisses I've had with other boys can't even compare to this. They're not in the same universe.

He doesn't stop for air either. This man's lips don't quit. They're just driving deeper, harder, ruthlessly taking me over. His tongue pushes into my lips and holds me open. I'm shaking and I can't stop the moan from steaming into his mouth.

He growls back, sucks my bottom lip with his teeth, shoving his tongue against mine. I can't even imagine playing hard to get when he's already inside me, whirling his tongue against mine like he owns it.

Hot. Wet. Unapologetic.

His hands dip down and go below my waist. I moan for precious air when he cups my hips and squeezes. My ass jerks in his hands, and I swing up, accidentally grinding into his lap.

His lips quirk up in a smile against mine when I gasp, feeling how huge and hard he is. He must've planned this. He had to!

Nothing else explains why I'm going to pieces all over this thick, tattooed prince who talks like a street thug. When his thumbs hook just below the waistband to my skirt, catching my panties too, I jerk up and pull away.

I can't speak. I'm too stupefied, too alive with pleasure coursing through my system. My body doesn't want to do anything but *feel*. All my blood goes straight to making sure I'm burning and wet for him.

Ty's ocean eyes are brighter than ever, small worlds dancing in his sockets. He doesn't say anything as he shoves my bottom down in one rough push.

"Oh, God!" I practically come on the spot, and he hasn't even touched me yet. Not *there*.

If it didn't feel so good, I'd be embarrassed. He's fucked a small army of weekly concubines, and I'm just a pathetic virgin, one more reason to hate him for the gulf of sexual experience between us.

Yeah, that's right. I *still* hate this asshole with his hands on my bare ass, pouring his hot breath all over me, even if I happen to *love* what he's doing to me.

He lifts up a hand and aims it at the control panel beneath the window. I jump as the seat falls back, flattening itself low and nearly horizontal. Great, now my bare, slick pussy is practically pressed right against his dick, separated only by his jeans.

I try to edge up, but he grabs me, and pins me down on his waist with a growl. “Don’t you fucking move, babe. That’s my job.”

“Ty, I don’t know about –“

This? I think to myself, finishing it as his face goes between my legs. He drags me right where he wants me, making room for us, cutting off my words. One lick, and hell, I don’t know about anything.

All the thoughts I have about wriggling away from him and saving face are obliterated the instant his tongue licks between my folds. He licks long, slow, and deep, making me feel how incredible this can be if I just shut up and go along with it.

He’s controlling every fucking thing I do, even from the bottom. I want to slap him across the face, keep hitting him before the shame and confusion kills me. But this control, these orders gliding from his mouth on my tender skin... I don’t mind it.

My trembling hands resist the urge to fight and clamp down on his shoulders. It’s just as well, because his licks are speeding up, making my entire body rock with his hunger. He finds my clit, pulls it into his mouth, and starts dragging the ferocious tip of his tongue across it.

I think about those stupid superhero flicks Mom grew up watching, and insisted on sharing with me when I was a kid.

Bam! Pow! Hiss!

One thing’s for sure – he’s an honest-to-God ninja when his mouth covers my pussy – and he isn’t going to stop until I either say it or blow the car’s windows out with my screams.

It’s an easy decision, and yet another one he makes for me. The wave pulsing through my body, shooting up my spine and

exploding in my brain, doesn't stop for anything. It's like a runaway freight train, and I just realize my pussy's grinding eagerly back against his mouth before I lose it.

Stop fucking thinking so much, beautiful, I hear him growling in my head. Shut the fuck up and come for me.

His hands clench tighter on my ass and he drags me across his face, fucking me with his tongue, quickening the strokes like he's tonguing the last desperate crescendo on some instrument. Oh, except *I'm* that instrument, and my body can't hold anymore of the manic fire he's sending through my bones.

My blood boils a hundred degrees hotter and I dig my fingernails into his shoulders. My head snaps back and my neck stretches. The volcano in my lower belly goes off, firing upward, a full body eruption resonating from my pussy into every single extremity.

“Jesus! Fuck! Ty!”

I've never been a religious girl, but I think I've found a new holy trinity. I call out to it again and again and again as my body comes in waves.

And when I say my body, I mean *every* muscle.

It's so strong I almost can't stand it. But when the energy hits my fingers, my toes, curling them like burning bark, I stop just short of passing out. I rock and hitch and scream, gushing on his face, every muscle pleading for him to finish what he's started.

Ty reminds me once again how intimately he knows a woman's body as I'm coming down. His licks soften, growing gentler as I'm gasping and trying to focus my breath. The spasms lessen, and my first orgasm at the hands and lips of a man passes in one last flush of steam.

“Okay, you win,” I ooze into his ear, resting my head on his shoulder. “Maybe I do want this. *Maybe.*”

He pulls me back and looks deep into my eyes. Then he kisses me again, making me taste the remnants of myself on his lips, forcing another hungry growl into my mouth.

“You’d better be fucking sure, babe,” he says when he breaks the kiss. “There’re no do overs here, Claire. No mulligans. This game goes all the way to the finish line. If you fuck with me, we’ll both end up broken.”

My fingers ache as I finally lift them off his shoulders, gliding them down his chest. Jesus, he’s so ripped. I can’t believe I’m freely touching him and loving it, admiring how chiseled his mountainous muscles really are.

“You think I don’t know that?” My heart swells in perfect rhythm with other parts of me as he slips a hand underneath my blouse and runs it along with my spine. “I’m serious about this, Ty. I’m serious about you, especially because it almost sounds like you’re looking for more than a quick and dirty thing.”

His eyes go wide. I get a perfect, unobstructed view of those glacial eyes, now moving like they’re melting under a high arctic sun. “Damned right I am. Just never found a chick worth trying that shit with ‘til I met you.”

He kisses me again. It’s hard, long, hot, and furious. I don’t think I can even find the words to describe this kiss.

My mind’s spinning – fucking *whirling* – trying to comprehend the fact that I’m really about to let my brutal step-brother punch the V-card I’ve held onto for way too many years.

I don’t know why I have to confess it. Maybe it’ll do something to help me regain my footing, help me grab this thing by the horns before my pussy’s wrapped around him the same way.

“Ty, wait.” It takes all my energy to sever our lips. “There’s something you need to know.”

My lips shake. He looks at me when I pause for too long, then reaches up and brushes my hair back, tangling his strong fingers along the way.

“Tell me.”

“Uh, I’ve never...”

Fuck. How the hell do I come clean about this?

“What?” He presses.

“I’m kinda new to sex. I’m...a virgin.”

Something goes off in my head. There’s a droning sound, something spinning, the entire world collapsing in on itself like someone’s blowing a didgeridoo in both my ears.

“Babe?” There’s a long pause in his voice. “Babe!”

I should’ve known it was too good to be true. A second later, the curtain falls across my eyes. I’m falling too deep into a thick, dark blackout to know anything at all.

LONG FUSE (TY)

Fuck me.

A minute ago, I was two seconds away from tearing off my pants and burying my greedy dick deep in her heavenly cunt. Then she had to set off a nuke in my ear and pass the fuck out.

As if it's not a big enough shock to know I'm the first bastard who's gonna have her pussy, she goes dead cold. Out like a dude going down in the ring.

Shit. Fuck.

I lift Claire off me and roll her soft body 'til she's flattened in her seat, checking her pulse, wrestling to remember everything I know about first aid. I hold my face to her lips, measuring her breath.

I wouldn't have done this shit if I still thought she was drunk. I have a raging red flash of the Swede in my mind, and I silently vow I'm gonna put him in his fucking grave if he's slipped her something more than booze, even if I need to track his evil ass to Stockholm.

No, she's too stable to be drugged by more than alcohol. Her vitals are good. I'm no doctor, but I know when some poor woman's been fucked up. I've seen it before with girls in the club, and always end up beating the shit outta the rat sons of bitches who're responsible.

She's just on overload. Overwhelmed by what I did to her, what we were about to do.

Goddamn. I need to get her home. I pull her panties and skirt back up with a sigh, then readjust my dick so it doesn't rip outta my pants.

I drive like hell. My heart's still pounding as I go through the gate and pull into the garage. I never take my hand off Claire's, making sure her pulse stays steady and her temperature doesn't drop.

I should take the back entrance downstairs to sneak in. But I gotta carry her, and I'm not gonna risk tripping on some firewood or old gardening tools laying around side of the house.

I don't give a single fuck who sees us.

I'll take all the hell my dad or his Congresswoman wifey wanna lay on me. Getting her tucked into bed with some blood going to her brain's all that matters right now.

I move fast, holding her tight against my chest. We get downstairs without encountering any shit. Laying her out in her room, I draw a blanket over her, and then head to the wet bar a few rooms over for some water.

I don't know if I should wake her up to drink. She's out deep, mumbling to herself every time I brush her cheek. She's warm, like she's got a slight fever.

Fuck. This thing's got me twisted up. It's hell deciding what to do.

If I rush her off to the nearest doctor, the prick'll probably chide me for being a jumpy boyfriend, and there's always the risk our asshole parents will find out. That's sure to go over like lighting a bonfire inside my old man's yacht.

"Ty? Ty? Ty?" She keeps repeating my name, soft and sleepy. Hypnotic, almost.

I brush her face, but she doesn't move like she's fully conscious. She'll be okay. She's gotta be. There'll just be one fuck of a hangover waiting for her tomorrow.

I'm still imagining all the ways I'm gonna castrate the Swede if I'm dead wrong and something *does* happen to her. I have to stay here tonight. If I can't bring her in to the town clinic, then I sure as hell can't leave her alone.

I kick off my shoes and climb in next to her. Her bed's a good size, newer and bigger than mine, but it feels tiny with her pressed up against me. I wrap one arm around her waist and tug her close, using half my mental energy to make my dick behave.

It took having my hands and mouth all over her to make Claire admit she wanted this. Now, it's my turn to resist, and I've gotta strangle my own goddamned brain to keep my hands from wandering all over her.

It feels like hours pass before I finally drift to sleep. Right before I do, I make damned sure her heartbeat and breathing are steady.

So far, so good.

She'll get through this, and so will I. This shit's just one hurdle. There's still a lotta summer left to fuck the absolute hell outta this girl, rock her world 'til there's nothing left to stand on.

A virgin! No shit. I can't stop thinking about her dirty little secret while sleep tugs at my eyes. *How fucked up is it that I'm obsessed with boning a real, dyed in the wool, card carrying virgin girl who's never so much as touched a dick 'til tonight?*

I'm used to fucking sluts who've practiced sucking off half of Club Zing before they finally get their lips on my golden cock. But with her, I'm glad she's never had anybody else.

I'm fucking thrilled, calmed, tossed into Zen-mode by it. I wasn't bullshitting her earlier. One ugly thought of another man having his way with her, willing or not, is all it takes to twist the key in my chest and make me wanna go into full psycho murder mode.

It's nuts. I shouldn't be this possessive, this crazy obsessed with fucking and owning her every way a man can. Thing is, *shouldn't* doesn't really mean shit when I'm fully prepared to

gut any ballsy motherfucker who comes within shouting distance of her panties.

I can't fuck her tonight. But I will. And I'll be the only one who *ever* does.

This sweet, innocent virgin girl wrapped up in my arms is gonna feel every inch of me, and she's gonna goddamned love it. She'll love me. She'll want me. She'll look right past all my flaws. And she's never, ever gonna get enough of this dick once it gets inside her, just like I'll never be able to think straight 'til I've had my fill of her.

Only problem is, I know that once I've had a taste, there's no fucking way I'll ever settle for less. I've got an eerie feeling the last woman I'm ever gonna fuck is hooked tight and warm around me right now, and it's fucking scary.

"Sleep tight, babe," I whisper in the darkness. "You'll need it. You were mine, mine, and only fucking *mine* the second you stepped into the club tonight. Once I get my hands on something good, I don't let go. They'll have to kill me and drag you outta my dead limp hands."



I WAKE up at the crack of dawn like always.

She's sitting up next to me, rubbing her eyes. Can't tell if it's disbelief that I'm next to her, or else if she's trying to shake off all the shit from last night.

"Ty?" Her voice is so soft.

I roll over, grab the water bottle I've got strategically placed on the night stand, and push it into her hands after unscrewing the cap. "Drink this and go back to sleep, babe. It's been a late night."

For a second, it looks like she's gonna pout. I give her a stern look and don't let up 'til she brings it to her lips. I'm secretly relieved she's not passed out or running into the bathroom to puke her guts out.

The fact that she's sitting up drinking means the exhaustion last night was all stress and hangover. Nothing more.

Claire looks at me, her big brown eyes flashing through the pre-dawn gloom. “What about last night? Did I disappoint you?”

I grab her, pull her close. Fuck, her warmth feels good. Dangerously tempting. I savor it as long as I can without my dick hounding me to fuck her.

“Nothing’s changed, babe. Nothing. Listen to me and go back to sleep. We’ll have all the time in the world to talk about it when you’re well.”

I’m a horny sonofabitch, but I’m not selfish or stupid. She’s in no condition for the horizontal gymnastics I’ve got in mind. Fucking will have to wait – as much as I want to stab myself in the eye for thinking it.

She relaxes in my embrace. My words soothe her, and I help her lay down, pulling the sheets up tight for her. It doesn’t take much more convincing ‘til she closes her eyes. Soon as I see her chest slowing and her breath goes soft, I quietly slip out.

I grab a fresh change of clothes and wash up. Fat Boy left me with a few parting blows on the jaw, but nothing that won’t heal with a little time. His sting reminds me the victory was hard won last night, making it all the sweeter.

So does the lingering taste of Claire’s lips on mine. No shit, I can still taste everything. Her kiss, her pussy cream, everything I wanted to suck and bite and lick for hours.

God willing, I’ll do it again. Soon. Just not soon enough to satisfy my utterly impatient fuck below the waist. There’s only one remedy for blue balls that ever works.

I head down the long corridor toward the back door, itching for a morning swim. It’s a cool summer morning. I’ve started many mornings like it – mostly the ones when I don’t wake up with some easy broad in my bed, ready to empty my balls before I send her on her merry way.

A long, cold swim will have to do. Sure, I could head down to Club Zing right now and find a few stragglers who’d fall to their knees and suck me off in minutes.

But they're not *her*, and they'll never fuck with my head the way Claire does. They'll never make my dick hammer half as hard as she does, turn me into an aching mess before I've even been inside her.

I'm outside and the big glass door clicks shut behind me. That's when I get the shock of my life.

Dad's sitting in a lounge chair next to the pool, something he never does. He's got a cigar in his mouth. When he sees me, he stops smoking, and gingerly flicks a few ashes onto the tile.

"What the fuck are you doing out here?" I growl, stepping close to the very private space he's intruding in. The pool's always been an extension of *my* territory in this house.

Shit, he barely spends any time in his own house at all. Maybe a little more since he moved in his trophy girl from Congress.

"Why is it so hard to just say 'hello,' Son?" Dad stands, stubs out his smoke, and stops with just a few feet between us. "I know you came home late last night, carrying your sister, Ty. Is the poor girl still alive?"

He's got a sarcastic curl in his lips. He knows damned well she is, and the venom in his voice makes me see red.

"How the fuck did you know?" It hits me, and I run a hand across my face. "Joan. God damn it. You said you'd stop pulling that shit after I turned eighteen – I'm not a fucking kid anymore, old man! You don't need to threaten her to spy on me."

Dad doesn't flinch, even when I get up in his face. He's the only bastard on this planet who doesn't, probably because he can remember me when I was just some gawky kid a few inches shorter than him.

"And you assured me you wouldn't drag Mandy's daughter into your childish antics. She's a good kid. If she's come home too plastered to walk, then you're the reason, and I want to know why."

Okay, Dad, I think. You want the truth?

My fuckface of a former manager at the club tried to force himself on her in the backroom after my roughest fight in months. I broke his fucking nose and drove her home, but not before I shoved my face in her virgin pussy 'til she came her brains out.

Hey, maybe we've got something in common after all, assuming your new wife's pussy tastes half as good as little Sis'.

Fuck. That's everything I want to say, but obviously I don't.

It's bad enough the asshole in front of me threatened our poor housekeeper. He's done it before when he wants to pump her about my latest fuck ups, holding her job security over her. Joan cleans early and late, just doing her job, but she sees a helluva lot. She deserves better.

"This is all on *you*, Tyler." He narrows his eyes. "You know that, right? It's time for you to take responsibility, son. Our poor maid wouldn't need to have these unpleasant conversations with me if I didn't have to worry about what's happening in my own goddamned household."

"That's just it – there's *nothing* for you to worry about. Claire's fine. She just had a late night out. I took care of everything. I stayed with her while she went to sleep. I know how to look after people, Dad, and I sure as shit don't need you to look after me."

I'm about to storm out before this shit gets much more explosive. It was a big mistake coming out here. I'll get in my car and drive to beach, swim in the choppy fucking Pacific to blow off steam. And I've got a lot more circulating in my system now that I'm once again wrangling with this dick I'm ashamed to share blood with.

"When are you ever going to grow up, Ty? When?"

My back's turned, but I can feel him shaking his head behind me. Something about that shit causes me to freeze, spin around, and lock onto his icy stare.

“When are you gonna stop being such a selfish jackass? You don’t give two shits about Claire’s health or what I’m doing with my life. You’re just afraid we’re gonna do something dumb in front of the media and rock your little empire, or maybe derail wifey’s Senate campaign. You don’t need to keep pretending you give a fuck about anything besides money and prestige.”

He comes striding up fast, his cheeks flushing red hot. “Little empire? Little?”

Oh, fuck. I can feel the volcano preparing to blow.

“It’s that *little* empire that gives you a standard of living ninety-nine percent of the people on this planet will never dream of, Tyler. It’s everything I’ve built with my bare hands! Hell, I would’ve *loved* to go gallivanting around with women and muscle men in my twenties like you. You know what I was doing?”

Fucking shit. Here it comes. I can’t roll my eyes fast enough. Too bad it doesn’t shut him up. I tune out for half his rant.

“Living like a monk at the goddamned library...ass in chair, coding like a monkey, building Spree line by line and struggling to earn a thousand dollars a month...I swear, son, you just don’t get it...you’d blow your stack and run the minute you stepped a single foot into a room full of fucking angel investors!”

It all washes over me. We both know it. Hearing him drop a rare F-bomb snaps me back to attention. I take a few steps backward and start laughing.

Dad looks like a damned grenade about to blow up and shower me in shrapnel. His fists are pressed tight to his gray slacks and they’re trembling. He’s not man enough to punch me – sometimes I wish he would, just so we’d finally have it out at a level I can actually understand.

But no, I’m not intellectual enough for him. I’m not a suit-wearing workaholic. I’m not rich enough. I haven’t pissed away the best years of my life licking other rich dudes’

assholes, and shitting my pants every goddamned week over some new lawsuit or fresh regulation or profits for the shareholders.

“And what would you do if another guy walked up and smashed you right in the face, right fucking now?” He’s looking at me like I just threatened him.

Well, fuck it, maybe I did. I’m not gonna be the one to break my old man’s jaw – even though he’s begging for it. Somebody else out there is bound to do it for me one day. I can practically hear the old karma train chugging away in the background, hungry to chew pricks like Dad up and shit them back out.

“I’d walk away before that ever happens,” he stutters. “I’d...I’d call the police.”

The crap coming outta his mouth makes me laugh all over again. I can’t help it. If this weren’t deadly serious, I’d be rolling on the goddamned ground.

“What, are you a hyena now? This is why I’ve got to treat you like a child, Ty. You haven’t grown up yet. It looks like you never will.”

“At least I’ve grown a fucking backbone.” I can’t stop growling, and the droning in my throat only quickens when I see the disgust rippling in his eyes.

“You’ve wasted half your damned life stacking up coin and never doing shit with it. I know I’m gonna get a call one day from some asshole underling who’s found you slumped over at your desk.” I pause. “As much as you piss me off, I don’t want that to happen. I wish you’d let go and pull the stick outta your ass just once. The world doesn’t need us to be the perfect model billionaire family. It just needs us to be real.”

“Real?” He throws his hands up and paces a lap around me. “What is it with you and that word? What the hell do you know about the real world, anyway? I’ve given you everything, Ty, and you’ve taken it all for granted. The six-figure prep school you flunked out of, the summer jobs at my

company you blew off, the club I helped you land for a bargain in Seattle...I gave you *too* much.”

That makes me snort like I’m fucking drowning. It’s just as well, seeing how I need to eyeball the water, or else I might end up punching him in his arrogant shit face after all.

“You didn’t give me crap after ma died. Not anything that matters. You gave me food, shelter, clothing, the trust fund. You gave me tutors who tried to ram shit down my throat I wasn’t interested in. You gave me all the tools I’d need to become a carbon copy of you. And that’s *all* you ever wanted me to be.”

Hatred flickers in his eyes like smoke. The fact that he doesn’t have an instant comeback says it all.

I’ve hit the spike and driven it deep. Too damned far to deny because it’s true.

“One thing we’ll both agree on,” I say. “You’re more stubborn than I am. You won’t stop trying to carve the perfect fucking family and make me into the golden boy you always wanted, even when you ought to know it’s too late for all that. You want everybody in this damned house being your props for the perfect PR campaign. You won’t just chill and accept this shit for what it is. You’re too big an asshole, Dad. Hell, if you’d shut the fuck up and accept I’m never gonna be standing in line to take over Spree when you’re gone, maybe I’d give you a pass for picking up your DC gold digger and pissing on Mom’s grave!”

Near the end, the filter connecting my brain and my mouth snaps. It’s too much, even for the bastard giving me the evil eye. I don’t expect him to seriously do it – but he fucking does.

For the first time in a long while, Dad surprises me. He moves real fast, and something hard smashes me right in my bruised jaw.

I tumble back. It’s all shock and awe. I’ve been hit by bigger, badder guys hundreds of times. But the fact that I’ve

actually moved my old man to physically strike for the first time in his damned life is like the sky coming down.

I reach up, touch my lip, and I'm bleeding. He's hit pretty fucking hard for a guy who spends all day at meetings. I wipe the blood away and grin, making damned sure he sees what he's done.

Dad jerks his finger out and stabs me in the chest. "You want it this way, buddy, then you got it. You'll never call her Mom. You'll never respect her. Fine. But you will *not* insult my wife to my face. Understand?"

I'm almost sorry if he weren't such a giant cock. Still, I manage to nod, and he jerks away.

I listen to his footsteps fading behind me and don't turn around 'til they stop. I'm wondering why I haven't heard the door close, and it's because he's still standing there, looking at me like I just stomped mud across his precious Turkish rugs flown in from Istanbul.

"I've been wrong about you. Everything I've given you... it's only held you back. It's poisoned you, Son." His voice is low, cold, robotic. "You've got until the end of summer to pack up your things and leave the state. Make some tough decisions, and do it without me and my dirty money, Ty. I'm selling your club. I'm setting you free. And if I find out you've done *anything* to upset Mandy, Claire, or – God help you – my company, I *will* have you prosecuted and locked away. I don't care if you're my own flesh and blood. You're a sick animal, son, and there's nothing more I can do for you."

I'm fucking stunned. Guttled. I can't believe it's taken me so long to see the fighter instinct is genetic.

Except, unlike the combo punches and gut busters I use to take down my opponents, my old man rips hearts out and pops them in his withered hands.

It's all over quickly, so freakishly fast I can't decide whether to rush him and choke him 'til he passes out, or else fall to the ground and puke my guts out.

He's gone before I can do jack shit. The door pops open and slams shut behind him, rattling the heavy glass.

I've got half a mind to pick up the deck furniture and start throwing it through every hand-crafted window pane lining the back of the house. But fucking up my old man's castle won't really do shit. It'll satisfy my monkey brain and nothing else.

It won't take back what just happened, it won't fix anything, and it sure as shit won't extinguish the firestorm he just hurled on my head.

I'm fucked.

Shit, I'm past wanting the asshole to change his mind. He whipped his dick out and swung it, forever reminding me that I'm a goddamned worm without him and these riches I'm supposed to worship.

Forget it. Damn it. *Fuck it.*

There's nothing left to do except what I came out here for in the first place. I tear my shirt off and drop my pants. Then I run to the pool and dive in buck naked.

I swim fast, furious, and hard as I can, splashing water all over the place. When my limbs are full of fire and my lungs don't wanna pump anymore, my mind's clear enough to start thinking about all the decisions I should've made years ago.

Nothing but the swim keeps me from burning myself alive.

I've got a hundred questions and no good answers. First thing on the list – where the fuck can I go that'll still have waters as clear and crisp as this to clear my head in?

EVERYTHING TO LOSE (CLAIRE)

I wake up more rested than I've felt for years. Guess there's something about having the weight of this insane attraction to my step-brother lifted that makes all kinds of things easier.

And no, after last night, he's not just my cocky, foul mouthed step-brother. He's become my lover.

He's stopped just short of claiming me the deepest way a man can. More importantly, he stopped when he could've taken me, leashed his desire because he cares.

Nobody else ever helped me when I'm sick or drunk except a few close friends like Dana.

Sure, Mom used to do it, but it was always somebody else's job like the housekeeper she hired during her long sessions in DC.

I wake up feeling like a billion dollars for the first time since I moved into this mansion. All the pieces are in place, and that makes me smile. It doesn't fade when I'm in the shower and freshening up. It's so nice to throw on a t-shirt and shorts after my first week wearing all business attire.

Breakfast is next on my list, but first I want some fresh air to help feed the cozy afterglow heating up my brain. I head down the hall to the big glass panels leading outside, hoping the morning chill has faded by the pool.

It's a lovely place to sit and I really haven't enjoyed it enough this summer. Lucky for me, there's still time to enjoy lots of things before the Washington's infamous rainy season creeps in.

I'm almost to the door when I see someone moving in the pool. One quick glance at the smooth, shapely muscles delving through the water like it's nothing tells me who.

It's Ty. And he's – holy shit – completely *naked*.

My body heats with the same delicious energy running through my veins last night. I was buzzed, pretty fucked up really, but I remember perfectly how amazing he felt. Actually, I'm relieved to find out it wasn't just the alcohol and the close call with the Swede that made everything so intense.

No, I'm feeling it again. Something's changed.

I fold my fingers in front of me and clasp them tight, all I can do to relieve the tension building in my muscles.

Jesus. I didn't think it was possible to want another human being so bad, but I do.

The thick glass between us muffles sound, but I swear I can hear his lungs chugging, hot and heavy like a grizzly bear running down a rival. He moves the waves aside like he's Moses, plowing through the waters effortlessly.

Damn, if only Moses had bulging biceps and savage ink on his skin. I'd have paid more attention in church when I was little during Mom's half-hearted, short lived attempts at passing on my grandmother's faith.

I study him, admiring the raw power and grace in his body. It's hard to believe this is normal for him. He's always out there, always training for the next match, a born fighter who won't hesitate to use all that muscle to protect what's his. And apparently, that now includes me too.

It makes me giddy.

Somewhere in the excitement, I notice his face. It's scrunched up in a furious, painful looking way. Fear sparks my heartbeats faster.

At first, I want to run out and yell, ask him if he's all right. But his laps are steady, and I don't believe he'd stay in the pool if something were really wrong. He certainly wouldn't be circling round and round like a shark.

No, it's not his body that's hurting. It's something inside him.

Ty proves me right a second later when he stops, slicks back his messy brown hair, wiping the excess water away. Then he tips his face to the rising sun and screams, fists in the air, bobbing in the water. He's roaring the same way I imagine a man does when he's shipwrecked and knows he's totally adrift, hopelessly severed from civilization.

Alone.

I need to help him. I reach for the door, put my hand on the knob, and freeze just before I open it.

The war cry ripping through the glass is over, and it's quiet again. But something about this new silence *scares* me.

I've seen him upset. I've seen him act like a total ass, watched him wreck a man for putting his hands on me. This rage pouring out of him is somewhere else on Ty's anger spectrum, some dark, evil place I can't comprehend.

No, this is different, and it scares the hell out of me.

I bite my lip and step back, too afraid to go out there. What will he think if I'm intruding on him like this? It might startle him just when he was opening up, destroy the wonderful thing we had last night when it's barely begun to flourish.

I'll find out what's going on. Just not until he's out of that pool.

Scurrying away from the door, I head upstairs and get another surprise. There's no breakfast laid out for me like most mornings. Strange because Joan's been so good about it, and so has my mom. I'm about to head into the kitchen to see if the billionaire might have an emergency Pop-Tart or two when I hear voices.

They're hushed. Angry. Serious.

“Are you sure about this, Gary? It’s rough out there for a young man. I can’t imagine doing this to my Claire.”

“Damned right. I’ve made up my mind. The boy’s had his hand held too much. He’s twenty-three years old, for Christ’s sake! Sure, he works hard at that club, but he’s never learned to work smart. He’s used it as a personal playground with his women, his drinks, and those ugly charity fights. It’s an embarrassment. Frankly, I’m surprised we haven’t all been shamed by the media spotlight by now. It’s a nothing short of a miracle.”

I stiffen up against the wall. They’re talking about Ty, and I’ve got a sickly feeling it has everything to do with why he’s swimming himself ragged and cursing the sky.

“Gary...I don’t know. Maybe he just needs some time away. A different job could do him good, something away from the alcohol and testosterone. I could land him something. Lord knows I’ve pulled enough strings for Claire, and it won’t hurt me to get back into touch with some of the folks I’m going to need on my side for the race next year.”

My heart sinks like an elevator. God. I don’t want to believe that I’m just as privileged as poor Ty and my own work’s just as worthless in my mom’s eyes, but there it is. It hurts.

“No,” Gary snaps. “My mind’s made up. Your compassion is a virtue, Mandy, and I love it. But mercy isn’t going to get him anywhere. He’s had his chances. Honestly, I’m surprised you’re not more upset. Your daughter came home stinking drunk last night – that’s totally out of character, isn’t it?”

“Claire’s a young woman,” I can hear my mother shrug. “I trust her. She’s got a lot to learn, sure, but she’ll work through it the same way I did. Trust me, Gary, there are far bigger mistakes a girl can be making at her age than having a little too much fun at the bar.”

Fuck. How do they know? Did Joan see Ty bring me in? I can’t believe the housekeeper would willingly rat on us, even if she did see something she shouldn’t have.

Some seriously bad stuff went down, and I've got a feeling it has everything to do with Gary making threats. Hell, if he's ready to turn his own son out, why wouldn't he threaten the older woman's livelihood?

I didn't like the man Mom married before, but this seals the deal. I fucking hate him.

And he's still droning on about how it's all Ty's fault. Something about how he couldn't get over losing his mother, despite the billionaire's best efforts. He makes himself out to be such a martyr.

I can't seriously believe Gary ever gave a shit. Not with this tone.

"It's a good thing our kids are grown. Well, yours is, anyway," Gary adds, fueling the angry heat simmering in my blood. "I think we'll have to agree to disagree about our parenting styles. Ty's my son, Mandy, and having him out of our hair really is the best thing for everybody. Claire doesn't need his bad influence. Neither does your campaign, and you'd better believe I sure as hell *don't*. I've put up with it for more than twenty years, and I'm done."

That's it then. Exile.

Christ. How long do I have left with him? He could be gone by the end of the week for all I know. Gary's crazy and cruel enough to do it.

I can't take it anymore. I walk into the kitchen and rip the huge stainless steel fridge open, making sure Mom's kefir and kombucha bottles clang together.

Their voices stop. I pretend I'm looking for my breakfast as Mom trots in, concern lining her face.

"Oh, Claire. I didn't know you were awake. I would've had Joan set something up for you..."

"I'm good with cereal, Mom. Hey, are we out of milk?" I'm so flustered I don't see it.

A large hand reaches past me, deep into the second shelf, and pulls out a tall glass bottle. Creamy white and all organic.

What else? Everything in this house has to perfect, especially when it's run by the asshole staring at me.

“Here you go, Claire.” Gary’s smile is so fucking fake it makes me want to spit in his face.

We lock eyes. I can’t hide the dark anger undoubtedly swirling in mine, and I’m sure he can see it. He gives me a sharp look, like he’s on the verge of chiding me, but then he purses his lips and scurries out between us.

“Sorry, everyone, I should’ve left for Seattle half an hour ago. I’m going to be exceptionally late if I don’t get out the door now.”

Mom takes a long step after him like he’s forgotten something. Probably her kiss goodbye. Gary keeps going, and doesn’t look back before he’s out the door.

I feel bad for her. But I’m not sorry I missed seeing their gross morning kiss under these circumstances. She turns back to me, brushing away the worry pulling at her features with a big, politically correct smile. Diplomacy’s in her blood.

“You’d better rest up today, honey. I’m surprised you were out so late after losing your first Saturday to overtime.”

I shrug and bite my tongue as cereal crashes into my bowl, followed by a generous splash of milk. I’ve got to admit, the food in this household isn’t bad, even if it’s as guarded and selectively picked as everything else here.

“There’s got to be some time for fun in the career world, right?”

My mom belts out an anxious laugh, and then quickly catches herself. “Oh, of course! Don’t let work consume you, Claire. Seriously. It’s okay to let loose a little.”

She gives me a stern look. I give her nothing more than a shallow nod. I still can’t believe the utter shit I overheard.

I’m not in the mood for taking any motherly advice. Not today. Sure, she offered a little resistance to Gary, but nothing that would put teeth into him for screwing over Ty.

Why do the assholes always have to get away with it?
Why?

Funny, I realize I used to think of Ty as Prince Asshole less than twenty-four hours ago. But I guess I've been wrong all along. There's more of Prince Charming than I thought in him, and I've been overlooking King Dick the entire time.

Mom mutters a few more bits of small talk my way. I mostly shrug and don't respond.

She finally gets the message and heads somewhere else. I eat my breakfast slowly, nursing my stomach after the rough night.

It's a miracle my body didn't collapse after the drunken bender. Not to mention what went down in his car later that night.

God damn it.

Just thinking about it makes me tingle. I remember how hard his hands squeezed my ass, how he pushed his face between my legs with such reckless abandon. We were so close to going all the way too, if only my exhaustion hadn't ruined it.

His mouth was amazing. How incredible would his dick feel inside me? Would he fuck me hard and fast, or would he fill my pussy with deep, long strokes?

My legs shift uncomfortably under the breakfast bar just thinking about it. I have to help my cereal down with some jasmine tea I quickly brewed up on the Keurig. Thinking about sex with Ty scorches me, robs the air from my lungs without him even being in the same room.

I don't know very much about sex, eager student that I am, but I know it's got to be rare for a man to live up to his wild reputation.

So fucking rare.

And the idea that I might never feel how good those lips feel on mine, much less anywhere else, ever again really

pissed me off. I can't let this crap with his dad get in the way of *us*.

I wrap up my breakfast and set my dishes in the sink, then take a long walk through the mansion before heading downstairs. I should go shopping or something to lighten the load on my mind, but I can't, knowing he's here.

I head down to my room and read for a while, keeping my ears perked up for any movement in the basement. I'm deep into this article for work about grizzly bear restoration in the Cascades when Ty's door swings open and slams shut. I hear him stirring through the wall, making quick, angry movements.

It's hard to believe he can move after taking so many vicious laps in the pool.

It takes me a minute to gather my courage. I get up and step outside, slowly closing my door behind me so he can't hear. I hesitate when I walk the few steps to his door and hold my hand over it, ready to knock.

Too slow.

Before I can make a single tap, Ty rips the door open with a *woosh*. It's so sudden and rough I jump, holding one hand over my chest like a startled old granny.

Ty snorts with amusement. "What the hell do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

He nods, steps aside, and slams the door behind me. I walk deeper into his room for the first time, trying not to lose my mind. His scent is everywhere, masculine and sexy and overwhelming.

Crap. It takes me a second to remember I'm actually here to talk to him.

"Hey, I heard some things this morning," I say softly, meeting his furious eyes. "I saw you swimming when I got up. You were so angry. I didn't understand why until I went upstairs and heard our parents talking. Gary's got it in for you bad, he's —"

Ty holds a hand up and storms past me, crashing his butt down on the bed. “I don’t wanna talk about that fucking jackass. I know what’s he got planned. It’s no loss. The swim helped me make up my mind.”

Why the hell is he so hard to talk to? I’m getting frustrated, mostly at myself for being so flustered. I step forward and sit next to him on the bed, gingerly laying a hand on his shoulder.

“What are you going to do? I’m here for you. Talk to me.”

He gives me a stark, half-skeptical look. But after a few seconds, his eyes soften. I have to suppress a smile, stunned that I’ve really worked my way into him. He’s going to let me in – *right?*

“I’m leaving Washington, Claire. I’m going somewhere I can leave this shit behind and start over. And I mean really, truly start the fuck over. I don’t need his billions to make a man outta myself. Just a little coin I’ve earned in my own damned club, plus my own bare hands.” He pauses, looks at me, and delivers the death blow. “I’m going to Alaska.”

It slams into my heart like a knife. Jesus Christ. *Alaska.*

It’s so foreign. It’s the place Mom visits once every so many years when she needs to run off to the wild and escape civilization. Much as I love nature, I’ve never had the guts to follow her. The stories about thumb-sized mosquitoes and villages with more bears than people are too much.

“Why Alaska? What’s there?”

He cocks his head when he hears how defensive I sound. But I can see the determination in his eyes, and that hurts even more, knowing there’s absolutely nothing I can say or do that’ll change his mind.

“Hard work. Virgin land, babe. Mining. Fishing. Badass motherfuckers who are probably in need of some serious entertainment. But you know, I’m probably not gonna start another club up there – at least not right away. I’m gonna go out to sea, try my hand at fishing. I don’t care if the money sucks. I know a thing or two about how to turn a couple bucks into hundreds, and then thousands. I’ll clear my damned head

for a year by working myself raw, and then I'll figure out the rest. I want the complete fucking opposite of the mold my old man tried to force me through. I'm heading down a different path, and I might as well go all the way. My gut tells me Alaska's the place to find it."

He stops. It feels like my lungs are collapsing in on themselves. I'm starting to wonder if last night was a mistake. It's a cataclysm, a riddle I can't figure out, and it's tying my heart in so many knots I'm not sure I'll ever smooth them out.

I can't regret anything about our night together. If it's all I'll have with him, then I'll cherish it forever. But I can't stand thinking it might be my only taste of this savage, beautiful, tyrannical bastard next to me.

"You're shaking your head again, babe. What's going through your brain?"

Guilty as charged. It takes everything I've got to push down the bitter lump forming in my throat, before I spit out the question suffocating me.

"If you're sure about this, then where do *we* go from here, Ty? What about us?"

"Us?" He rolls it around on his tongue. "Babe, we both made a big fucking mistake last night. I think we both realize that, and it's my fault. I shouldn't have sucked your sweet clit on the side road last night. Listen, if I had any clue my old man was gonna go all mad dog this morning, I'd have never done that shit. Hell, I shouldn't have done it anyway, but you looked so fucking good."

A mistake? A fucking boo-boo?

That's it. This brutal, heart wrenching confession overloads everything in my system. I need to get away from him, and I have to do it now.

I jump off his bed and go marching to the door, but Ty runs after me. He grabs me, whirls me around, slams me effortlessly against the wall. Somehow he does it without hurting me, which is always amazing.

Of course, the glaciers he's formed across my body start melting the instant I'm under him, completely covered by his rock hard muscle. His heart's beating much faster than it was just a few seconds ago. My palms lay flush against his chest, wondering if he's always been so hard through and through.

Maybe last night was a big fat mistake. Maybe I saw something that wasn't really there – an honest-to-God heart behind his steel.

“You're teasing me like a motherfucker, Claire. I'm trying to let you down easy – and you're just making me crazier. Getting my mouth all over a virgin, all over my own goddamned sister...that's where I fucked up. We both know it.” He stops growling just long enough to run his tongue across his lips. “What the fuck's going on with you? For real? Why do you make me stupid? I try to back away, try to do the right thing, and you pull me right back. You can't stop teasing every fucking inch of me, begging me to shovel my grave deeper, hounding me to fuck you.”

“So do it!” An electric jolt runs through me. “Stop being scared. Don't talk about mistakes. You're all about living on the fly and figuring things out, right? Why don't you just shut up, fuck me, and find out what happens after that?”

The low, breathy rumble in his throat builds. I swear to God there's a pit bull somewhere inside him, and he lunges for me a second later just like a starving dog.

Ty crushes me against the wall. His lips collide with mine so hard my breath vanishes in a single second. I'm not just going to lay down and take it, collapse against him.

I can't decide if I love him or hate him, and that's making me insane. It's making me hate myself for being so mixed up, just as unable to let him go as he is with me.

I give him everything in my kiss. I kiss him, bite him, shove my tongue against his, moaning like a total whore into his mouth when his huge hand squeezes my thigh.

“Tell me you fucking want this,” he snarls, breaking the kiss. “Beg me to fuck you again.”

“Do it, you bastard. I don’t care anymore. Nothing makes sense when I’m just staring at you, feeling you. I need you inside me. I need it *now*.”

He lets out a low laugh and shoves his chest to mine, flattening my hard nipples on his shield-like torso. “That’s what I need to hear. I know it’s real when you say that shit. I can almost believe we’re not making a huge mistake, almost believe it’s meant to be. You’re lucky you got it out now, Claire. I wouldn’t have fucking stopped, even if you told me.”

He thrusts between my legs, hard as ever, stroking the massive erection popping out his shorts against my pussy. Jesus, we’re closer to joining than ever, separated by only a couple thin layers of fabric.

And his lips don’t stop. They keep coming, burying mine in waves. I’m a sucking, biting, sopping wet mess by the time he breaks to run his fingers through my hair. Ty growls, fists my brunette locks, and pulls my head taut to give his next few kisses an even better landing.

His tongue’s hypnotic. No joke. No lie.

Time loses all meaning as long as mine’s wrapped around his, led in a dizzying clockwork dance that stirs every ounce of my blood.

Neither of us know what the next hour, day, or week’s going to bring. Right now, I’m content to live in the moment, as long as it means being pressed to his granite flesh.

The saner part of me keeps screaming *no, no, no*.

You can’t do this, she howls. You can’t seriously push down your panties and fuck your own step-brother.

It’s weird. It’s wrong, so terribly twisted on so many levels I don’t even –

Moaning louder into his mouth, I shut the good girl up. My body knows exactly what it wants. My heart’s just as confused as ever, but my pussy’s humming with delight, wet and blooming open for him to take me any second.

Ty swoops away from my lips and begins stamping fresh kisses down my neck. I gasp pure delight at the sensation, wondering how low he's going to go. He shows me an instant later, shoving my blouse aside, sucking deep into my neck while his hands wander up and squeeze my breasts.

My knees drop out. I'd seriously hit the floor if it wasn't for his strong arms holding me up, and the pressure of that seriously mean dick grinding between my legs.

I don't know how I'll die first if he doesn't give it to me soon. Will I burst into flames, or just drown from the bottom up?

I want him. I fucking need him. And I never, ever want him to let go, no matter how harsh and crazy things get with our messed up family.

"Ty, Ty, Ty..." His name hisses out like a mantra, all I can do to keep myself grounded.

I'll never live it down if I pass out again while we're this close. I'm not drunk this time – not on liquor – but I'm definitely intoxicated by his touch, his taste, his divine scent.

Ty steps back, points to my shirt, and then grabs my hips. "Take that thing off for me now. I'm gonna work your pussy twice as hard while you strip."

Holy shit. Before, his orders just made me see red, but now I'm tugging at my shirt like it's made of poison ivy, desperate to drop it on the floor.

Ty's falls to his knees and jerks down my jean shorts. When he spots the wetness on my panties, he stops and smiles, then lowers his face to the wet spot like a target and grabs my black lace with his teeth.

Typical virgin. I practically orgasm right on the spot before he's even licked me. I don't know how I can possibly be more sensitive than yesterday, but I am, maybe more so this time because there's not a trace of anything from a bottle scrambling my system.

My boobs fall out and catch his hungry eyes. I'm about to work off the bra when loud, wooden thunder claps next to us.

Oh, no. Oh, Jesus Christ.

“Claire? Ty? Are you two both in there?” Mom’s voice calls out less than a second after knocking at the door.

Ty gives me one quick glance and then he’s off, grabbing at my clothes with one hand, and carrying me over his shoulder with the other. Ripping open his closet door, he points to a narrow space between a couple boxes and an old guitar with his eyes.

“Cover your nose and mouth. It’s not too dusty, babe, but you’ve gotta stay quiet.”

He pushes the door shut just as Mom calls my name again.

“Coming. Give me a damned second.” It’s all he needs to throw on a shirt and straighten his shorts.

I cringe when I think about my mother seeing that huge dick peeking out of his pants. That’s right – the same one that was about to fuck me, if only the fates hadn’t conspired to keep it away from me *again*.

“Ty!” Mom sounds oddly surprised. “Have you seen your sister anywhere?”

“She went out for a long walk. That’s all I know.”

There’s a long pause. I can practically see Mom’s eyes studying him, checking for truth. I keep my hand pressed tight over my mouth, anything to avoid breathing a little too loudly or coughing when I shouldn’t and blowing my hiding place.

“Hm. I suppose I’ll wait until she returns. Listen, I’m really sorry for everything your father’s putting you through. I tried to change his mind.”

“I don’t need your fucking sympathy. My old man’s an asshole, plain and simple. You’ll figure it out too with a little time, Mandy.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree about that, young man.” Mom says smartly, mustering her sharp Congress tone. “You know, whatever life has in store for you, it’ll go so much smoother if you just find a way to relax. You don’t need to be so angry and on edge all the time. *Chill.*”

I almost laugh. I've never heard her use that word, and it's so fucking out of place while I'm standing here half-naked and wet, every part of me still pleading to fuck my step-brother when it's the most reckless thing I can possibly do.

“Whatever, Congresswoman. I'll work on that. Now, if you'll kindly go pester some lobbyists or something, I've got shit to do.”

The door slams shut a second later. I listen closely for Mom's footsteps, feeling them synched to my thudding heartbeat. There's a new bitter lump lodged deep in my throat, and I'm choking on the cold realization of just how fucked up things really are.

God damn it. It won't let up – will it?

If I needed a sign from the heavens that I'm about to screw the pooch even harder, it's this. I'm not meant to fuck him. I'm supposed to sit quietly until he mopes away from the house and I never see him again. Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll end up getting my pussy stamped by some nice, clean boy with a six figure salary and one lonely, carefully concealed bunny tattoo.

Ty marches over and rips the closet open a second later. I'm pulling at my clothes, trying to cover up my nakedness, feeling the heat rush out of me.

“Fuck, that was close. You okay, babe?” His shirt's off again.

I stop and gawk at his chest, but this time I feel my lust melting. It's like a cruel reminder of everything I can't have.

“No. Not anymore, I mean.” I can't lie to him.

I'll disappoint him, I'll get under his skin, but I'll always give him the truth. That's something I can offer that no one else in his life does.

“Claire? What the fuck!” He jumps when he sees me heading for the door, blocking its path with his huge, tattooed body.

The wildcat on his chest looks extra angry today – mad enough to leap off his skin and tear me to shreds. It's the last

violent straw I need to feel hot tears stinging at my eyes.

“Goddamn it, babe, talk to me!” Ty jerks me into his arms and closes them tight, smashing my face into his chest. “What the fuck happened in there? I thought we were gonna fuck?”

“Oh, come on!” I need to pause and catch my breath, suppress the shameful shudder sweeping through me. “Don’t you get it yet? We’re not meant to do this, Ty. We really aren’t. You were right earlier – this thing between us is just a big ugly mistake – and we were about to make it bigger. Just let me go. Forget about me. You’ll have plenty of girls when you get to Alaska. They’ll be easier, hotter, and not related by marriage.”

I try to make another run for the door, but he jerks me back, flattens me against his chest. I’m crying and acting like a total idiot, but it doesn’t stop me from feeling a wicked pleasure when he brings his face close.

I don’t know what the hell I want anymore. I just want him to decide for me.

Rough stubble on his jaw scrapes my cheek. He’s winding his way to my ear, and his lips stop, hot and heavy with breath.

“I don’t buy that superstitious bullshit, babe, and neither should you. The only thing stopping us from hitting the sheets and fucking right now is what’s in your head. Now, you gonna forget about it on your own so we can get down to it? Or do I have to make you by slamming your pussy so hard you won’t think about anything except how good you feel?”

My spine’s tingling. I don’t resist as he brings his lips to my throat, hot and possessive, sucking in flesh that’s becoming tender again alarmingly fast. Several sucks and love bites like that and he grabs me, whips me around, pushes me up to the wall where we left off.

He drops to his knees and fists my panties, tearing them away in one jerk. I have to bite my tongue to keep from screaming out loud.

I don’t know what to think or feel anymore. All I can do is hold on to the pleasure rushing through my veins. It’s like standing next to a freight train whistling by me at full speed,

especially when he pushes his mouth between my legs and finds my clit with his tongue.

“Oh...*fuck!*”

My ass bobs against the wall and I fight to keep my balance. My hands go to his shoulders, and I dig my nails into his perfect skin, feeling a dozen curses light up my brain at once as his licks across my pussy deepen.

Ty sucks me. He needles me. He bites me.

I thought I understood what it's like to come all over his marvelous lips after last night in the car. But this is different. It's rougher, it's raw, and it's so fucking real my skin sizzles with every jolt he sends through my nerves.

Mostly, he spins me around and around by the clit with his devilish tongue strokes. I can't get enough air into my lungs the closer I get to going over the edge, and he's forcing me there lightning fast, dragging me to the precipice by my smothered, throbbing clit.

When he feels me tighten up and my knees start to wobble, he grabs the backs of my thighs and pushes me closer, catching me before the climax brings me to the floor.

Fucking hold on and let it all out, babe, I hear him telling me through his lips. Come on my goddamned face. Come like you've always wanted to.

I don't know if I'm really reading him. I don't care. I do it.

My body tenses up and the fireball in my belly explodes outward. For the next few glorious minutes, I'm running on autopilot, a breathless, gushing, blinded mess who can't stop grinding on his chin.

My hips drag my pussy straight into fresh licks, and he doesn't stop, even when I'm collapsing on top of him, begging through the explosion. He's fucking killing me with this white hot pleasure, and I'm ready for my heart to stop.

I wish everything could stay obliterated the way it is when I'm locked in climax. There's no worries here. Nothing holding me back from just enjoying our skin fused together.

No complications or family dramas to smolder the fires in our hearts and minds.

When I'm finally coming down, I feel him take his face away and wipe it, but only for a second before he lifts me up. Ty holds me while he drops the rest of his clothes with his free hand, guiding me over to the bed, that magical forbidden place where I've imagined him fucking me too many times to count.

It's cool against my bare ass, or maybe it's just the furnace still roaring in my bones. "Fucking shit. You taste so goddamned good, babe. You know I've been thinking about how tight this gets since the day you moved in?"

He cups my wet pussy with his hand, laying two stiff fingers against my clit. He circles it just hard enough to make me squirm. I'm amazed my body recovers so quickly. It's like I'm addicted to him, and rest is totally out of the question whenever he's touching me.

I manage to open my eyes and shake my head. It's seriously hard to believe he wants me as bad as I do him, but his words say otherwise. Hell, so does his touch.

It's also hard to believe how fucking huge he really is.

I'm getting a good look at his dick for the first time, pulsing away in his fist. I'm not sure how the hell he'll fit inside me, but damn if I'm not going to try to take every inch.

He's long, swollen, angry. A bead of pearly sap forms on its little slit and dribbles down to the bed, his pre-come marking the sheets, which are about to get a whole lot wetter.

"Fuck. I can't stand it anymore. You need me to wear a rubber or what?" He reaches for my thighs and pushes them apart, blue eyes glowing like a hungry wolf's as he stares at my pussy.

My cheeks are so red. Some of it's the pleasure, but I'm scared as hell of disappointing him.

Do the words ever come easy when two people are staring at each other buck naked, ready to fuck the way they've imagined for weeks?

“No, no,” I shake my head and whisper. “As long as you’re clean...I’ve been on the pill for a while. Just never had a good reason for taking it until now.”

His eyes glow even brighter. “Thank fuck. I’d be scared of fucking right through the condom anyway. Once I’m in this pussy, babe, it’s mine. I won’t stop ‘til long after you’re screaming my name. There’s no off switch, no refunds, no reverse. Understand?”

I don’t. But I want to.

My knees are shaking as I spread my legs wider, reaching for his hand. He clasps my fingers and takes it as a cue to crawl forward. He covers me, an immense beast as big and feral as the tiger tattooed to his chest.

“You’re wet as fuck, but I’m gonna make you cascade. Come on, baby. Push that clit against my dick. I wanna hear you moan. Beg me for this dick with every breath.”

He drags his full length up and down my pussy several times. My folds push snug around him, so fucking close to swallowing him up, feeling him inside me, everything I want with an intensity that completely devours every hunger I’ve ever known.

Our flesh steams, pressed together. It’s hard to believe he’s there, right up against me, ready to dig in and fuck me skin-to-skin. But I can’t deny *this* pleasure, so deep and dark and much more primal than having his mouth teasing me a minute ago.

With a growl, his mouth slips down to my nipple. I’m shocked for about the hundredth time today, and let out a whimper as my back arches into his bite.

God, it’s good. His hands catch mine and pin them down above my head. That’s when I realize he isn’t screwing around – he seriously wants me to beg him for it.

Not just with my words, but with my body.

And – believe me – I’m a hot, pleading mess half a minute later. My fingers flex against his, scratching his skin. My words barely come through the teasing friction of his tongue

flicking my bud, and his rock hard cock sliding against my clit.

“Please, Ty. *Please*. Fuck me. Give me what I want.”

No, that can't be right. This is *way* beyond wanting. I fucking *need* him inside me in the next five minutes, or I'm going to die of a stroke right here in this bed.

“Ty...”

He cuts me off by tightening his teeth around my nipple. He holds it there, slashing his tongue against it in circles, making me feel the same shock he gave my pussy all over again.

“Come on! I know you want it too. You need it, Ty, just like me...don't you?” I roll my hips as hard as I can into his dick. He needs to want me too.

He growls pleasure through my breast. It works. He lifts his face a second later, beaming those bright blue headlights in his handsome face straight through me.

“Fucking-A. You're a goddamned whore when you're pussy's on my dick – you know that? I fucking love it.”

So do I. I should be offended, but his filthy talk turns me on. Prince Charming has a tongue like a whip, and I bare myself for every strike.

I grind my soaked slit against his length again, showing my teeth, hissing out my wanton need that's all slut.

Never doubt a virgin girl who's been clinging to her purity for far too long. Ty pulls back and gives my wrists a rough shove, holding them in place. His dick takes aim and starts to push inside me when he thrusts forward.

My eyes go wide. I'm struggling to count inside my head so I don't forget to breathe. But my brain can't even comprehend numbers when he's halfway inside me, pushing his way in, filling me with that mad, masculine fullness that's Ty to the core.

“Fuck, you're tight.” He sounds amazed, and it comes out in a whisper.

Apparently, I'm not the only one going breathless here. He's much more experienced than I am, and he shows it a second later when he increases his force, plunging his cock into me until it can't go any farther.

My pussy stretches around him. The tingle's hot, precariously positioned between pain and pleasure, but I know I want more of it.

I shove my lips up to his and we kiss. It's all the signal he needs to roll back and pound into me again, this time a little faster. I moan into his mouth and twine my tongue with his. His tongue pumps in and out, rhythmically matching the tempo of his dick, fucking me in both holes at once.

My hands keep flexing, struggling to grab onto something, but he won't let them up. I'm being buried by this animal all over me, my filthy step-brother, the last man on earth who should be slamming his giant cock against the entrance to my womb.

I don't care anymore. I swear I fucking don't.

I can't bring myself to care about anything except how good it feels, and how incredibly quick he's making me come my brains out.

"Just keep fucking me back, babe," he growls. "It's about to get a whole lot faster."

He isn't lying. My pussy struggles to accommodate him as he tilts his hips and starts pumping me two, three, four times as fast. I manage to get one hand on top of his hand and hold on for dear life.

A scream comes belting out of my mouth. There's no time to muffle it, but Ty does it for me, shifting up so he can fuck without needing to hold the other hand on the bed. He grabs my legs, pulls them around him, and keeps on going, clapping his palm tight over my mouth.

The insane pressure sets me off.

I fucking bite him as everything below my waist coils up and explodes. The firestorm hits my brain a second later, and

I'm bathed in mind-bending pleasure, a current of animal pleasure that takes me into a whole new zone.

When I'm here, I don't care about Gary or Mom or even the fact that Ty's leaving. I don't care about bursting a lung and telling everyone in this house that I'm fucking my own step-brother.

Jesus, I don't even care about how I'm going to sit straight at work tomorrow.

Ty snarls, quickening his thrusts, slamming between my legs like a human jackhammer. The bed's slapping the floor and squealing. I swear it's louder than the way it rocked when he was fucking his club slut.

It's a big mistake thinking about that bitch halfway through my orgasm. Her memory makes me want to suck every last drop of come from his balls, make him unload everything inside me, all the seed he'll ever have.

If he's my first fuck, then I want to be his last. I want to keep coming on this cock forever, depriving every other woman on earth from experiencing his glory.

I'm finally starting to breathe again, coming down from the high, and realizing what a jealous bitch I am. Ty looks at me and slows his strokes, just enough to bring his lips to my ear.

"You'd better get used to this feeling, Claire. You're gonna spend every spare second you've got glued to my cock when we're both in this house. I'm fucked when I come inside you. Straight up fuckin' doomed. I'll be thinking about how good this sweet cunt feels wrapped around me the same way I think about drawing my next breath." He pauses, slams his cock into me harder, rocking my whole body. "I fucking need this, dammit. I need what's mine."

There's that M-word again. Hearing it a few more times doesn't lessen the impact. When he says it, my toes curl, and not just because his cock's plunging deeper, harder, faster.

What the hell does it mean to truly belong to Ty Sterner? To be *his*?

I come a little closer to understanding when he picks up his hips and fucks into me again. The hot, feral voice in my ear fades into a sucking kiss just below my ear. His teeth graze my tender skin, and then he sinks them in rougher.

He's biting me. Marking me the same way a wild animal claims a mate.

As if this couldn't get any more wrong...

Fuck, why does it feel so good to be bad?

He finally releases the death grip he's got on my hands. I wrap my fingers over his strong neck and hold on tight, pulling myself up tighter to meet his deep strokes, fucking him back.

Ty's words come in slower, heavier bursts when he releases his teeth. Or maybe I'm just losing my sense of time. The superhuman pleasure crashing in this bed blurs everything.

"Oh, fuck...baby...fucking shit...fuck, fuck, *fuck!*"

The last few F-bombs drop in a steady beat, perfectly synchronized with the thud of his hips on mine. He's fucking me so hard and deep his pubic bone grinds against my clit, introducing me to yet another delicious sensation.

I can feel the music in our bodies. My veins sing, lungs full of fire, begging him to fill me. I want to overflow with his seed.

My pussy starts clenching on his dick just as a lower, rougher growl pours from his throat. The next few thrusts are dynamite. Explosions pick my muscles up and slam me down – or else it's just the incredible clap of his skin on mine as he slams himself into me at breakneck speed.

I can't feel my fingers. I'm probably scratching raw lines down his muscular back, but there's no sign he cares. If anything, it's edging him on.

I'm coming before he grabs my ass, pulls me up onto his cock, and impales me on his fullness. That's when I feel him swelling, holding himself against my womb as his tip balloons.

“Fuck, Claire – fucking come with me!”

I have to bury my face in his shoulder before orgasm beats me blind and stupid. It’s all I can do not to scream so loud it’ll echo through the house. Ty’s shaft throbs deep inside me, and he holds me down while thick magma jets burst inside me, deeper than ever, completely flooding my depths.

We’re fucking and rocking and coming for a small eternity. I swear our bodies match the rolling Pacific behind the house.

Hungry. Roaring. Insatiable.

His muscles flex around me like never before. It would take a bomb to break us apart. We’re glued together as molten come pumps into me, pumps deep, pumps for what feels like forever.

He doesn’t stop growling. It’s a steady hum, a mantra rooted in his ecstasy, a sound I’ll remember on my deathbed. I’ll never get tired of hearing this thunder.

I’m already missing it when the pleasurable hurricane washing over us fades. Baser sensations return to the numbness pooling in my toes, and it rolls up my body. I’m going to hurt like hell tomorrow.

I’ll probably be sore, inside and out, but it’s not like it stops me from wanting more. I bring my lips to his and bury myself in a long, wet kiss.

His lips taste sweet, full, and addictive. Okay, now I’m in really big trouble.

What the hell are we going to do? The deed’s done, and I hope to God it’s not the last time. But if he really has to leave before the end of the summer, that means I’ll lose these monstrous muscles wrapped around me.

His hands help me settle on the bed. Slowly, he pulls out, climbs over my legs, and flops down. I lay on his chest, just savoring his heartbeat, trying to quiet all the hateful worries flooding my head.

“That was so good, Ty. Better than anything I imagined.” My voice purrs faintly, robbed of its energy by our sex. I like

it.

“Good. We’d both be in trouble if I disappointed a fucking virgin.” He smiles. “You rocked my world too, in case you’re wondering. It doesn’t take mad skills to get me off. Long as you look half as pretty as you do now, I’m gonna need to rub balm on my dick or some shit before the summer’s out.”

The joke’s so crude and ridiculous it makes me laugh. I roll my fingers down his chest, fixing them around the tiger’s black eyes staring out through his muscle.

“Okay, what’s the deal with the cat? Did you eat too many Frosted Flakes as a kid, or what?”

He slaps me on the ass. I yelp, shocked, but quickly return his soft smile when I hear him chuckling.

“That’s my latest and greatest, babe. Probably got room for a few more, but this one will be hard to beat.” He stares at the ceiling, as if he’s taking a long journey through time and space. “I had it done a couple years ago, right after I got back from India. I pretended to give a shit about Spree’s new market so I could tag along. Soon as I was off the plane, I slipped out and explored. Ended up having tea with this shaman, who did some mystic reading and told me this was my spirit animal. I thought he was full of shit ‘til I saw the cat staring at us out his window.”

“No way!” I slap his chest, wondering if he’s just jerking me around. Then again, I guess we already did plenty of that.

“No bullshit. That big, beautiful bastard came right up to the window and showed his teeth. Man eating tiger, stripes and all. He looked right at me. The old guru just shrugged like he was expecting the thing to come in and drop off a package. The sly smile on that fucker’s face trumped my doubts.”

Flashing him a mischievous smile, I slide my hand lower, resting on his tight packed abs. “Oh? I thought you told me you weren’t the superstitious type?”

“No, not really. Shit, I’ll leave the door open to anything, even a little crack. This world’s a strange place. Besides, I’ll say anything if it gets me more of this pussy, babe.” He

preempts my slow, plodding circuit to his dick by pushing his hand between my legs and finding my clit. “I’m not just saying that to be an ass. I’m hooked. I dunno about nirvana beyond this world, but the pink between your legs is as close to heaven as I’m gonna get.”

He rubs just enough to bring me into the zone. Then, without warning, he pulls his hand away, bringing his fingers to his lips. I watch in stunned silence as he licks my cream into his mouth.

His hand darts out and slaps my ass again, this time a little more playfully. “Now, stand up and get dressed,” he orders.

What the hell? We can't be done here!

“Huh? Why?” I stutter.

“Because somebody needs to go upstairs and make sure the coast is clear. If you don’t see your ma or Joan putzing around, we’ll go right back to fucking, and I won’t even have to gag you this time.”

Asshole.

I’m smiling, trying to fix my screwed up sex hair as I quickly dress. Asshole or not, I want to hurry up and return to this bed as soon as I can. Anything to have him inside me again.

“How the hell am I going to survive the rest of the summer?” I ask him, pulling my shirt down over my belly.

Ty folds his hands behind his head and shrugs. “Fucked if I know. Good thing we’ve got about seven or eight weeks before my old man has me arrested for hanging here. That’s plenty of time, and I’m gonna do more than break you in. Your pussy’s gonna fit my dick like a goddamned glove by the time I ship off for Alaska. That’s a fucking promise.”

I wish I could make him promise not to leave.

Tomorrow’s a complete mystery to me, and so is next week. It doesn’t bother me as much as it will later. Today, all I want to do is fuck my step-brother a few more times until I can’t move.

Is that so wrong? And if it is, I've got a bad feeling I won't know what's right ever again.



I'M DRAGGING on Monday morning.

Every time I stand up, walk, or even just sit with my legs stretched out, my body reminds me of the filthy fuckfest we had all through the night.

Ty on top of me. Ty thrusting into me from behind, pinching my ass cheeks tight in his hands, shoving my face into the pillows. Screaming my pleasure to the steady clap of his balls against my skin. Ty all around me, burying me, owning me, fucking me, growling threats into my ear about all the ways he's going to make me crave him forever.

God. I think I know how a freshly fired pistol feels.

The worst part? He's absolutely right.

I'm on day two since getting my v-card punched, and I'm already hooked to this man and his savage bedroom ride. And if that's not incredible enough, Ty got up early to drive me into work. It's hard to be around him all dressed up, thinking about the ways he can mess up my neat business outfit all over again.

I can barely concentrate during the team meeting this morning, much less this list building exercise Dan Jacobsen wants done by the week's end.

The names wash over me. I see nothing but vulgar, sweaty, tattooed fucking in every name and email I click through. The gutter has officially pulled my mind in deep.

Of course, none of it changes the fact that we're going to face a terrible reckoning when Ty really has to leave. I'm not sure what'll happen. It hurts just to think about it.

This crazy thing can't last, can it? But I don't want it to be over. Not when it's barely begun.

I bite my lip, working as well as I can, imagining all the insane possibilities. I'm seriously considering joining him in Alaska after my internship ends. It's starting to sound a lot

better than struggling to move into a high priced apartment in Seattle for whatever political gig I can wrangle up next.

No, I *don't* want anything to do with Mom's Senate campaign. I'm still pissed she's decided to march to Gary's brutal drum. If she can rationalize him kicking Ty out and leaving him cold, what else will she cave in to?

And I definitely don't want a cent more from the billionaire prick who wipes his shoes on his own son the same way he does to the rest of the world. I don't care if he bought me a car. He's a total bastard who puts appearances over everything else.

"Claire." There's a knock at my cubicle.

I spin around and see Dan standing there, tall and genteel in his dark brown suit. "What's up?"

"I'd like to see you in my office at the end of the day. There's a special project we need to discuss." He pauses and winks. "Don't worry. Nothing about the quality of your work. That's been fantastic, and I can see the lists are going splendidly."

"I'll be there."

Dan doesn't wait another second. He takes off and leaves me staring, wondering what the hell he's got in mind.

Ugh. I guess there's such a thing as working *too* well.

I don't exactly want more responsibilities dumped on me with Ty tempting me to follow him to the ends of planet earth. Having a quiet, lazy summer is starting to sound really good, especially if it's the only way I'll get to be alone with him. Well, before I have to make another fateful decision about uprooting my life.

Am I really willing to chase this tattooed bad boy's cock all the way to Alaska?

The good girl inside me stares at me like I should be wearing a straitjacket. The rest of me knows damned well what she wants. She sneaks up and starts choking the hell out

of the perfect princess, my conscience, screaming for me to follow my heart into the wild.

At least there's a few more weeks to decide what I'm going to do. Who knows, maybe I'll find out once and for all if Ty's heart really matches the oversized flesh hanging between his legs.



“MISTER JACOBSEN? Dan?” I knock on his office door and it swings open.

He's never got it totally shut. Guess he subscribes to the new Zen of office openness all the managers are preaching these days, especially in the relaxed, progressive work environment Cascades Now! represents.

“It's beautiful out there, Claire. Too good to waste.” He's standing by the window, and turns to face me when I'm inside. “How about we get out of the office and talk over drinks? There's a little Irish place I know up the street. Killer happy hour.”

My heart stops. Mother of God.

My boss isn't seriously hitting on me – is he? If he is, I'm more worried about how the hell I'm supposed to let him down.

I can't say I have a boyfriend. Somehow, I don't think telling him I'm secretly starting to love my foul tempered step-brother and his massive fucking cock will go over well either. Dan's a traditional man, however radical his environmental views.

I freeze up and try to think through it, letting the rational side take over.

It's just a drink. It's innocent. He won't force anything on you unless he wants a harassment suit. Just go with it.

I shrug and give him a small, friendly smile. “Sure. It's been a long day. I guess I can use a beer or a glass of wine. Um, a friend drove me in today, so I'll need a few minutes to call a cab.”

“Nonsense!” Dan pounds his fist on his desk. “We’ll go together. Just let me know when you’re friend’s coming to pick you up later. I’ll drop you back here at the office and you can go home from there.”

Jesus. His eyes are wide and hopeful like a puppy’s staring through a pet show window. I feel awful about leading him on. Even worse that Ty’s the one who’ll be picking me up. He snuck a few more grabs at my thighs and ass before I slid out the door this morning.

He can’t keep his hands off me, and I don’t want him to. I start to wonder what’ll happen if he pins me down and smothers me with his lips right in front of my boss. I shouldn’t let him, but I can’t promise I’ll keep a grip on anything the instant his hands are on me.

For a crazy asshole, my prince has got *charming* nailed down.

I need to be careful. Jacobsen can’t see the badass in the fancy car picking me up – and no fucking way can he see the look Ty gives me when his eyes are glued to my body. It’ll be a dead giveaway for everything.

I have to get out of this, and I need to let my boss down easy. I want to be polite and professional, no matter how good it feels to let Ty wreck everything civilized with his kiss.

“Okay,” I say smartly. “Just let me grab my purse and we’ll go!”

I’m trying to stay upbeat all the way to the bar. It’s a little further than Dan says – just the kinda cruising distance a man in full courtship mode plans for small talk. I go along with it, always steering the topic back to work and wildlife preservation when he starts to get too personal.

The bar is really pretty decent. Thank God for small favors.

It’s been way too long since I’ve had a nice, tall, bitter Guinness. It’s a welcome distraction from the awkward scarecrow sitting across from me. Yeah, even if I didn’t have

step-brother on the brain, I wouldn't date a man as lean and soft as Dan.

"Tell me, where do you see yourself in five years, Claire?" Dan asks, staring down at his half-empty lager.

"Kicking ass and taking names."

He laughs like a fool at my lame cliché and I want to shoot myself. My mind's still drifting back to Ty. My pores open up and sweat when I think about how good it'll feel to sink down on his cock later.

I'm sore, but I'll take it. Every damned inch. I want to ride him tonight, bury my face in his slab of a chest and lick his tiger right on its roaring mouth.

He likes it rough. Apparently, so do I.

I'm going to bite Ty while I'm dragging my nails across his skin. Hell, I'm going to make him bite *me*. I never knew I was part pain slut until I came the hardest with his teeth clamped down around my nipples, or sucking at my throat, leaving his hot, vicious impressions all over my body, inside and out.

Dan slams his heavy glass down with a clink. I blink.

Shit. Is he still talking?

"What's that, boss?" I smile sweetly, hoping all these dirty thoughts aren't painting my cheeks bright red.

"I said, isn't it a bit warm for that thing?" He points to my turtleneck. "Summers are short in these parts, Claire. I thought you were born and raised in Washington like me?"

Nodding, I pull on my sweater, adjusting it uncomfortably. "Totally. Lucky me that I get cold *real* easily. The only place I ever enjoyed wearing skirts and flip flops was DC in the summer. Can't imagine living there, though!"

I've always been quick on the draw when I need to be. The sweater's a big, fat lie hiding the aftermath of our fucking. It's unpleasantly warm when I'm wearing it outside, but it beats the alternative, having nosy pricks like my boss see the hickeys stamping my neck.

Then again, maybe I should've let him see them. Then I wouldn't be sharing this insufferable happy hour with a guy who has zero chance of going anywhere further than a friendly conversation.

He relaxes, an understanding smile tugging at his lips. "Ah, I'll drink to that. Everything about DC's stifling, and I don't just mean the politics."

I give him a pathetic, fake smile for about the dozenth time since we sat down at the bar. Jesus, I'm fidgety. I need to pay him some tiny morsel of respect, I know.

But it's hard to give my boss the time of day when I've got a bad boy waiting to pick me up. It's hard to do anything except think about how he's going to rail me tonight, beat the worries out of my head with those piston hips slamming me into the mattress.

"So, you're set on staying in Cascadia, then? No big ambitions to move somewhere else and follow in your mother's illustrious footsteps?" Dan smiles shyly.

"Ew, none at all. I *love* helping out on causes I believe in. But I fucking hate politics."

Dan cocks his head when I drop the F-bomb. Great. Ty's dirty mouth is really rubbing off on me in more ways than one.

"Sorry. Didn't get much sleep last night and I hit it pretty hard at the office today. I really shouldn't use that kind of —"

"Hey, it's nothing to apologize for. You're more political than you think." There's that awkward wink again. Dan licks his lips and continues. "I mean, that's how it looks to me. You've got the right mouth on you to intimidate some of those bastards in Washington for sure."

"Thanks."

"No, I really mean it, Claire. In fact...I'm hoping you'll consider a full time position with our organization by August. We've got one coming up, and with the quality work you've been doing, well, you're first in line to fill it."

Talk about desperate. I haven't even put in ten days, and he's already kissing my feet. It's awkward, uncomfortable, and kinda disappointing.

Is this really how things work out here in the real world?

I take several long pulls from my dark beer before answering. Cascadia Now! is fine for an intern gig, sure. But my life's totally up in the air with Ty in the picture. I'm not exactly looking forward to spending more time than necessary with Dan Jacobsen and his puppy dog eyes.

I'm also wondering how he'll react when I finally shoot him down. Some guys take it badly. How awkward will it be if he keep his distance after, or decides to retaliate for showing him I'm not interested?

"Can I think about this?" I look up into his hopeful face.

His smile slowly fades, and then twists into a frown. "Of course."

He shakes his head and straightens his close. "How silly of me. You must have other offers coming in."

"No, no, it's nothing like that." I cradle my beer close to my chest. "I'm just mulling my options, wondering if I should go further afield for some good experience before I settle in any one place for the long haul."

Of course, what I'm really mulling is how many times I'm going to feel my pussy clenched on Ty's cock as he fills me tonight, driving his molten seed hard and deep. I bite my lip right in front of my wilting boss, squeezing my legs together.

"Sure, I can respect that." He pulls out his phone and taps the screen. "Hm, what time did you say your friend would be by?"

"I can text him right now."

Thank God. It looks like he wants to kill this thing just as much as I do. Ten more minutes of hell, and I should be closer than ever to the heaven in my new step-lover's massive tattooed arms.

I feel like I've just dodged a bullet. All I need to do is get back to the office and climb in Ty's car.

Dan looks about ten years older than me. Maybe he's gotten the message. Maybe he won't hold anything against me.

That's what I think until we're in his car for the short drive down the road. Then I hear the words that turn my blood cold.

"Listen, Claire, I appreciate your honesty this evening. I really do. I think our little discussion clarifies a lot of things. My father handed me the job of finding a new full time employee, and I think I finally know exactly what we're looking for. Cascades Now! needs someone who's interested in long-term solutions. I'm looking for someone a little more enthusiastic, someone who wants to *leap* at the opportunities our organization presents. Unfortunately, I'm sorry to say it looks like we'll have to part ways sooner than I anticipated."

CLOSING IN (TY)

I'm taking a seaside run somewhere halfway along Bellingham and Claire's office when my phone dings. She's ready for me.

About fucking time too. I've been waiting to pick her up and haul her back to my cave since I sent her off to work with a kiss and a slap on the ass.

Fuck, Claire's ass. Just thinking about it gets me hard. Running like a dog who's been cooped up all winter pulls energy from every part of my body except the steel hammering in my pants.

I've been on edge all day. It's not like the feeling's new. Before, I always went gunning for some new slut to drain my nuts at the club.

Now, I just go in to take care of business, thinking about bringing Claire home the whole time. Losing the place doesn't upset me as much as it did a day ago. It's like this chick's an antidote to the poison my fuck of an old man injected.

I'm Zen to the point of freaking everybody else out. Shit, half the chicks I've had my dick in tear up when they hear the rumors I'm leaving. They fall all over themselves, begging me for one last sympathy fuck, but I smile and push right past 'em.

They don't fucking get it. Olympus has fallen. Me, Ty Sterner, the badass billionaire fighter with a dick that never

quits is about to go exclusive.

I've finally found the only pussy I wanna bury my dick in for the rest of my life – and it's a goddamned good one. Just thinking about Claire wrapped around me, moaning her little heart out the way she did last night, makes my cock ready to do the rumba.

I get sex off the brain long enough to climb into my car and finish the drive south. A little later, I pull up to the office and wait. Place doesn't look like much, especially if these fuckers are hellbent on giving my old man and lots of other tycoons hell.

My eyes start scanning. I'm expecting to find Claire waiting for me on the curb, or maybe behind the sleek glass door leading inside.

I sure as shit don't expect to see her sitting in some asshole's car, wiping tears outta her eyes.

“What the fuck?” My heart spits rage into my blood, and it goes straight to my fists.

I gun it and drive forward. The car screams to a stop next to the mystery man's car. She's looking up at me and waving her hands, but I'm already outta the driver's seat like a dog off the chain, heading for her door.

This motherfucker with a piss sucking look on his face steps out and glares at me. He's tall, but I'm taller and wider than his gawky ass. I push past him – jab my hand on his chest and fling him against the car – working my way around to where Claire's climbing out.

“Baby, what's wrong?”

She runs into my arms and buries her face. “Let's go home, Ty. Please. I don't want to cause more of a scene than I already –“

“What the fuck did you do!” I look at the shithead standing across from us.

It's not a question.

I'm ready to walk my girl to the car and then run back over, grab him by the throat, and put the motherfucker through his own windshield. He's got about ten seconds to explain why the fuck my woman's in tears, and the countdown's already begun.

"That's work business. You heard the lady. We're done here." He holds his hands up and gives me an uneasy grin. "Look, I don't want any trouble. I'll make sure someone packs up her things and gets them over to her, *sir*."

The last word comes out full of venom, like he's chewing mud. He looks at me like some shit he just found stuck to his shoe. I bare my teeth and lean down to Claire, whispering in her ear.

"Car's unlocked. Go get in, babe. I'll do the rest."

"Ty, no. This is embarrassing. Please, please don't —"

"Babe!" I hold up a finger and press it to her pretty lips. "You heard me. Now listen."

Her eyes fill with horror, but she casts one more hateful glance at the pretty boy scarecrow kicking at the pavement like a goddamned turkey. She peels herself away from me and heads to my car. I don't move 'til I hear the car door shut.

I'm off like lightning.

The asshole's eyes go wide and he reaches for his door, trying to scramble back into his car. It's too fucking late.

I get him by the shoulders and slam him down on the pavement. A satisfied growl rumbles in my throat when I hear his jaw crack.

He's moaning, stuttering with pain, probably shocked that I'm doing everything my warning gaze promised. Some of these fucks think they're so high and mighty they're above it all. Truth is, nobody's above pain, and my barbaric fists are just a reminder.

"Hey! Heeeey! Jesus fucking Christ, what're you doing? Do you want me to call the cops?" He's slurring his words like I've cracked the jawbone or a few teeth are busted out.

Good.

I rip his head up by the hair and give his head a jerk, making damned sure he realizes how easy it'll be to fuck his face up a whole lot more. I'll bounce his melon on the hard ground like a damned basketball if he doesn't start talking.

"You went down easy-peasy, so I'm gonna give you ten more seconds to explain what the fuck's going on here before I break your damned nose too. Start talking, asshole. *One...*"

"Jesus, you're Gary Sterner's son, aren't you?" The fucker tries to shake his head in disbelief. I jerk it still, making him spit blood.

"Two."

"Ow! Fuck. Okay, okay! I didn't think she'd freak out like that. I decided she wasn't a good fit for our firm on the way back from a drink, and she agreed. Come on, Tyler, you've got to understand this is all just business and I didn't mean any –"

"You don't get to use my fucking name!" I rip his head backward and punch him in the temple with my other fist. "You wanna talk about respect? Start by apologizing for the shit you did!"

Fuckface howls his pain. I always keep my promises.

"Ty! No, no, no! Tyyyy!" I hear a faint sound behind me.

It's Claire, beating on the window with her palms, begging me to spare this piece of shit. Hell, I wasn't gonna kill him, just rough him the fuck up 'til I know he's *really* sorry for making her cry.

Whatever, I get it. The interrogation's over. It doesn't take a damned FBI file to piece together what's going on here.

The fuck made a move on her, she turned him down, and he threw a tantrum like the little boy he is. I've known enough overly sensitive trust fund kids in my time, and I've fought like hell all my life not to end up the same way thanks to the family wealth.

"Here's what's gonna happen – you'll pick your sorry ass up, walk into the office, and come back with a box of her stuff.

Then I'm gonna watch you get in your car and drive off. Whatever the fuck you owe her, it'll be in her account tomorrow. And I'm talking about the *full* eight weeks she was supposed to be working for you assholes." I pause. "Wait, nah, better make it *double*. I know she did good work for your sorry ass. Consider it severance pay."

"Are you nuts? I can't do it! We're a non-profit, man, don't you get what that means!"

"Yeah, I know. Except you're raking in enough in donations for your old man to take months off at a time golfing the same swanky greens my dad wishes he had time for. Don't feed me that bullshit. I'll tell you what, having plastic surgery on your whole fuckin' face is gonna cost a whole lot more than I'm asking for Claire. You're getting off with a drop in the bucket." I bring my lips to his ear, so close he feels the lava I'm steaming outta my mouth. "Don't let me change my mind."

I tighten my hold on the bastard's head 'til he nods. Slowly, I let him up, and stand by his car while he runs inside. I don't give a shit if he calls security or drags his feet cleaning up the pile he laid in his damned boxers.

I'll bust his fucking windows out and wring his fucking neck if there's any funny business. If I'm going away in handcuffs for flipping my shit and protecting my girl, then I'll leave his ass with some shit that'll last a whole lot longer than any jail time for my sorry ass.

Turkey boy comes trotting out about four minutes later. He's got Claire's photos, some papers, and the little bonsai tree she kept on her desk stacked neatly in a box. He shoves it into my arms and gives me another sour look.

I point it at him while I start walking backwards toward the car, never letting the fuck outta my sight. "You keep your goddamned mouth shut, you hear? If I find out you go to the press, or try to pin this on my family, I'm gonna come back. If I find out you send Claire a dime less than she's owed, or you fuck with her in any way, you'll see me again. We'll finish what we started today, believe me. And next time there won't

be any ten second grace period. Now, go the fuck home and get that jaw wired shut.”

The fucker actually sniffs. He’s got hot tears in his eyes, the kind a man makes when he’s shamed and beaten. Asshole doesn’t realize he’s lucky that’s all I let him off with. A little ego stroke and an adjustment or two at the chiropractor will have him good as new.

Whatever, him and I are done. All that matters is that it’s easy for Claire to say goodbye.

I throw her stuff in the trunk and then hop in the driver’s seat, buckling my belt and waiting ‘til her fuck of a boss drives out ahead of us.

We hit the road. She’s got her face glued to the passenger window, refusing to look at me. She doesn’t turn around and say a damned thing ‘til we’re halfway home.

“Goddamn it, Ty. I’m never going to live it down. *Never*. What you did back there...”

“What I did?” I shoot her a stern look. “Sounds to me like we outta talk about what your fucked up boss did before we get on my behavior.”

She purses her lips, but doesn’t say anything. I keep pressing her.

“Just tell me what the fuck happened. I’ve got a pretty good idea, but I wanna hear it from you. Your text sounded happy. How did things turn to hell in ten minutes?”

“He made a move on me, Ty,” she says softly. “I turned him down. I didn’t want to date him, and I wasn’t interested in the long-term position he offered neither. I said no, and I guess he couldn’t take it.”

Christ. The steering wheel blazes like hot iron on my hands. It takes everything I’ve got not to whip this car around, head to the motherfucker’s house, and put him in a body bag.

“Fuck,” I growl. “I knew I should’ve busted his nose after all.”

Nobody fucks with my girl, and he sure as shit doesn't make a move on her. An image flashes in my mind. I pick that skinny fucker up and snap his spine across my thigh like a junk branch.

But I can't do that. We're in too damned deep. I've done my damage to the little cocksucker in the suit, and now I've gotta figure the rest out for *her*. Meanwhile, I'm still trying to comprehend *us*.

Claire scrunches her eyebrows, but I can tell she's suppressing a smile. "Let's just call this done. God, now I need to worry about what I'm going to do with the rest of the summer. And explain to Mom why I've blown my first real job."

"Don't bother. You don't need to tell anybody shit about today, babe."

"What? Why? We can sneak into the house tonight and hide it, sure, but it'll come out by morning. She'll ask me why I'm staying home, assuming your asshole dad doesn't notice first."

"He won't. Neither of them will. They'll have a lot more to worry about when they realize we're not home."

I stomp the gas harder and we pick up steam. I've fucking had it. Me and this girl aren't gonna sort out shit while we're bogged down in Bellingham, pinned down by the weight of our parent's disappointment. We need to forge our own path, and I'll do anything to find it.

We're just a few more minutes from home. Claire keeps staring in stunned silence, her beautiful eyes flickering like the high summer moon.

"Ty...I'm afraid to ask what you're talking about. I can't run away with you to Canada or something. You know that?"

I snort. "You bullshitting me? I'm not a big fan of Vancouver myself. Besides, it's summer. I've got somewhere warmer in mind."

She shakes her head again, but she doesn't protest. I watch her hands move tensely in the darkness as I push the car

onward. She doesn't open her mouth 'til we drive right past the gate and keep going down our private drive. There's another gate at the end of the road, but this one has an automatic opener.

I reach up, tap it, and start humming softly to myself.

I can't believe I've let almost June slip by without a cruising the Pacific. The night lamps illuminate the family boathouse like spotlights. Pulling the car to the curb, I hit the lock and order Claire out.

"Let's go. There's already some supplies on board. We can worry about our clothes and shit later."

"On board *what?*" She looks at me pointedly, but I'm moving. "Hey, wait up!"

I don't slow down 'til we're inside the boathouse, and I hit the automatic door opener on the way inside. The place lights up like a huge garage and the *Stingray* wakes to the light. The big white boat can easily handle ten or twenty people. For us, it's a moving palace.

My old man always hired a pro to take the wheel half the time for our outings, but I've learned to steer it myself over the years. Nothing but the best tech and several upgrades means it only takes one man to captain this sucker.

I climb up the stairs leading to the deck and look down at her with a big grin on my face.

"Come on! This thing's not gonna wait all night. We need to get a start if we wanna make some progress toward the Oregon coast by morning."

She freezes. Her eyes go dark. For a second, I think she's gonna turn tail and run, fleeing back into the safe, fucked up world she knows.

Then she shakes her head, flipping that sugary sweet chestnut hair over her shoulder. She gives a little shrug and takes the stairs after me. I can't help but throw my arms around her once she's on the deck, smashing my lips to hers.

My hands slide down her waist, cup her ass, and squeeze. Her moan joins the thunder gushing from my throat, a voice to the demon need to take her here and now.

“Thought you said you couldn’t run away?” I growl, pressing my forehead to hers, giving her one last chance to run.

“Maybe for just a little while,” she whispers. “I trust you. You’re the *only* one I trust anymore.”

Just a little bit longer, I think, eyeballing the massive erection tenting in my pants.

Next time we fuck, it’ll be on the open waves. And something tells me we’re gonna be doing a lot of that for the next few weeks, ‘til we decide to abandon ship or else my old man has the Coast Guard drag us home.

Fuck it. A man only lives and loves once. Claiming this girl’s the only thing that matters.

We’re really not so different, her and me. Don’t know why the hell it’s taken me this long to figure that out, but it’s true. Take away the money, and we’ve both lived our lives suspended above the coals by some other asshole who’s gonna make us bend, or burn us alive.

No more. No fucking way, ever again.

“Let’s move, babe. Bet you never knew how easy it is to handle something so big.”

She giggles sweetly and wags her eyebrows, staring at the dick pressing up against her thigh. “Something tells me you never do small.”

“Baby, you’ve got no idea.”



LATER, I give her every fucking inch.

It takes a few hours to put some distance between us and Bellingham. I’m careful to take us into the night, cruising for several hours ‘til we pull into a marina a good way down.

She's at my side looking happily into the darkness. The huge, dark waves chop around the ship. Thankfully, it's a calm night, and the GPS and radio chatter helps me steer well away from any big rigs in the shipping lanes.

She stands up a couple times to get a better look. I pretend to stay focused on my instruments, but really, I'm sneaking every peak I can at her ass.

Fuck, *that ass*.

I'll never quit saying it. Those two supple globes crowning her thighs are the alpha and the omega for me.

That ass makes my dick throb like nothing else in the known universe. That ass is what drew me in, and the firecracker she calls a tongue did the rest. I'm heading for the flames like a goddamned bug, and I don't give a shit. Just as long as I die with my hands squeezing that ass, jerking it while she fucks my dick numb, I'm a very happy man.

Yeah, I like a challenge in a chick. That's the reason I've got her at my side while I'm stealing my old man's yacht and heading for God knows where. But I *really* like that ass, and I'm gonna keep loving it with all I've got 'til I'm a pile of dust.

She comes back to the passenger seat later and snoozes gently at my side. Sometime after we're anchored, I give her a gentle shove, just enough to wake her up. She rubs her eyes, sees the lights all around us, and sits up straight.

"Ty? Where are we?"

"Past the Pudget Sound, babe. That's all you need to know. We'll be staying here for the night and taking off late in the morning. You hungry?"

She shakes her head and yawns. "No. Maybe I'll have a sandwich or something later."

"Fuck, that sounds good. Unfortunately, we've got nothing but champagne and caviar coming out our ears. My old man's never been the type to just pack some cold cuts and bread. We'll have to pick up our groceries next time we park this boat."

She laughs, and I take her hand. I walk her down the long hall, heading for the master quarters. When we get inside, I can practically hear her sweet jaw clapping the floor.

It's a sweet room, no doubt about it. King sized plush bed with silk sheets, all the storage you could want, a jacuzzi in the adjacent bathroom, a mechanical wine cellar, and a helluva view outside.

For a second, I wonder if it'll be a problem that there aren't any curtains. No, scratch that shit. Anybody nearby will hear us fucking way before they think to look through the big windows near the top of the ship.

I'm gonna make her scream that loud. Gotta do something to get the shock outta her system. I wanna make her feel so good she forgets all about Dan the Boss Man, leaving home, and everything else that's been dumped on her since my asshole dad shackled up with her ma.

"You wanna know something? I've been dreaming about something like this since you landed in my house and got underneath my skin. We're finally alone, babe. Really, truly alone. You ready for this, *Sis*? I don't even have to gag you while we fuck to keep our fucking parents from hearing."

A shudder rolls up her back. She wiggles into me deliciously, pursing her lips for a kiss, answering me with her body instead of words.

She's a natural. She knows what I like. Of course, I know how to work her in spades, and I'm not gonna waste another precious second.

I grab on tight and whip her around. We crash down on the bed together, my teeth pulling at her bottom lip, starving for her taste. Her tongue hits mine in shy, desperate sweeps. I twine mine in good and start dancing circles, giving her the love she needs, but holding just enough back so she's fucking begging me for more.

Her tits press into my chest like they were made for my tiger tat. I can feel her hard nipples scraping through her shirt,

so puckered they dig into me through several layers of fabric. I reach for her right tit and squeeze.

Goddamn.

Hot breath explodes in my mouth, and I swallow it, warming my mouth up for the fiery licks I'm gonna level down her curves and between her legs. My fingers pinch her nip tight, making her jerk with pleasure. Her hips roll up and down, grinding on my dick, breaking the thin cage still left around the beast inside me.

Right now, that beast wants to fuck all night. Harder, rougher, and deeper than any girl I've ever been with. But she needs to know it's more than just animal need too.

I'm really into this woman. I haven't said the L-word yet because it's too soon, and it freaks me the fuck out. Fuck if I don't feel it, though. It turns the lava in my blood into plasma. Makes my damned heartbeat a hundred miles an hour.

I don't know when the fuck to drop it on her. All I know is I'm gonna combust if I don't get her under me this second and suffocate myself between her thighs.

Fuck, fuck, and mother-fuck.

I start tearing at her clothes, tugging off big handfuls. Never once do my lips leave hers. I keep her sweet mouth open, dragging my tongue in and out, fucking her lips the same way I'm gonna do to her pussy real soon.

When she's down to her panties, my fingers push down her waistband, find the wetness, and stroke her slit Two fingers slide in and she claws my back. I'm fucking owning her with pleasure, drowning her without even touching the mighty Pacific outside the glass.

"Oh my God," she whines. "Ty."

It's so good to hear my name on her lips. Everybody else always says it like a curse, or else as a plea when they think I'm gonna wring their necks over some business initiative gone bad at my club.

Soon, Club Zing's going into my boys' hands. This woman in my hands, though, she's staying mine forever.

Mine.

I start sliding my fingers deep in her hot cunt, slow and teasing. I don't stop 'til she's bucking her hips and I hear her breath getting shallow. Her kisses come sloppy now. She can't keep up, digging at my lips with her teeth a little more desperately as I find her clit and give it a good pinch.

“Oh! Oh, fuck!” Claire sputters. “Don't. Stop.”

“I'm gonna.” That makes her eyes snap open and beam pure hate, all while I pull my fingers up and grab her panties. “Who the fuck do you think you're dealing with, babe? Did you really think I'd let you come without tasting you first? I don't let good pussy go to waste. This is a fucking warm up. Now, spread your legs.”

She moans loudly as I rip her panties down in one jerk. I can't even get 'em off her ankles before I'm sliding down her body, stamping my lips between her breasts and on her soft belly, down to the wet wonder I'm gonna fuck every way possible tonight, and then a few more I haven't invented yet tomorrow.

My chin hits the bed and I slide up. Her legs are shaking uncontrollably, so I hold her thighs and spread them wider, giving me all the room I need to wedge my tongue over her clit.

I don't hold nothing back. Her taste, her scent, her everything drives me fucking wild.

I feel the sheets beneath us getting pulled and tangled. She's trying like hell to wrap 'em around her fingers, digging her fingernails in like she's gonna leave this earth if there's nothing to keep her anchored.

Fuck it. I lick her pussy harder. I want her to hit the ceiling and bounce like she's on a goddamned trampoline.

My mouth goes wild. I'm sucking, fucking, strumming her cunt every way I know how. I growl as I drag her clit deep into my mouth, lashing it in long strokes. Her thighs turn to warm

rocks in my hands, and that's my cue to lick faster, sending her over the edge.

Her breathless scream's the most jagged, inhuman thing I've ever fucking heard since I started bedding women. And I love every damned octave pouring outta her mouth.

Claire's thighs pinch tight, covering my ears, but damn if I can't hear her screaming, whimpering, wondering how the hell I can make her pussy feel this good. I don't let her ask too many questions.

I fucking show her.

My tongue's a machine all through her explosion. I follow her hips up and down, rocking on the bed, holding her down onto the mattress 'til her little ass sinks deep. Hot, sweet cream keeps pouring into my mouth. I lap it up like the champagne stored in the room with us, but no liquor I ever tasted compares to this.

Her pussy gets me drunk like nothing coming outta a bottle.

She's not the only thing soaking wet. I'll be surprised if my pants haven't melted from all the pre-come drooling outta my dick, and I'm sure that slick coating's the only thing that keeps the pike from drilling its way out.

"Ty, Ty, Ty, Ty...please don't stop. Please don't fucking stop." Her words come slow and desperate.

She's cooing like she's got a hit off my tongue, and my dick jerks for the hundredth time that night.

Shit, for all intents and purposes, she has. Her brain's pumping the same kinda fire junkies get when they hit a new high. I've been to kink clubs before and seen fuckers reach a whole new plane of existence from really good sex.

I don't know about the science, but I'm gonna make her feel so fucking good she can't feel anything except my ecstasy. Tonight's not one where she gets to worry about losing her job, what's gonna happen with me, or how hard our asshole parents are gonna hit the ceiling when they realize I've stolen the yacht and taken her with me.

No, goddamn it. She's devoting every minute we've got on this ship to me. I won't let her think or feel anything except how good my tongue, hands, and cock feel between her legs.

I'm not holding a damned thing back. I'll fuck her straight into a coma, and then ride her ass some more if I need to.

I don't give a fuck. I'm beyond it. I'm a mad dog tonight, and I'm foaming at the mouth – or since my mouth's too busy with her pussy, I guess my dick's doing the foaming for me.

Her lungs must be ready to explode by the time I'm done. I can't even feel my jaw when I break away, sucking in a badly needed breath myself. My dick's hammering so hard it fucking hurts.

I stand up while she's knocked the fuck out, trying to unscramble her brain after I short-circuited her clit. I stand up and stretch, eager to get the hell outta my clothes. They're gone a second later, so quickly I wonder if I've set a new record for stripping down to skin.

“You need a few more seconds to catch your breath, or what?” I fix my eyes on her naked body and growl, impatiently fisting my dick in one hand. “Think carefully before you answer, babe. Once I'm inside you, I'm not fucking stopping ‘til we both pass out.”

She smiles – only for a second. It fades just as fast when she realizes I'm not fucking around here.

Time's up.

“I'm ready,” she moans, spreading her legs for me again.

It's all I need to hear. I'm already climbing on the bed, wondering if we'll make several tons of luxurious metal rock from how hard I'm gonna give it to her.

Shit! If she didn't make my heart flip, I'd break this girl by fucking. Hell, I'd break my own sorry ass in her sweet cunt, just fuck her and fuck her and fuck her ‘til my balls pop.

Luckily, we're beyond breaking shit tonight. That shit's in the past. For the next few hours, she's all mine, and I'm gonna commandeer her body in the darkness the same way I took

over the *Stingray* and pointed her where I want. I'm cruising my girl's body.

Hard. Steady. Without regret.

My dick's pulsing so hard I can barely breathe, giddy as all hell to slide inside her, to fuck her, to fill her. I haven't had nearly enough of this woman.

Claire arches her back when I get between her legs, reaching for my shaft. Her fingers wrap around it perfectly and she squeezes me tight. I grunt and roll my hips.

Her hand feels amazing, and it's only a tiny fraction of how mind numbingly good that hot wet slit in front of me is about to feel. I put my fingers over hers and give them a squeeze, then lift her palm away.

"New rule – hands over your head, or anywhere I tell you when you're underneath me like this."

"Oh? Just underneath you?" She swings her legs over the backs of mine, giving them a long, silky stroke with her feet. I almost blow my load on her belly like a fucking high school kid. "I didn't know you wanted to fuck missionary all the time."

"Babe, missionary's just a classic warmup. You're gonna feel your brains coming out your ears before you stop and try to make sense of all the ways we're fucking." My eyes narrow and I reach underneath her, grabbing her ass, aiming my cock perfectly for her entrance. "I need this like I've never needed anything else my whole damned life. I need *you*. You're mine, girl, all fucking mine and then some. Hold on tight while I make you feel it."

She opens her mouth to say something, but I cut her dead off by pushing into her. Fuck, she's wet, hot, and tight as the first time. I push good and deep, loving the fact that there's no reason to ease her in slow this time.

The shy, sweet virgin girl's fading. I'll miss her, but I love the woman I'm about to meet. Fuck by fuck, I vow to turn her into the hottest ball buster I've ever buried myself in.

I was the one to break her in, and I'm not done yet. Not 'til I've brought her into the world of raw, sweaty, unrepentant fucking. I swear I'm not stopping 'til she's stamped with my cock from the inside out.

I slide balls deep and then jerk back, ramming it home harder this time. She gasps, tenses, squirms beneath me. Her fingers are doing that adorable curling thing against the brutal hand I've got holding her wrists, and damn if I don't love it.

Holding on for leverage, I fuck her hard. I thrust 'til she opens her mouth and struggles to get oxygen into her lungs, shaking her sweet body, moving my mouth down against her throat. Her nipples brush me as I fuck faster, and I sink my teeth into the soft spot along her neck with a growl.

I marked her once, and I do it harder now. She moans loud, sharp, but doesn't stop. On the contrary, my girl pushes her neck harder into my teeth, and I gotta hold myself back from drawing blood.

We both come up for air and lock lips. I time my tongue to match the strokes of my cock, totally throttling her now. It's sloppy and imperfect, but fuck it feels good, the only kinda bliss that really matters.

My heart's chugging – not from the exertion either. I can't fight it. I can't pretend. There's truly something here when I'm rampaging between her legs, the same thing that's there when she's lying next to me steaming after a good fuck, running her pretty brown eyes over my body.

I think it's love. But her pussy won't let me think too hard about anything at all, and neither will my dick. That greedy motherfucker jerks me deeper into her body, faster, sending pure hellfire into my balls. He pulls me in to the hilt, and won't stop 'til I spit fire up her womb.

We're fucking so fast and hard the room thumps again and again with our flesh, smacking together in waves. She's screaming when I finally grab her wrists, throw her hands over my shoulders, and then fall back on my calves, pulling her up with me. My fingers dig into her round ass so hard it hurts – not that it slows me down for a single beat.

Her legs pinch tight around my waist and her ass rises off the mattress, suspended in my raging hands. She's right where I want her – wide open and totally wanting.

I slam her deep. I turn into a human piston. She tenses up and digs her ankles into my back, throbbing with the fury that lets me know she's on the cliff.

I send her right over it a second later. Claire comes on my dick; a convulsing, screaming, bucking mess. My balls are gonna burst if I don't shoot inside her soon, but it's too fucking good making her come undone like this.

Holding her hips, I slam deep and strong, raking my pubic bone across her clit. The added friction makes her shriller, and then she completely loses her voice.

Fuck! Everything around my dick gets hotter, wetter, tighter, stretched to its very limit. I think I've just taught her to squirt, and it's so fucking hot I almost lose my load then and there.

Somehow, I keep fucking through her climax, slowing my strokes a little as her limbs uncouple from their death hold on me and she starts to breathe.

“God, Ty. How do you do it? *How* did you ever learn to do half the things you do to me?” Her curiosity's real cute.

I pull out, settle her on the bed, and nudge her to roll over. “I'm showing you right now. Fucking's just like making music, babe. Practice makes perfect – except the practice is pretty damned sweet too.”

She doesn't need to know about the dozens of women I've had before her, the hundreds of times I've rocked beds rough. All she needs to care about is that it's all hers now, my gift and my sacrifice for making her mine.

Her laugh turns into a sharp gasp when I clap my palm on her ass. I'm almost looking forward to another lashing from her tongue someday, giving me all the excuse I need to throw this ass across my lap and give it a proper spanking.

For now, I'm too fucking hard and eager to stop. I jerk her up on all fours and reach for her clit, holding onto her fine ass

with my other hand. Her legs go wide like a good girl, and I sink right in, picking up where I left off before.

I'm gonna fuck her molten before I come. I watch her hands go out and claw at the sheets and pillows above her head. It's not enough with the way we're fucking. Every thrust slowly moves us closer to the headboard, where she steadies when she finally smooths her palms on the wood.

Shit, maybe this full body practice we're making today *is* perfect.

Claire's legs start trembling closed after another minute of bullet fucking. Growling, I grab them, pull them apart, and hold her by the thighs while I ram into her.

"Jesus," she whimpers, her fingers going white as she presses them flat against the headboard. "Oh, Ty. Ty! *Fuck!*"

The last word shoots out like a gunshot. I'm off to the races.

My hips go insane, slamming into hers so hard her tits swing like soft pendulums. My dick throbs, and the lava churning in my balls won't hold back any longer. I'm gonna explode.

Soon as her pussy locks around my cock, sucking as she comes, I'm toast. I throw my head back and add my roar to her screams.

"Fucking shit, babe – don't quit on me now! We're not done 'til you're dripping my come."

I don't know how true it is 'til I bust a second later. I pump hot, thick ropes straight into her. It feels like I'm fucking melting.

All my energy runs straight into my balls, and then they shoot. I fill her deep and hard. I scorch her from the inside out as my nuts pump like foundries. Seed flies straight up my dick, last stop before I'm hurling it into her.

Coming was never like this before. This is something else. This shit squeezes my whole body and twists my muscles in

knots, as if some giant picked me up and wrung me out like a rag.

I pour everything into her. I'm growling, spitting, swearing. She's turned me into a feral fucking animal grinding my hips into hers, pulling her back and forth against my dick, jerking myself off with her killer body.

That's when it hits me. Every year of sex I've had before her's fucking ruined. I thought I did good, rutting wild oats into the harem I collected over the years, right before Little Miss Perfect came along and dropped me to my knees.

Now, there's no going back. That shit I did before in bed with other girls? Absolutely fucking nothing.

What's right here in front of me, twitching and moaning as spastic aftershocks run through us, this is heaven. This is nothing *but* fucking nirvana in its purest form.

I root my dick inside her like a madman and don't stop 'til my balls are drained. Thank fuck she's the hottest thing I've ever seen, or else I'd have a hard time getting up again for the minimum four or five romps I've got planned for tonight.

Claire's slumped beneath me, her head on one pillow, trying to replenish the air in her empty lungs. I pull out and hop off the bed to grab a towel. It's gonna take a massive cleanup for anyone else to ever fuck in this bed again after the mess we just left, and we're only getting started.

She's still leaking my seed when I return. Something primal inside me wants to growl, push it back inside her, knock her the fuck up. The beast in my skull doesn't care if she's on the pill or not.

That's crazy talk, right? I've never imagined letting my seed take in any girl before. I wonder who the fuck I'm becoming. Fuck, who the hell is *she*?

I take a good long look.

This baby girl looking at me like I just handed her the goddamned moon's my lover, my confidant, my partner in crime. And yeah, she's still my fucking step-sister too, which is a big problem now that we're *fucking*.

My dick doesn't care. The greedy SOB is already getting hard before I climb into bed with her. Guess I'm not the only one who's got lust fever today.

Claire reaches for my cock and starts stroking it, slowly guiding her soft sweet lips to mine. I'm about to dive in when I feel something hot and wet splash my cheek.

What the fuck? Reaching up, I brush away a tear. I gently pull her head back and see there's a few more brimming at the corners of her eyes.

"Shit. What the hell's the matter, baby?"

"My life's a fucking mess, but I don't think I've ever been this happy. Why's it have to be like this? I wish we didn't have to go home, Ty."

I wrap my arms around her, pull her close. "We don't have to. We'll stay out here as long as we can. I've got the coin to keep this big bastard gassed up and supplied for at least a month. Maybe longer if my old man drags his feet with freezing my trust fund."

She looks up at me, her eyes narrow and hurt. "Then what? Something this good can't last forever, can it?"

"We'll make it," I promise.

And I mean it too, even if I don't know how. I bring my lips to her forehead and stamp them there tight. This closeness is nice, even though my dick's thudding impatiently against her thigh.

I hold her for a few more minutes 'til she moves her head. Then she shifts her lips into mine, and that's the kiss that leads me to savoring her hot warm heat all over again in the most carnal ways imaginable.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HEAVEN (CLAIRE)

I wake up to my phone ringing off the hook. Ty's left the bed. By the time my feet are on the cool floor, I realize we're moving again.

Big Pacific waves slosh outside the windows, broken only by the outline of the shore beyond. We're probably making good progress to southern Washington by now, and we'll be in Oregon's waters in a matter of days.

I can't wait. The beaches are warmer, brighter and more beautiful than the gloomy sands of Washington's shores ever will be.

My phone dings again and I snatch it off the floor. I already know who's calling before I hit the button.

"Claire? Claire!?! Oh my God." Mom's voice goes from panicked to relieved when she hears me breathe.

"Where the hell are you?" She snaps. "You've got to give us something so Gary can send someone to come get you. Jesus, I hope they drag Ty home too. I'm going to murder that boy myself if I find out he's hurt you."

"No, no, no. *Mom.*" I let out a heavy sigh. "There's nothing to worry about. I left with him by choice. It's voluntary."

There's a long pause. Then she explodes.

“What! Jesus Christ, Claire!” I hear her take a sharp, steadying breath. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No. Dan Jacobsen made a rude advance on me yesterday, and he decided to let me go when I turned him down. There’s nothing else there for me this summer. Ty had something in mind that sounded a lot more exciting than sitting around trying to find a new job, so away we went.”

I swear I can hear her teeth grinding on the other end of the line. I can’t blame her completely – it’s a lot to take in – but nothing I say will ever justify it in her mind. I can’t make sense of what she’ll never understand.

“Claire, listen to me. I don’t know what he told you, but that’s not his boat. He *stole* it from the house, just broke in and sailed it right out into the open sea!”

“Mom, please. He didn’t break into anything at all – it’s not like the thing was even locked up. We both promise to bring it back in one piece. He knows how to handle it. And don’t worry, we’re not heading anywhere crazy. I’m looking at the coast right now. It’s never out of sight.”

I count ten seconds of nothing. I’m starting to believe maybe Mom won’t have a shitfit over it, maybe she’s more open minded than I ever believed.

“*God damn it, Claire!*” Her voice is so loud I need to jerk the phone away from my aching ear. “Don’t do this to me. Just *don’t.*”

“I’m not doing this to you. It’s all for me. I need the time and space to clear my head, Mom. Stop worrying. I know it’s sudden, but nothing crazy’s going to happen.”

Another slow building explosion. I wait for it, seriously tempted to open one of the windows and chuck my phone into the water.

“You’re ruining everything, honey! Everything! And you’re wrecking yourself too,” she adds hastily.

You’re ruining my Senate bid is all I hear. My lips tighten.

“You’ve got to come home, Claire. *Please*. Just tell him to turn the ship around and come home now. I’ll talk to Gary, make sure the consequences aren’t too serious. I’ll do it for *both* of you.”

Oh. So we’re going to be treated like common thieves? Christ. Maybe what Ty said about the Coast Guard barging in and dragging us home in handcuffs wasn’t so far off.

“The only one ruining anything is you and your controlling, greedy freak of a husband. You two deserve each other. Goodbye, Mom.”

I swipe the call angrily to end it and then shut the damned thing down. I probably won’t be needing it where we’re going.

I dress and wash up, then head outside, racing toward the bridge. Ty mans everything with rock music piping through the satellite radio, humming along with it. I walk up quietly behind him and throw my arms around his rock hard waist.

God, those muscles are tight. I’ll never get tired of holding them. He’s like my own personal mountain, *mine* as much as he calls me his.

He doesn’t even flinch. It’s like he’s been expecting it. He smiles, gives me a good morning kiss, and pulls me closer.

“Everything all right, babe?”

“Yeah,” I tell him, and I’m not exaggerating. I feel it. “Everything’s just fine.”



THE NEXT FEW weeks are heaven. Ten days zip by in a blur, and then a few more. Before I know it, we’re docked in Lincoln City for the Fourth, watching as the fireworks explode above the little seaside resort town I’ve always loved.

It’s like coming home. It’s one of the few places where Mom and I went on trips before she went Congress crazy.

She’s tried to call about a thousand times since I shut her off. I only check my phone once a day, and I don’t listen to the voicemails anymore.

There's nothing new in them after the first ten. Nothing but threats and stern warnings, pleas and selfish whimpering. She isn't worried about me coming home safe. It's all about her career, and it hurts to see how deep she's been bitten by the same greedy bug perched on Gary's shoulder.

The woman who raised me and bought us ice cream in the town we're spending our holiday in is all gone. I barely recognize the woman I call *Mom* now, the woman who married a bastard of a billionaire for convenience.

She's not my youthful, vibrant, Lincoln City loving Mom anymore. I can't be her pawn.

Now, I'm hoping I can build some new memories here with Ty. Luckily, Independence Day has gotten things off to a good start.

Before the fireworks, we walked along the warm, sleepy beach. The sun glowed high and we ran barefoot, hand in hand, finding a few nice private spots not touched by the holiday throngs. Money and GPS can go a long way.

We hit a restaurant with an amazing wine bar for dinner, and then I insisted on buying him ice cream. Ty snuck away for a few minutes while we were at the ice cream shop. I swear I saw him run across the street to one of the little boutiques, and now I'm wondering what he's got up his sleeve.

The only thing we didn't like were all the tourist cameras. One sneaky photo with the right tag online could blow our identities wide open. Then Gary and Mom will really have a good reason to come after us if we hand them a real scandal, wrapped up in a pretty neat bow.

We're sitting out on the boat's main deck. Bright, orange contrails rocket up and explode magnificently into red, white, and blue, plus a sprinkling of almost every other color too.

It's beautiful.

"I've got good news and bad news, babe," he says, squeezing the arm he's got around my shoulder tight. "Take your pick."

My face scrunches. "Give me the good first."

“I’m gonna make sure this paradise we’ve found isn’t just temporary. I know that’s what you’re worried about, and you don’t fucking need to. Yeah, it’s gonna take work. It won’t be easy. But I’m gonna make it. I swear to you, Claire, deeper and more seriously than anything I’ve promised in my whole damned life.”

He doesn’t wait. Ty swoops in for a kiss, and I lock my lips on his long and hard, just as another fireball goes off above our heads, splashing our faces with a brilliant orange glow.

I don’t even want to ask about the bad. Unfortunately, I have to. Breaking the kiss, we stare at each other, and he slowly opens his lips.

“My asshole old man’s frozen my trust fund account. I’ve got plenty of my own money to haul this beast home and figure out the rest, but not much more. It takes a couple thousand a day to operate this boat. Sorry, babe, but we’ve gotta cut our trip short.”

I’m not shocked. I expected it. I push my face into his rock hard chest, unable to resist dragging my fingers down his abs.

Jesus, those abs, they’re like small hills beneath my fingertips. I’ll never stop being awed by his body. *Never*:

“Say something,” he growls.

“Ty, it’s okay.” I look up and run my hand across his cheek. “Really. The whole point of this trip was to get away and figure things out. I think we’ve done that. If we can survive through all this turmoil without wanting to kill each other, then I think we can do anything.”

He smiles. “You shitting me? Who’s got time for murder when I’m too busy fucking your brains out?”

My eyebrow quirks and my pussy heats. “Oh? Is that all we do?”

He gives me another growl and lifts me up from my chair, walking to the edge of the deck and laying me down on the hard wood. A bright blue firework goes off in the sky, dancing its light across our skin and the ship’s white hull.

“Don’t play dumb, woman, or I’ll have to show you what we do.” He’s got his hands on his belt, and I reach forward eagerly, helping him take down his pants.

His cock springs out, hard and alive, pulsing with a need that won’t stop until it’s satisfied. I lick my lips and roll my hand over his shaft, marveling at his size. He groans, and everything below my waist goes hot and wet and tight with satisfaction.

Well, satisfaction and flaming lust.

I take him into my mouth and shudder when his head swings back. He tastes amazing.

“*Goddamn*,” Ty rumbles. “You’re learning to suck better every fucking night. You’re gonna kill me one of these days, girl.”

I can’t smile with my mouth full of his dick, but you’d better believe I’m happy. Pleasing him makes me light up just like the sky. I moan, tightening my hand on his base, and slide down his length. My tongue flicks up at the ridge underneath his head, twirling, begging to bring him off.

Ty groans. “Fuck. Shit. God. Damn.”

Everything coming out of his mouth is vile to the core, and I love it. I can’t imagine sex any other way except crude and hard and absolutely filthy.

For a second, I can’t believe what I’ve become. There I am, shy virgin girl turned wanton runaway, kneeling on the deck of a billionaire’s yacht with my mouth stuffed full of my step-brother’s cock. I’m sucking off the most arrogant man in the world, an utter bastard I never expected to fuck, much less fall for.

But the facts don’t lie. Neither do the last few weeks.

Ty Sterner isn’t such a soulless bastard after all. And I’m not such a good, plain girl anymore.

“Ah, damn. Holy *fuck*.” His growls deepen. His rough fingers move through my hair, grab several locks, and pull.

My head automatically follows his motion. I sink down on his cock and just keep sucking him, tonguing his ridge, feeling his balls tighten in my palm. I'm ready for him to explode in my mouth.

Hell, I'm ready for him to take me anywhere, any way. I'm not shy anymore. I love this man as bad as I want him, even if saying the L-word out loud still scares the crap out of me.

His calloused palm feels hot, bobbing my head in quick strokes, holding me on his magnificent cock. I take another breath, pull him against my tongue, and wait, wiggling my cheeks and waiting for the explosion.

He pulls out at the last second, rips my head back, and stares at me. A bright red rocket explodes and reflects its fire in his glistening blue eyes. It's an incredible contrast, rare and frightening as everything about this relationship with my step-brother.

"What's wrong?" I ask softly.

He drops to his knees, grabs me, and pushes me to the floor, tearing at my clothes. I hear his pants kicking off behind him. Before I know it, the tank top I'm wearing is disappearing over my head, and so is my bra. He grabs my breasts in both hands and squeezes them tight. My nipples bloom between his fingers and he pinches them harder, working to roll me over.

"What's wrong is you trying to make it too easy, babe. It's the Fourth of July for fuck's sake."

"Oh?" One hand slides down, shoves its way beneath my shorts, under my panties, and catches my clit.

Okay, forget *oh*? It's all *ohhh* now.

"You thought I wouldn't strip you bare and fuck you right here on the deck of the ship with fireworks exploding above us? You think I'd waste my load down your throat instead of making you leak my come for hours?"

Both hands zip down to my shorts and pull. In one jerk, everything is gone, and I'm completely naked. He centers

himself between my legs and I get a perfect view of him rolling his shirt off his head.

Jesus, he's always so tightly wound, no matter what I do. I'd give him crap about it if it didn't always lead to such mind blowing sex.

His cock presses hard against my belly, throbbing with raw need. His lips are all over me, kissing mine into submission and then sliding down my throat, where he stops and sucks so hard I know he'll leave another mark.

My body screams. I can't help him. Call me sick in the head, or slap me across the face, but I've finally accepted I'm addicted to every depraved thing he wants to do to me.

His hips glide low and hook to mine a second later. One perfect push and he's up inside me, thrusting slow, but hard. These strokes cut deep, his trim hair grinding on my clit, and I'm glued to the floor by the shock alone.

“Ty!”

It's all I think, all I feel, all I say. My entire universe is wrapped up in that single two letter word. It's a short, staccato curse for this Greek god with the mind of a demon, not to mention a massive dick and a pair of balls that leave me in a coma.

Finding my reserve energy, I wrap my arms and legs around him, dragging my hips to his. We *bang* ourselves together, hot and wet and desperate, as if we're human mirrors for the fire erupting in the sky.

A huge white firework bursts at just the right time to drown out my first climax.

It's a rush like it always is. I hold on tight and drag my nails down his neck, trying to hang on, trying to keep my sanity as my body feels like it's imploding. Lightning pulses through me. Orgasm hits my brain and buries me. The spasms pick me up like a rough tide, clenching all around his length and pulling him deeper, harder, greedier.

Ty grunts and pulls out when I've finally stopped coming. I look up, wondering if he came too, but I usually feel his

molten heat.

He reaches for my hips with a wild urgency that says *fuck no*. He flops back on the wood and positions me on top of him, working my sopping wet slit back down on his length. I spread my legs wide, devouring him from above, watching as he sinks into me and fills me whole.

Ty's hands cup my ass and he gives both cheeks a sharp slap. I jump, and it's just the kick I need to get moving on his cock.

"Ride me, baby. Ride me so fucking hard I forget to breathe."

Oh, God. "You know I want to," I mutter. It's hard to form words when he's owning every inch of my pussy.

My hands go down his chest and spread out on his warm, impossibly muscular surface. His thrusts start rising to meet my hips. His thrusts pick me up and down like it's nothing.

We fuck hard and long. The fireworks keep coming, faster now, adding a thousand new colorful stars to the dark summer sky.

My hips rock furiously. The sea isn't doing much to cool us down, and I don't care. I'm dripping sweat all over him, and still we keep going, slippery and wet, starving for release. His fingers pinch deep into my ass cheeks, hauling up and down his dick. He slams me against him over and over, bouncing me like the fuck toy I've become.

And I'm okay with that. Hell, I'm *happy*. My sole purpose for living tonight is to blow his mind.

Tonight, something's different. Maybe we realize we're about to go home and face the very bleak music, or maybe love is in the air. Whatever it is, we've *never* fucked like this.

I didn't dare think it could get even better than all the nights he's rocked my body, but it does. He pounds into me with his whole body, his soul, sending crazed energy through every curve sticking to my bones.

My breasts flop so hard I can't even feel my nipples. My pussy's never been so wet, leaking all over him, pinching his cock tighter each time I come to pull him deeper still.

The grand finale starts, on the ship and in the sky.

Ty's strokes hit deep, growling like the beast he is, fucking me so hard my knees bang on the ship's deck each time I come down. I can't imagine how hard he's being rattled too, but we're both too far in the pleasure zone to care.

I swear to God the ship's bobbing from our sex, and it's not just the ocean. A huge, blinding flash lights up everything, and he pulls me close, shoving his lips to my ear and sinking his cock womb deep.

"I'm fucking coming, Claire. Give the fuck up."

His cock swells inside me a second later and I feel the first thick rope of his seed. I come on the spot, pinching my teeth together so hard I think they're going to break.

My eyes roll back and I jerk my body up, throwing my head back, grinding my hips into his as his cock pumps lava into my depths. His balls keep heaving it up into me, pulsing and shooting, filling me until I completely overflow. New screaming fireworks hit the sky, drowning out our love screams.

The same merciless fire bathes everything.

Above and below, inside and out, all over the fucking place.

I can't even take it all in as ecstasy pulls me in deeper, drowning me for what feels like an hour. We keep rutting on each other for a small eternity. When I finally come down from it, I'm gasping for air, and only the last reverberations above us hit my ears.

A minute later, he's holding me, gently stroking my hair. It's quiet, and deeply satisfying.

Ty pulls out of me and keeps his hard-on nestled against my thigh. I swear he doesn't go soft. It's just as well, because I know we'll be right back at it soon.

It doesn't seem to matter how much we fuck. It's never enough for me, never enough to completely scratch the itch that's always there when my flesh touches his.

He reaches up, brushes my messy hair away from my face, and plants a kiss on my forehead. "You know how fucking much I love you, babe?"

My eyes snap open. We lock eyes for a moment, and then my gaze softens. I can't help but smile. I also can't believe that he's beaten me to saying it, and my heart swells faster than the rest of me.

I lean in, give him a long, salty kiss. "Of course I do. I love you too, Ty."

It's the perfect beginning to a flawless night. This is one of those nights where time breaks apart and blurs, losing itself in the darkness and passion.

The night cools around us as we lay and fuck, stopping only for snacks and drinks conveniently waiting around the corner. Caviar and champagne make our evening more decadent than ever, and I take my fill of everything.

We're still fucking by the time there's light on the horizon. Ty has me on all fours, hammering into me from behind, fisting my hair in one hand so fierce it promises to leave me sore tomorrow.

I'm going to be a mess tomorrow, and I don't care, damn it. The sun coming up doesn't even bother me.

Tomorrow isn't official until we're back in Bellingham, plotting the rest of our lives, and that won't be for several days. After a night like this, I believe we can do anything.

We're unstoppable – aren't we? I can't imagine anything that'll come between us, even if our parents try to destroy this beautiful thing we've tasted.

One thing's for sure – his thrusts don't stop until my mouth forms an O and I'm completely breathless, bent over, and coming my heart out to the sound of the day's first seagulls squawking their way to shore.



WE TAKE our sweet time getting back home, almost a full week. The dream lasts as long as it possibly can, and I squeeze it for dear life. Unfortunately, there's no way to keep dreaming forever until you hit reality face first.

When we start to feel the cooler bite of Washington's mid-July waters, my heart sinks. It's two more days to home. My mind runs wild with all the grim possibilities we're going to find back at Gary's estate.

I tell myself I'm ready for anything, and I hope to God I mean it. I know I don't care what happens, just as long as I get to stay with Ty.

I swear I'm prepared for anything. They can try to put Ty in handcuffs or send me away from him, but we'll always find our way together again. We have to.

Mom and Gary can't control me. I'm twenty-two, for fuck's sake.

Sure, my first job was a bust and money's dwindling, but there's got to be a way to make this work. I'm smart, I'm motivated, and I'm in love.

That's got to count for more than all the hell our parents can throw at us.

Ty feels it too. He looks more serious when he's steering the ship into familiar waters, and he's not quite as playful when we stop in the marinas for drinks and dinner each night.

Thankfully, the sex is just as explosive as ever. I've got to set an extra reminder to take my pill with all the craziness going on. One night with this animal and no protection is plenty to leave any girl knocked up – probably with triplets.

I'm at his side when the dark day finally arrives. It looks like nothing's changed at the huge estate on the hill, surrounded by the dark forest. The tall castle looms over the horizon, just as cold and imposing as ever, and Ty navigates the ship carefully toward the boathouse.

We're coming in after midnight, and I'm grateful for the darkness. Maybe it means we'll have a chance to camp out and rest before dealing with some serious crap tomorrow.

“Come on, babe. We’re here,” he says, as soon as the ship’s engine stops droning.

He takes my hand and leads me out, extending the stairs so we can walk down to the dock. It’s a warm night, dark as thick mud, and it’s like we never left.

I try not to freak out or worry as we exit the boathouse and head toward the house. There’s no car waiting for us, of course. I don’t know what’s happened to either of our cars since we left.

Ty leads me on the long, slow walk, carefully passing along a few points off the main path so we don’t alert security. We’re coming through the gate near the back, right next to the huge pool, when we see a light on behind the massive glass panes.

“Shit! Stay the fuck down.”

I duck, but it’s too late.

Joan gazes right at us, frozen behind the huge glass door, a small squeegee for cleaning windows in her hand. Ty growls, shakes his head, and curses again.

“Come on, babe. Let’s get this the hell over with. She saw us.”

My heart starts pounding with every step we take. Tension lines the older woman’s face as we draw closer, but she pops the door and holds it out for us.

I don’t have a fucking clue what I’m going to say. Jesus, I don’t know what Ty’s going to say or do either. It’s dangerous. If we have to confront our parents now, someone might end up getting killed.

We’re not ready. *I’m* not ready for this. We haven’t rehearsed or planned anything.

Joan speaks first. “Welcome home.”

Ty cocks his head. I stand next to him, nervous and tight lipped as a guilty kid next to teacher.

“Thanks. You gonna tell my old man we’re back, or what?”

Joan’s face softens. “I won’t do that, Tyler. I don’t care what he threatens this time. I’ve been ready to walk out the door for weeks without looking back now that I’ve seen somebody who has the courage to do it.”

That makes me grin. I step forward, give her a hug on impulse. It’s too hard to contain the relief humming through my veins.

Ty seems a little more uneasy, but he’s not fighting mad.

“We’re leaving soon,” he says. Then he does something that almost drops me to the floor.

He steps forward and throws his arms around the woman, pulling her tight, the way a man hugs his mother after a long time away.

“Lady, I don’t give a fuck what he does either. You’re family as far as I’m concerned. You’re welcome to follow us up to Alaska or wherever the fuck we end up anytime, if you can stand the cold.”

Jesus, he’s right. I really might have to follow him up there to stay together. I have no idea what I’ll do for work, but keeping Ty in my life means everything. That’s what love is, and I’m watching it spill over onto the old servant in his embrace, looking at me with tears in her eyes.

“I’ll pack my best sweaters, Tyler.”

“You got it. Now, we’ll get the hell outta your way so you can get back to work. Hopefully it’s just about the last you’ll do in this house. Come on, babe.” He pulls away and I follow him, shooting one last smile over my shoulder at Joan.

I’ve never seen her look so happy. To be fair, I’ve never seen her do much of anything except clean up after us, but the gratitude flashing in her face doesn’t lie.

You can’t buy that kinda loyalty, and it makes my heart swell. It’s sweet to see my man do the right thing too, proof

that the heart hiding in his rough exterior doesn't only open to me.

We head for his room and shut the door behind us. I inhale deeply, amazed that it's still got his scent after all these weeks away. Good thing too. His masculine richness helps calm me down. It's hard to worry about us being back here, staring down the barrel of a gun, when he truly surrounds me like this.

He steps out into the middle of the floor and starts to get undressed. It's amazing, really. He's so chill. Deciding to follow his example, I stand up from his bed and strip, enjoying the nighttime coolness against my body.

"You're magic, babe," he says, stepping close to me. "Gotta be. There's no other explanation for why the hell you look just as beautiful when we're under the sun or moon or rolling rain. Shit, even when we're back in this God forsaken place..."

I blink, then feel a big grin coming. "Hm. When did you turn into such a poet?"

He wraps his strong arms around me. If I'm forever beautiful in his eyes, then he's forever huge, forever hard, forever a superman in mine.

I can't imagine anything that'll ever break his brute strength. Being in the ring with Fat Boy came close, but he won, using the same persistence that's natural to him.

One hand runs down my back, fingers spread, before they stop next to my ass and give me a sharp whack, ending in a possessive grab. He's growling, tickling my cheek with his stubble, pressing his lips to my ear.

"I'm in an artsy-fartsy mood tonight. Call it nostalgic. This might be the last time we ever fuck in this bed. Better make it count, *Sis*."

My breasts flatten deliciously against his chest as he pushes me to the bed. The kisses keep coming, hot and feral. We're tired after the long journey in, not to mention the stress, but I'd be certifiably insane to pass up sex.

It makes me feel alive, reminds me of everything we've built. When he pushes between my legs a second later, grabbing my hips and wiggling them to take his cock deeper, I see our whole future.

And yes, it's really a *future* together, more than just endless naked romps. I see us growing old together.

This thing is more than temporarily losing our minds on a hot, forbidden summer tryst. This crazy affair's going to last forever. I don't care who says it's wrong, or how often they scream it in my face.

I'm going to do it. I'm going to build a life with this man, just as soon as I can stop losing my mind on his dick every night we're together.

He's thrusting hard now. His hips hammer into mine, and he leans down one breast, dragging my nipple against his teeth. He catches it and sucks hard, letting another growl slip, vibrating me right to the bone.

God, I love fucking him. Only him. With Ty, I'm not even curious about anyone else. I don't care that he's the only man I'll have for the rest of my life. Instinct tells me no other man comes close, and giving him my V-card was just the start.

I'm going to give him everything. *Everything.*

The thrusts deepen. My pussy tingles with delight, creaming and tightening on his cock. My hands go over my head, helping me push my body up to meet his. We're colliding, fucking at a more frantic, anxious pace than we did on the yacht, but it's just as amazing as ever.

Ty's teeth form a tight ring around my nipple. The energy hits the bolt coming up from my pussy and my nerves ignite, crying for release.

It comes a couple seconds after he kicks his thrusts into overdrive. I'm no longer attached to a gorgeous man. There's over two hundred pounds of rock solid fuck pressure between my legs, slamming me deep, filling me to my breaking point.

Oh, God. Oh, Ty. Oh – fuck!

My head snaps back and I come, reaching desperately for a pillow to stuff into my mouth before I scream so loud the house lights up. Snarling, Ty drills hard and steady, baring his teeth before he holds his swelling length to my womb and lets go.

The loud clap of his balls on my ass stops. Next thing I know, he's filling me, pouring his liquid heat into my core. It makes me come so hard I shake, whimpering into my pillow, keeping it between my teeth so I don't chip a tooth as they grind together.

Orgasm doesn't describe it. This is a climax, a crescendo, a peak so high I'm bound to wind up a little battered when I jump off it. And I do, falling straight into the wonderful mass of man surrounding me, spilling himself into me, driving his seed to my depths.

This is the medicine we need tonight. It's clear when he finally pulls out, and my heart doesn't slow to a dull thud. I should be dreading tomorrow.

Instead, I'm more content than ever, wrapped up in his arms. He holds me tight while I press my thighs together, trying to keep what he's given me inside. I don't want to lose his heat.

I don't want to lose him.

"I love you, Ty," I whisper in the darkness, nuzzling his shoulder.

"Love you twice as much, babe." I blink, surprised by the challenge, and he smiles. "What? You gotta be crazy if you think your heart pumps harder than mine. I'm more than twice your fucking size."

I snicker and roll my eyes, settling in on his warmth. Yeah, he's still a fire breathing asshole when he wants to be.

But he's *my* asshole, damn it, and I'm willing to put up with his crap for all the joy he brings.



"YOU USELESS FUCKING CUNT! If you're not going to help me find them, then get the fuck out of my way!"

I jerk up like the house is burning the next morning. At first, I think the harsh, deafening words are a nightmare, and then I think they came from Ty. But he's sitting up next to me, eyes wide open, tight lipped.

That can't be Gary...can it? Holy fucking shit.

“Wait! Please, wait, Mister Sterner! You can't go down there!” Joan's voice sounds small, muffled, desperate. It cracks like tears are piercing through it.

“Get dressed, babe.” That's all Ty says right before the staircase down the hall thunders.

He doesn't wait for me to move. Ty jerks me out of bed and grabs my clothes off the floor, throwing them into my hands. I try to follow his lead, dressing as quickly as I can, but the world won't wait.

Angry fists start beating on his bedroom door.

Ty doesn't have time to put his shirt on. He stands in front of me like a wall, ready to destroy anything that comes through the door to threaten us. And it does a second later when the door blows open, so loud I think the hinges snap.

“Oh, God! Fuck. *Damn it!*” Gary's beet red face stops and stares at us. He takes one look at us half undressed and stumbles backward, smashing his trembling fists against the walls. “It's true, it's true, it's goddamned true...”

I notice he's holding a newspaper or magazine in one hand. Ty steps forward, his lips quivering like a dog getting ready to bite.

“Something you wanna say, *Dad?* Had a funny feeling you'd greet us like this after we came home. Didn't put a scratch on your precious *Stingray*, in case you're worried. You're gonna give us the same respect.”

He rips himself up in a flurry and stands tall. For a second, I think he's stupid enough to try getting through Ty, into the room, but he stops. The newspaper flies out of his hand and hits the floor where we're standing.

“I’ve got nothing else to say to you that these goddamned jackals haven’t said for me, you ungrateful little idiot. I’ve got nothing to say to this fucking whore either!”

He shoots an accusatory finger toward me. Despite standing behind Ty, I want to dig a hole into the floor and hide forever. Seeing this billionaire aim his long-bottled hellfire my way makes my heart want to stop.

Still, I have to see what the hell’s got him so riled up. Before Ty can lunge and beat his father to smithereens, I reach in front of him, snatch up the paper, and give it a good shake.

BILLION DOLLAR BEDFELLOWS! GARY
STERNER’S SON SEXING HIS NEW SISTER, EX-REP.
AMANDA FROST’S DAUGHTER!

WHO EVER SAID LOVE, POLITICS, AND MONEY
CAN’T MINGLE?

Okay, now my heart really does stop. I barely have the energy to tug at Ty’s sleeve and whisper his name. His eyes dart down to the tabloid and skip over the awful headlines.

We’re both staring at the same thing – the pictures. Several are from our unforgettable Fourth of July holiday.

There’s Ty and me walking around the beach, hand in hand, smiling as we hold our ice cream cones. Then we’re on the deck of the ship, locked in a passionate kiss. The real killer is the one that’s half blurred. We’re both naked and horizontal on the deck while fireworks light up the sky, a thousand word picture carefully shot by some kinda camera with an amazing zoom from the marina.

I want to gag. I want to die. Mostly, I just want to bawl, and the tears are coming, stabby and brutal.

We tried so hard to keep our relationship under wraps for our own sakes. Obviously, it wasn’t hard enough.

“You piece of fucking shit!” Ty explodes, eyes fixed on his father, ripping the paper out of my hands and crunching it in his fist. “Who the fuck did you hire to tail us?”

Gary snorts. “Jesus! You think *I* did this? My God, I really raised a dipshit for a son. Why the hell would I destroy myself when I have your careless, degenerate tryst with your sister to do it for me?”

Ty doesn't move as his dad steps toward us, this time crossing the threshold to his room. I cover my face just as Gary stabs a finger in his chest.

“You're the one who's getting off easy. I've had to live with this nightmare for days. The butt of every late night talk show joke and gossip rag. Poor Mandy, she's heartbroken. She'll be lucky to hold a state rep seat again before she's hit sixty with this kind of scandal. And it's all because you pissed off Jacobsen.”

“Jacobsen?” Ty shakes his head.

My heart slams against my ribs. I feel like I'm going to faint if this was my fault.

“Martin Jacobsen, dummy!” Gary stabs his son in the chest again with his rigid finger. “You know, the big environmental nut. The same man your sick little sister couldn't hold down a job with. Apparently, some knuckle dragging animal got mad because Martin's son asked her out, and fractured the kid's jaw. I know the Neanderthal was you, Tyler, and don't you fucking deny it.”

Gary looks like he's about to blow up and shower us in his gore. Ty looks at the floor, too stunned to speak, undoubtedly feeling the same ruthless ice crawling across my brain.

“Do you know I was supposed to meet the Vice President of the United States next week to talk technology?” Gary growls, shaking his head. “Now, my own goddamned shareholders won't talk to me. It's your fault, Son! Yours, and this sorry little bitch's too! This marriage was a big mistake. Mandy was supposed to bring me closer to the sun, not let her whore of a daughter burn me down.”

His eyes hit me again, blazing with the same nuclear blue fire I've seen in Ty's. I'm stumbling backwards in slow motion, the tears blurring everything.

I feel trapped, pinned down. It's just as bad as the night Karl tried to force himself on me, before Ty burst in to save me. Gary's icy stare *violates* me, forces me to realize that the damage is already done. Ty can't save me this time when we're already fucked.

I'm struggling to breathe as Gary moves again. I watch in horror as the billionaire thumps his finger on Ty's chest, this time closer to his throat. It's the last spark before the powder keg ignites.

It happens in a blur. Ty screams, grabs his scrawny dad by the arms, and picks him up. One savage throw later, Gary's on the floor. There's a sick crunching sound, and I see his foot's twisted unnaturally, a look of sheer horror on his face.

Gary shudders, holding his hands up over his face as Ty closes in.

"You can treat me like dog shit all day, but don't you dare say shit about my woman again! This isn't her fucking fault, old man, and you know it!" Ty stomps forward, puts his foot on his father's chest, and holds it there until he screams. "This is yours! It's your greed, your little business wars, all this Machiavellian horseshit you call a life."

My God. I'm afraid he's really, truly going to kill the billionaire asshole in front of me if I don't stop him. I rush forward, tugging at his giant arm, making nonsensical pleas. Pulling on Ty feels like I'm trying to move a thousand pound statue.

Gary's got his hand out, and there's something in it. At first, I think it's just his phone, but it's actually some kind of pager. I'm still screaming as Ty stoops to the floor, picks his dad up, and hurls him against the wall.

Above us, somewhere on the second floor, a woman screams. It's got to be Joan or Mom.

A second later, boots are clattering down the stairs. When I look away from the slow motion murder going on in front of me, there are two big guards in black, men I've seen before

with their golden security badges stenciled neatly in their dark shirts.

“Shoot him! Shoot him!” Gary screams, twisting his neck as Ty’s fingers reach for his throat. “For Christ’s sake!”

My brain wants to shut down. That’s when another big guard joins his comrades, and so does Mom, stepping down behind him. Her jaw drops when she realizes what she’s seeing, and we both share a look that says it all.

This. Can’t. Be. Happening.

“Claire? Gary? Oh my God.” She blinks, inert for the next three seconds. “Everybody stop!”

No one’s listening. The third guard fumbles for something at his side. I can’t fucking stand the thought of Ty getting killed in front of me by this monster, but my brain won’t let me move, can’t fully comprehend there’s a gun coming out and it’s going to shoot the love of my life.

It’s just like a movie.

Father and son are still screaming, struggling as my instinct comes back. I leap in front of them. Something bright and impossibly fast hits me in the stomach, right above the belt, and everything becomes a howling white light.

My whole world turns into needles. All my muscles become crackling ice. I’ve never felt anything like it – not even close. I can’t scream or cry or even breathe. I never imagined being shot would be anything like this, and then I realize it’s because it isn’t a bullet going into me.

I never find out how many bolts the Taser screams through my body. It hurts so bad I’m certain I black out for a few seconds.

When I come to, my body feels like it’s been drained, cooked. I don’t know if I’ve been out for seconds or hours.

All I hear is Mom screaming nearby. Ty’s on top of me, shaking, the electric probe he’s pulled out of my skin bouncing in his fingers.

Gary roars incomprehensibly as he's pushed aside. Mom and Joan somehow reach me through the commotion. They grab me by both arms and start dragging me down the hall, toward the thick glass and the pool.

I keep waiting for Ty to look at me, but he's shaking like he's grabbed an electric fence, his huge arms and legs twisting unnaturally. Then I see the other guards around him, holding their Tasers. He's been hit by no less than two, maybe three of the goddamned things, and he's still screaming, trying to fight it.

“Get. The. Fuck. Away. Claiiiiiire.” His voice drones, loud and anguished and freakishly calmed through all the lightning wrecking his body.

The last thing I see before my brain shuts down is the love of my life, kicking and bellowing until he hits the floor. Then, he doesn't move at all.



WHEN I WAKE UP, I'm lying on a sofa. I'm in the big family room upstairs, the first place I ever saw Ty, shirtless and magnificent, before I realized the asshole from the club was also my brand spanking new stepbrother.

I never believed Prince Asshole could become Prince Charming then. Now, I can't believe I'm going to see him alive, and it terrifies me.

My muscles jerk when I try to sit up. Huge fucking mistake. It's like the world's worst sunburn, except it's all on the inside.

“No, dear. Lie down. Doctor's orders. Try to stay calm. You're okay.” Joan speaks softly, and I realize my head is in her lap. “Just rest. Any movement right now will be *very* painful.”

I manage to open my mouth, but the words won't come. When she sees me struggling, she reaches for a tall glass of water, and holds it to my lips. I must end up spitting about half of it out, all over myself.

Joan dabs at my lips with her apron. I'm more ashamed and confused than ever, wondering how long it'll be until my throat muscles work again. *Hell, how long will it be before I can walk?*

I don't know how long I end up lying in her lap like an injured kitten. Time passes in a haze. My body hurts too much to think too hard about what the hell just happened. It doesn't all come back in any coherent way until I hear the voices screaming. I try to make out what they're saying, but it's too far away, and it stops after a couple minutes.

"Come on, Joan. Help me get her into the car. We're leaving right now." Mom steps out of the kitchen, her voice bright and sharp with the same ferocious spark I've heard her use during House committee meetings.

My mouth moves like a fish when Mom's over me. I can't remember if I should be disgusted or relieved. She runs a gentle hand through my hair, and whatever anger I've got stewing dissipates.

"You're going to be okay, baby. Just give me a couple hours to get us away from this freak show. We'll stop at a real clinic on the way to Seattle too, I promise."

I think I groan. I'm not really sure what's happening until I hear more footsteps come storming into the room.

Mom looks up, her face tense and angry. "Jesus, you really have the balls to show your face again? After everything you and your lunatic son did to my poor daughter? I told you – we're done. Stay the fuck away from us!"

"Oh, please, Mandy. We both know he'll be locked up for a long time. He's cut off. Over. I'm not responsible for his shameful actions, and you're a fool if you think otherwise."

Her heels click loudly on the floor. Joan holds my head up higher, and I sense her suppressing a smile. I'm just in time to watch my mom slap the billionaire across his face.

"We're over, Gary. Don't make me say it again."

"Well, you've had your chance. I can accept that. What I'm not going to let you do is walk out of here having the last

word.” The billionaire moves his lips sourly and smiles. “Thank God for the prenup. If you really want to feed the media frenzy and ruin this family, then I guess I can’t stop you. I hope we can at least be partners in Washington – assuming you ever make it back at all. Oh, and if you ever scratch me with the tenderly manicured fingernails I paid for again, I’ll have my men escort you out. They’re plenty eager to move around after everything else that’s happened today.”

I don’t want to hear anymore. I’ve already seen the real Gary Sterner, and this is just an overload.

He’s suave. Cruel. Arrogant. Maybe it’s just the pain in my body fogging everything, but my soon to be ex-stepfather looks like the devil himself.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Mom snaps, before she turns around to face us, clapping her hands. “Joan! Is she all set? Let’s go. I don’t care how much overtime I’m paying you, we need to get out of here *now*.”

“Consider these hours off the books, Miss,” Joan says smartly. She looks at her old boss and frowns. “I know perfectly well what he’s capable of. I suggest we all go.”

I try to just breathe and rise above the pain while they carefully drag me to my feet. It takes longer than it should for both of them to hold me, walking me out the huge entry door. As promised, Gary’s goons are outside, eyeballing us.

Mom gives them a wild look and helps Joan guide me very carefully down the long marble stairs. The soft black car has its door open for me to lay in the back, waiting to swallow me up.

This is the last time I’m going to see this house. Thinking about it chokes me as I’m loaded in and held by Joan.

It’s a relief. The best and worst summer of my life just ended.

The huge mansion disappears through the windshield, and that’s when I start thinking about Ty. I don’t have a clue what’s happened to him, only that he’s going to be *locked up*.

What the hell does that mean? It can't end this way. It fucking can't!

My heart bleeds in my chest, and I have to focus very hard on breathing so I don't have a panic attack. I need to hear his voice as soon as I'm able to hold a phone. I need to know he's okay.

I'm ready and willing to wait my whole life just to taste his lips again, but I start sobbing uncontrollably at the terrible idea that he's been ripped away from me, no different than the memories of his rough lips on mine.

FROZEN (TY)

When I wake up, it's like every fucking bone in my body's been broken and fused together again. At first, I think feeling the brutal concrete underneath me means my spine's fucked up and misfiring, but then I stretch.

My palms graze cool, hard stone. I sit up and growl as the worst hangover in the world crashes into my skull. Nope, the hard ass floor ripping at my skin isn't just in my head.

I look up. The prison bars in front of my face tell me where I'm at.

The motherfucker really went and did it. I'm sitting in the county jail, locked up tight, a world away from ever being able to spit in my old man's bitter fucking face again. Of course, spit's too soft for what I'd like to do if I ever get a crack at his wicked ass again.

I don't give a shit about being exiled like this. He hurt my girl, so I hurt him. I did all I could to get his goons off her, and it wasn't enough.

Seeing her twitch when the Taser's probe sank into her skin was the worst goddamned thing in the world. I felt my soul leave my body, bathing me in darkness.

And that's where I saw it – it's not just my bastard father's fault. It's me. I'm the fucking cancer who hurt her, the senseless fuck who dragged her into this situation and nearly got her cooked alive. If I weren't so smashed from getting

throttled with current myself, I'd wrap my hands around my own throat and squeeze 'til I pass the fuck out.

It takes me a couple minutes to stagger up. In the cell next to me, a nasty looking old dude laughs, smiling with his rotten teeth.

I walk to the edge of the cell and put my hands on the bars. Fucking shit. Now I know exactly how a monkey at a zoo feels.

Whatever, I barely give a damn that I'm locked up. What really bothers me is what went down before fifty thousand volts fried my nerves and I blinked out like a busted lightbulb.

I deserve to rot in here for what I did to her. Claire's *fucked*, and it's all because of me. Well, me and that cowardly little pissant she was working for.

I'm used to half the world pointing their fingers and laughing like the criminal in the cage next door. Shit's pretty damned natural when you're a billionaire's son, and I doubt it'll get much better now that I'm officially disowned. But Claire shouldn't have to live with this shit, shouldn't have to claw her way back with a fraction of the resources I've always had.

I'm willing to risk having my body shredded along with my reputation. But I can't stand pulling her into the grinder too, without even knowing it.

Goddamn it. My muscles pulse warning aches every time I move. Too bad it doesn't stop the urge to take my fists to the walls and start beating them 'til something gives way, either the bricks or my own damned bones.

I can't fucking let her go down like this. I have to get outta here, have to make sure she's all right. Then I'm gonna do the soul killing thing I should've always done for this chick who's got my heart in her pretty little hands.

There's only one thing that's *right*, I know it's my only choice because it hurts so fucking bad.

I'm going to clean up loose ends, and then I'm going to disappear.



IT ONLY TAKES a day to talk to some asshole judge, and the badges running this facility. Actually, my boys from the club do most of the talking, and one of them just happens to have some powerful family ties in the local police force.

Thank fuck money doesn't mean much in this world. Yeah, you can buy your way to freedom or lock somebody up with enough dollars in the hopper, but an old police chief or two can buy even more on street cred.

Dad's gonna rage himself blind when he finds out how easy it was for me to walk outta here free, and I don't give a shit. I want to finish what I started in our old house, slamming my fists into his demon face, but it won't solve a thing. Driving home, busting down the gate, and wringing his scrawny neck won't do shit to help my woman.

As far as I'm concerned, my family's dead and buried. All I've got left is her, and not for long. Not after what I'm about to do.

I'm out in a heartbeat, dumping the tight neon prison clothes wrapped around my skin. Ed, Mike, and Tommy pick me up. It doesn't take long to ask them for a big favor, and every one of them is game.

We're gonna pay the too-stupid-to-live fuck responsible for those pretty tabloid pictures a visit.



WE STOP by a gas station on the way to fill up our ride, plus a few canisters. Then I'm outside the asshole's building, a nice swanky condo Daddy probably bought. The trees aren't the only thing that's green in the big environmental lobby.

My guts churn, thinking how easily I could've been beholden to the same shit, falling in line to run Spree like my bastard father always wanted, dragging anybody I damned well please through the mud.

Not anymore. Not ever again.

Dan the Boss Man comes home late. His jaw's still hanging a little crooked from our last encounter. Fuck if I don't wanna tear it right off.

I pull my hoodie up and wait about a minute after he's gone in inside. A shy, leggy blonde runs up the stairs, and I'm right behind her. She jumps when she sees me, and I don't say a word, just take the door she's nervously holding for me and my crew.

We're in. And we've gotta move fast in case the girl decides to squeal on four big dudes climbing up the stairs with several big plastic shopping bags. She'll really flip if she sees the red canisters inside.

I let Mike go first when we're outside the fucker's door. He gives me a nod and works the lock, exercising all the skill I expect as my newest and last ever security appointee at Club Zing.

The latch pops open and we all file in. Dan's several feet away, standing at the kitchen counter, fixing himself a shot of some amber colored booze.

"What the fuck!" he screams, dropping the glass.

It's a helluva commotion, but it's too fucking late. I grab the asshole before he can make a run for the balcony. My hand pinches his jaw shut, and I give his teeth a rattle through his cheeks that lets him know I'll pop the sonsofbitches out if he does anything stupid.

Oh, except, I guess he already did.

My free hand tugs back my hoodie. I've got him in the living room, next to a big black recliner, and my guys all grin behind their matching hoods. Dan the Man starts squirming, trying to scream into my hand. I knee him in the guts and knock the wind right outta him, realizing I've got no patience for this horseshit.

"Shut the fuck up, kid. You know why I'm here. You just couldn't let it fucking go, could you? You had to snap our pics when our heads were turned and leak it to the paparazzi!"

Slowly, I draw my hand away, and tears start foaming at his eyes. “It wasn’t me, Sterner! I promise, I swear – I vow to Christ!”

“Yeah?” I blink, barely even amused. “Who the fuck, then? You’re telling me it was the tooth fairy?”

“My dad found out what happened. He wouldn’t go down without a fight, he wanted to destroy you, wreck Spree’s reputation.” Dan clenches his teeth, as if he’s afraid to let out the rest. “I begged him not to put a PI on your tail, but he wouldn’t listen. He hired some photographer from Hollywood, some guy who’s damned good at getting celebs in compromising positions. I begged him not to, Sterner, I *fucking begged*. Please don’t do this...please, please, please.”

He closes his eyes softly. I let out a long sigh.

It’s a cute story, and the asshole’s a mighty fine actor. Only problem is, my boys tell me Martin Jacobsen’s been laid up for more than a month after a golfing accident. Slipped disk or something, the kinda pain that makes you too paralyzed to get pissed enough to fuck with someone else, much less hire some jackass to follow Claire and me down the coast.

“Sterner? Tyler?” His voice is so soft. “You believe me, don’t you?”

“Sure, bud. I read you loud and clear.” I tighten my grip on his mouth, covering it as he starts to squirm. Then I look at my three guys and nod. “Burn this fucking place to the ground.”

My guys rip the gas cans outta their bags and pop the caps. Half a minute later, the living room reeks like a fuel tanker, and they’re spreading out across the condo, pouring gasoline on everything.

The asshole in my hands completely flips his shit. He’s shaking, biting, clawing at me like a rat in a trap. I just hold him down and make him watch. Tommy stops above what’s probably his favorite chair and empties the rest of his canister on it.

When all three boys are finally standing next to me again, I pull my hand off his mouth. “Have you lost your fucking

mind!?”

“You wanna find out?” I growl. “Everybody in here’s gonna throw their fucking matches if you don’t shut the fuck up. We’ll pull the alarm in the hall as a courtesy to your neighbors, and let you roast. You’ll have this building all to yourself while it goes up in flames.”

Blood drains from his face. “Jesus. God. I’m sorry I lied. You were right. I’m sorry I sent those cameras, Sterner, I’m *so goddamned* sorry.”

“Sorry? We’re past apologies, fuckface. The only thing that’s gonna save your ass from burning is making sure you never, ever do it again.”

He starts shaking his head. “Oh, no. I promise I won’t. I’ll swear on anything you want, on my own fucking life!”

Sighing, I grab him by the hair, lift his head up, and smash his forehead sharply on the floor. He sits up, dazed and confused, trembling as he takes the scene in. I’m not listening to anything ‘til he gives me the look that says he knows we’re mad dogs ready to bite.

I count to ten. Finally, it’s there, clear and tiny as the pinpricks in his eyes.

“I’ll level with you, Dan. I’m about to move a long ways away and I won’t be here to fuck you up personally anymore.” Grabbing his head in both hands, I crane it ‘til he’s looking at my guys. “That’s why I brought these boys along as a reminder. They’re local. They’ll be watching and waiting for you to fuck me, to fuck over Claire, and if you do...well, the matches come out next time. Maybe we turn your home to cinders, or just your old man’s offices. Or maybe they just take you out to some pristine, isolated section of Cascades wilderness and blow your fucking brains out.”

He’s shaking bad. Good. I can’t fuck up again, threatening this asshole. I need him to believe every last thing I’m saying, make him fear for his life. Scaring his sorry ass straight’s the only way to keep my girl safe for good.

And honestly, that's my only damned problem. Nothing else is. Not Bellingham, not my old man, not even Club Zing. Whatever happens to this stupid, sneaky little fuck isn't neither. I don't give a shit if he's traumatized and starts pissing his bed every night – that's for the shrinks to sort out.

“You can't do this, Sterner...you can't kill me...”

“I fucking can, asshole, and my boys *will* if you fuck up again. If you just simmer down and let go of my girl, live your life nice and quiet, I don't give a damn what you do. Bury my old man's company goddamned deep if he's really fucked up the environment like you claim he has. I don't care. This begins and ends with Claire. That's all this is about. And I hope for your sake you're smart enough to realize this is your last chance.”

“Oh my God, I am, Sterner. Thank you for this chance. I won't disappoint you, I won't screw up again. I won't –“

I knee him in the guts so he can't talk, then push him into a thick puddle of gas dripping off his soaked recliner. “Just shut the fuck up and get somebody in here to clean this shit up. Let's go, boys.”

We're gone. If I were a betting man, I'd say he'll never so much as think the name Claire Frost or Ty Sterner without smelling petrol.

The easy part's over. Now for the one that rips my fucking heart out.



One Year Later

HAS it really been a whole goddamned year? Every last one of my boys had tears in their eyes when they dropped me at the harbor where the Alaska ferry docks. They hugged me like brothers, and I embraced them just the same, told them to take good care of my club, because it's theirs now.

A little legal wrangling helps make sure my old man will never get the place back in his name, and he'll never siphon

much money away from it either.

Despite the warm sendoff by my crew, it's not them I'm thinking about when the ship pulls away from Washington's shores. It's not like it gets better when I land in Anchorage and start to settle in.

Their faces don't haunt me at night when I'm tossing and turning, or come to me during the day when I'm in the choppy Pacific, screaming at my new guys to reel in a catch before the old fucking net snaps.

I've tried to forget about Claire every way I know how. And it's all a miserable failure.

Every. Fucking. Way.

There are so many times when I just wanna pick up the phone and call her, assuming her old number still works. But fuck, she's gotta be heartbroken when she realizes I'm not locked up, and then shattered again when she finds out I'm gone. Weeks ago by without any contact, and soon that turns into months.

I never reach out. I fucking can't. And it guts me.

I can't be responsible for hurting her again. I'll kill myself before it happens.

Some nights, when I'm watching the snow fall down for what seems like forever, I get down on my hands and knees, praying her ma will just shake some fucking sense into her, help her scrub every waking memory of me outta her brain.

But I've read the headlines, and I've got a feeling the Congresswoman's got bigger worries, now that she'll have to work three times as hard to ever find a way into Washington again. Her politicking is just as fucked as Spree's profits.

My first winter here's the worst. It blows in lightning fast, not long after I find a place in the city to hunker into while I plan the rest of my life. I'm cooped up in a little place in Anchorage, drinking myself half-blind every night, working up the energy to drive and hit the slopes when Jack Frost stops trying to turn everybody's digits black.

Snowboarding helps me get used to the Alaska cold. Useful for handling the weather, yeah, but it doesn't do shit to help me forget.

Neither does bar hopping. A few times, I try to approach some chicks, and God knows it wouldn't take much work to haul 'em into bed.

I'm still Prince Charming. When you're built like I am and you know how to melt panties, you're set picking babes for life.

Alaska has tough guys aplenty, but the women have never seen a specimen like me. I can practically hear their panties splashing into a puddle at their feet as soon as I say "hello."

It doesn't matter how drunk I am or how hot the girl seems. They all end up looking like ash by the time they're ready to pucker up and grab a ride to my place. I make up some bullshit about eating bad fish every fucking time, and I bail with my tail between my legs.

Maybe it's partly true. My poor guts are twisted up so bad I think my stomach's trying to hang itself. I'm sick – completely fucking ill – suffering withdrawals from losing Claire way worse than any junkie misses smack.

I can't get a handle on my guts 'til spring comes, and I'm able to get outside. There's work to throw myself into, and I work like a fucking dog with my first fishing crew, learning everything I can from the grizzled vets I've brought onto my ship.

We're out there for weeks, making hay while the precious summer sun shines across the cold Pacific. I get hooks in my hands and swept overboard a couple times. I've finally found something that makes my muscles beg for rest, and it makes me fucking stronger

Except it's not strong enough to burn away the memories of how we loved and fucked last summer.

I fight not to drown in this crazy new business, pitting men against nature's worst. And I muster everything I've got not to fucking die in my own lonely anguish, killed by my own black

heart curdling my blood on those long, dark nights when we're sailing through the rain, exiled from everything I ever cared about.

I'm lost. Out there with backbreaking runs and constantly shifting waves, I start to question whether or not she was even real, or if it was some shit I just imagined so I wouldn't go insane leaving behind my billion dollar family fortune.

But there's no doubt about the last thing I've brought from my old life. The ring was in my pocket the morning we got our savage wake up call. It followed me to jail, and then to Alaska, haunting me like a goddamned vulture because it's everywhere except on my woman's hand where it belongs.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

Fishing season ends and we're about done counting our cash. It's no billion dollar empire income, but it might be seed money for a few new clubs in Anchorage, assuming I decide to go back to the night life and don't kill myself alone on those hellish waves.

I'm sitting on the dock late evening, holding the little black box in one hand. My grip's so damned tight I think it's gonna snap, assuming I don't flip my shit and hurl it out to sea first.

Not that it'll do me much good if I did. I know damned well I'll dive into the cool water and swim after it. I'll fucking suffocate beneath the Pacific before I surrender the last thing I've got that ties me to that woman, to the summer I'll never forget.

I can't believe how much time's passed, and how much it doesn't matter. It's one whole year since I left the lower forty-eight forever, and it's still slitting me wide open. I've fought like hell to forget her, and I can't anymore.

I do the only sane thing left.

I walk home and hit the website of the fanciest Alaskan airline I can find. I place my order, print out a ticket for a one week trip in her name, and then I'm at the post office, scrawling a quick note before I stuff everything in a big flat envelope.

My boys said she still lives with her ma near Tacoma, and I've got the address. Hoping their info's right is all I can do.

So is hoping she doesn't just tear the envelope open, see what I've sent her, and throw it in the nearest trashcan. I sure as fuck would if a big, stupid man left me high and dry for a whole year, without even a note by pigeon.

Actually, I know that's a load of bullshit. If she's been hurting a fraction as bad as I have, then I know she'll want to see me one more time, if only to slap me across my face.

And I'll fucking let her too. Anything's better than suffering in silence, living this dead, dull mystery I try to call my life. I'll turn the Alaska shores red with my blood, my rage, my explosive need to have her under me again before I give up.

I drop it in the mail and punch the old blue box once, telling myself it's only a fucking week. It might as well be another ten years.

I've given her my hand, and I hope to fuck she takes it. But if she doesn't, you'd better believe I've got another ticket with my name on it, straight to Tacoma, or wherever the fuck else I need to be.

I'll chase her to the ends of the earth, anything for closure, whether that means tasting her lips on mine again, or listening as they cut me to tatters.

RESET (CLAIRE)

One year.

One complete course of the sun across the zodiac, burning me alive, leaving me in darkness. The Taser hurt me so bad I'll never forget it, but losing Ty numbs my body a thousand times worse, and it lasts far longer than the sting of lightning coursing through my skin.

For an entire year, his loss, his silence, hurts. I can't let go until the next summer starts to fade, marking the onset of the chill that's bound to last a lifetime.

I'm so ready to let go. I'm all set to slowly, painfully forget him after hundred hour conversations with Dana during our phone calls and weekend getaways to Portland. Mom's gotten her crap together too, and the stuff she learns at her long meditation seminars flows to me, encouraging me to hold onto my sanity through the heartbreak.

She talks all about Zen this and Buddha that and yoga breathing exercises. It's refreshing not to hear a thing about politics, except when she apologizes and beats herself up over the stupid marriage to Gary, the one that was going to help send her all the way to the White House someday.

Mom feels guilty. She does everything she can to help, and I can't say I turn it down. We're into the holidays before I finally come out of my coma long enough to take work seriously.

I refuse to take another job with her connections. It blew up in my face last time with Cascades Now! and I don't need another disaster to make me think about Ty.

Of course, I can't *stop* thinking about him.

He reaches through my chest and tears my heart out every night. Every fucking day. I dream about the tropical warmth I found in his arms all winter, and sweat remembering our heart pounding sex when spring comes.

I've picked up some consulting work, mostly line editing documents and things like that. It's not much money, but I get to work from home, and I'm doing it on my own.

The clients like what I do, and I adore them because they keep my brain on channels that aren't set to constant heartbreak. I try to bury my nose in career books when I'm not proofing for cash. It usually keeps me going until dinner time, when I shut down to eat and cleanup for the day.

Then the memories come back to torture me. That's when I miss him, and wonder what the hell happened to make him give up on me for good.

Was it all just a lie? Did the charming, brash, stinking rich asshole I first met screw me over once again?

I could accept that. It would hurt *less* to admit I misjudged him, made a terrible mistake, and had a fling with a remorseless bastard who at least gave me some spine tingling sex before casting me aside like another toy.

It happens. Bad boys rule this world, and sometimes they're *bad guys* too.

But the fact that I don't know is what haunts me. I don't understand why he's cut me out of his life. I wonder if he's hurting like I am.

The memories are brutal. I remember how softly he'd growl in my ear after we made love, how good his lips felt against my skin, and how we went from being bitter step-siblings to best friends in a few tumultuous weeks. It's the miracle of a lifetime, and its loss is devastating.

I keep working. I distract myself. I throw myself into whatever I can to take my mind off Ty, taking breaks with Mom over long cups of coffee, or driving down to Portland to see Dana. I feel bad about the trips, where I do nothing except rehash the disastrous silence with him. I'm sure one day she'll pull a muscle wearing that sympathetic grin while I'm dumping all over her.

But they both help. Really. They put gauze on a gushing wound that needs a tourniquet, but it's better than nothing.

Mom teaches me all about clearing my mind, banishing the nightmares in my life with a body work and breathing regimen for dulling the pain. Dana reminds me I'm never alone, shows me a good time, and constantly tries to get me to approach guys at the bars.

All I do is smile and keep my distance. I'm not going down that road again, and it's not an option, even if I want to. There aren't any places in Portland quite like Club Zing. And among all the bars and lounges and restaurants we frequent, there's no man like Ty.

There's arrogant playboys, desperate dude-bros, and divorced charmers with salt and pepper hair galore, looking for their newer, younger wives. They're all special in their own way, yeah, sometimes even a little hot. But not one man I see has that rare mix of fire and ice, money and heart, violence and tenderness.

Everything I want begins and ends with Tyler Sterner, and nobody else offers it.

Something different happens on the last trip to Portland. I don't know why it doesn't kick in at the bars, and sneaks up on me when I'm making my way home to Tacoma instead.

I'm in the car humming along to a love song when I just break down. The lyrics fall to pieces in my throat, and my voice breaks. I cry so hard I'm close to pulling over before I continue my drive.

It hurts like hell because Ty's love is missing from my life, but that's old news. What hurts even worse is that I want to

find love, and I realize I'll *have* to do it without him if he's gone for good.

And I know he is.

For the first time, I feel it in my bones, and I don't wonder if it's some cruel physiological aftershock left by the Tasing a year ago. It's a year ago to the day, isn't it?

The next two days, I barely think about Ty at all, a sudden scary first.

I'm taking a break from my editing to walk to the mailbox when it shows up. As soon as I feel the envelope in my hands, my heart plunges to my ankles. The handwriting makes my knees give out, and I barely catch myself against the door for support.

God damn it.

I want to scream and curse, fall to the ground, tearing at the last summer grass until I've dug a rabbit hole to Wonderland to leave this world forever. I can't believe I have to open this fucking thing.

The package comes right when I was about to *let go*. I don't even have to see what's inside to know I never will. I'm mentally doing the math, trying to figure out how much it'll cost to get to Alaska before a freshly printed airfare voucher falls into my hand.



ONE CRAZY CALL to Dana later, and I'm on my way. I don't tell Mom what's up, only that I need to go up there, but it's not hard to see that she knows.

She doesn't curse me out or beg me to stay like I expect. Instead, she just wraps her arms around me, squeezes me tight, and tells me she loves me.

"Do what you need to do, and come home happy," she says. "That's all I ask, honey."

"Mom? Who the hell are you?" It's scaring me. The woman staring at me with her big, beautiful eyes is someone else.

Okay, maybe there's more to this Zen-yoga-breathing stuff than a way to escape her guilt.

"I'm family, Claire. It's taken me a long time to realize that I need to be putting my daughter first. I care about what's going to make you happy – even if it's a little crazy. Life's too short for nothing but climbing the ladder."

Her words echo in my head when I'm on the flight up. I'd just started to remember that there's a ladder to climb at all, and now I'm on the verge of throwing it all away again for this man who's burned into my heart.

I can't pretend I'm not scared. I eat a simple snack and down some anti-nausea stuff on the plane. If everything in Ty's note holds true, he'll be waiting for me at the docks this afternoon, just a short taxi ride from the airport.

I've got some emergency funds and a hotel room lined up in case it's a disaster.

But hell, who am I kidding? I can't imagine any disaster worse than this last year apart.

Just *seeing* him again promises to be the best thing that's happened to me since leaving Gary's house of horrors.

There's a uniquely northern crispness in the air when I step outside for the first time to hail a taxi. A pudgy older driver smiles at me with a few missing teeth, and I hop in. It's hard to keep up with the sparse small talk while he takes me down toward the section of the harbor I've asked for.

The trip takes a little longer than I expect. I hand him his cash, get out, and start moving fast. It's bewildering to see the choppy Pacific from a whole new angle, flanked by Mount McKinley and its towering cousins.

I walk fast, trying to keep my wits, searching high and low. I want to see him before he sees me. I can't let him surprise me. I can't just walk back into his life as nothing more than a moving target.

Luck's on my side today. At first, I almost walk right past the hulking man sitting on the pier. It's the tattoos that catch my eye.

Of course it's him, sitting shirtless and magnificent, despite the cool. I recognize the immense stripes flowing down his arms and over his shoulders instantly. When he turns, the tiger on his chest looks at me, as if it remembers how I moaned and shuddered beneath him those hot, unforgettable nights.

My legs ache. It takes everything I've got to move, steer myself toward him.

Ty's arms are folded and his face is an impenetrable mask. But I recognize the cosmic fire in his eyes, the magnetic energy in his baby blues that grabs me by the heart and draws me toward him, step by painful step.

Jesus, I swear he's filled out with new, rugged muscle. That's why I didn't recognize him at first glance. The tight slabs chiseled to his bones are even tighter now, rougher and more natural. He even seems taller.

His eyes are the same, and they draw me into his world instantly.

"Hey," I say sheepishly, as soon as we're close. I jerk to a stop just outside his reach.

"Hey yourself." The distance doesn't stop him.

It takes him all of two seconds to close it, and he's right up in my face, so close my blood boils. I don't know whether to jump up and kiss him, or jump off the pier and drown myself in the icy Alaskan waters. The fire roaring beneath my skin blazes hotter than everything I've known before, even the ones he kindled a year ago.

"Cannot fucking believe you're here." His mask breaks, and he flashes me a big, broad grin.

My body tenses as he lunges forward, throwing his arms around me, lifting me high off the ground to look into his eyes. God, it feels good to touch the sky with this giant. I never forgot how much I missed these arms, but *nothing* compares to having them around me again.

"Christ, I missed you, babe. It's like seeing spring returning to this God forsaken place."

My heart flutters. It's hard to speak, my throat's so damned dry. "Ty. I can't believe it either. I can't believe it's you."

I allow myself to squeeze his shoulders. A million emotions explode in my belly. Anger, fear, love, and lust. It hits my brain at once in a big sloppy wave, and I fight not to pass out.

He tries to move in for a kiss. As much as my body lights up when his skin's on mine, I can't do it. I jerk my head away. He senses the resistance and sets me down, his broad smile fading.

"What the fuck? Don't pretend you haven't been missing these lips all over your body."

"I have," I snap, feeling anger gaining the upper hand. "Really. But you don't realize I've missed hearing your voice just as much as feeling your lips. *Why* didn't you call? *Why'd* you let us slip apart?"

"Because I fucked up. Twice, Claire." He takes a pace back, collecting his thoughts, and then he's looking at me again. I don't know if I should melt into a puddle or turn to ice beneath those gorgeous eyes. "Once was thinking I did so much goddamned damage that I had to let you go. My fuck of a dad ruined you, and he did it because of me. I lost half my soul seeing you hurt. Seeing those probes shoot lightning through your body was the worst damned day of my life."

"Mine too! I was glad to be out of that house – believe me. But you were supposed to come after me. I thought we really had something on the ship that summer. Do you remember the Fourth?" I pause and swallow a hard lump as he nods his head sadly. "You abandoned me, Ty. You didn't keep your promise."

His eyes flash brighter. "Babe, you didn't let me finish. I fucked up *bad*, and I'm man enough to say it to your face. My first mistake was running. Mistake number two was thinking I could ever let go. I lied to myself. I thought I could forget you, thought I *had* to, anything to keep my crazy shit from fucking up your life."

“Yeah? Then I guess you never understood I *wanted* it in my life. All of it. I wanted you. You’re wrong, Ty, and I can’t believe you thought I’d just skip away and get on with my life. Did you really think I’d be able to get over you just as easy?”

My heart thuds. I’m starting to think this is a bad idea, that coming up here at all to confront everything I should just leave behind is stupid. He hasn’t changed. He’s still the same selfish playboy prince who pulled me to his lips that first night at Club Zing.

“I’m not done yet!” he holds his finger up to my face and gives it a shake.

His whole arm flexes. I can’t help remembering what those hands did to me all summer. If they weren’t busy running across my body, plunging inside me, prepping me for his dick, then they held on tight while he fucked my brains out.

“Asshole.” It slips out, and I can’t stop it. “You’re still the same man I met.”

He blinks, and the rage seems to leave him. Ty lowers his hand. “Yeah, babe, I fucking am. That’s the point. I’m the blind ass fuck who thought I could be somebody else. I was supposed to remake myself up here, become a blank slate, rip my own heart out and throw it away. I thought I could live with losing you, and the ticket you got in the mail last week’s proof I was wrong. I know how bad I fucked up now, and I’ve come to terms with it. But I can’t take back the past and apologies won’t do shit. All I’m offering you is to pick up where we left off, babe, knowing like nothing else I’d rather be *dead* than ever dream of letting you go again.”

I try to step away, but he won’t let me. His arms wrap tighter, fuse tight, hook me to his immense slab of a body.

The choice is clear – it’s either break down in his arms, bawling like a baby, or hit him as hard as I can and run. This time, there can’t be any looking back.

Guess which one I choose.

Ty’s face hits my fiery palm, and there’s a crack like thunder. I’m so shocked I can’t think about moving my feet.

He stops the impact dead, and I can feel the heat beneath his stubble, blood rushing in to cover the shock. I'm too stunned by the fact that I've done it to remember how to struggle away from him.

“You got that shit outta your system, or what?” He says coolly.

I shake my head. I don't know. Maybe I feel a little better now, sure, but something tells me I'm never going to get the huge hulking splinter named Ty Sterner out of my heart.

My head starts thrashing side to side. Ty squeezes me so close it hurts, shoves his face against mine, and swallows me with those beaming blue eyes. “What the fuck's the matter? Talk to me!”

“I don't know if I love you or hate you,” I whimper, voice breaking. “You're an asshole because I can't let go, no matter how much you hurt me. Part of me wants to flee, get as far away from you as I possibly can, and never set foot on Alaskan soil ever again. But I can't forget you, Ty. I can't let go. And that hurts more than anything.”

He looks at me, his eyes beaming and amused. I can't look away.

“That's what I thought, babe. We're both fucked – screwed by our own beating hearts in the best way possible. And if this is being held captive, then lock me up and throw away the key. Didn't you hear me the first time? I'd rather be in the fuckin' ground than here without you, even if you're crying and fighting like hell in my arms. We've talked this shit out as far as I'm concerned.”

He isn't wrong. Only problem is, I don't have a clue where we go from here, assuming I don't keel over first from the shame of ripping myself open and exposing it to him like this.

“We good, babe? We got an understanding?”

Very slowly, I look deep into his eyes and nod my head. Everything inside me is way too twisted up to say a word, especially my heart.

“Good. Now, let’s shut the fuck up and let our lips say the rest.”

Our first kiss in a year sucks the air from my lungs. His lips lock onto mine and I don’t move at first, but it doesn’t take long to feel the familiar, unstoppable heat rolling through me in one massive front.

My knees shake. My nipples throb. The V between my legs swells open, wet and empty and aching, screaming for him to throw me down on this dock and fuck me like he did last summer. I don’t care if there are cameras watching and we end up all over the internet.

Luckily, that’s not likely, considering our little scandal is yesterday’s news.

My mouth splits open, and I let his tongue inside. A few seconds later, we’re twined, kissing as hungrily as the last night in his old bed, harder and stickier to make sure we never have to miss this again.

We’re not just making up for lost time. We’re entering our future, and the asshole’s right like he usually is.

I can’t stop wanting him. I can’t let go. I can’t pretend I’m not in love.

He made a mistake. He apologized, in his own screwy way. And now I feel the hatred, disappointment, and sadness steaming out my pores, leaving me like pollen after a good hard sneeze.

Ty’s hands roam my body. I flatten my hands on his chest and let myself feel him. It wasn’t just my imagination earlier – he’s even harder now, stronger and more masculine, impossibly *developed* in a way ninety-nine percent of males on this earth will never be.

Jesus. God help me.

One hand pushes down his washboard abs with a mind of its own. I can’t stop myself from moaning into his mouth as I touch the hard ridge rising in his jeans, huge and wanting, just the way I remembered it.

“Damn it, Ty,” I sputter, breaking the kiss for oxygen. “I missed you so fucking much. I missed *us*.”

“Yeah, I can kinda tell with the way you’re squeezing my cock. Keep your panties on a little longer. There’s something I gotta do here before we fuck.”

My eyes go wide and crazy as he lets me go and drops to the ground. His knees crack against the old wood hard when he crouches, and at first I can’t figure out what the hell’s going on.

When the little black box appears in his hand, I almost join him on the pier, and all the blood goes rushing out of my head. The world opens up and goes dead silent, condensed into this moment, with nothing except the churning sea and distant ships.

Not until he opens his mouth and pops the top with his thumb.

“I bought this thing in Lincoln City on the Fourth. It was a perfect fucking day – all except the asshole paparazzi snapping us. I was gonna give it to you before we came up here together, and it was still in my pocket the day our parents tore our world to shit. It’s all I had to remember you this past year, and it still counts for a goddamned lot now that you’re here.”

“Ty...” I can barely say his name.

He holds up a hand, begging me to stay quiet. “There’s a few less diamonds on this thing than I’d like, but it’ll do the trick just the same. Marry me, Claire Frost. I want us bound together so tight we’ll need an asshole judge to undo us if one of us goes crazy and ever thinks about walking out again. And I know it’ll never happen. I need you to be my wife even more than I need you under me right now.”

My heart swoons. The ocean’s blustery echoes are like a sharp breeze, and everything starts spinning. I go down, fly through the air, landing in his powerful arms. For a second, I think I’m going to black out, but then everything goes bright and he’s staring at me, just as strong and loving as he’s always been at his best.

There's my Prince Charming, handsome as he is swoon worthy. Beneath the asshole, the best man I'll ever know and love is still there. I can't even dream about saying no.

"Babe? Shit, are you okay?"

"I'm great," I say softly, throwing my arms around his neck and pulling him to my lips. "I'm trying to tell you yes, Ty. Let's get married."

My hand covers his as it holds the ring. We stay just like that, kissing for a long while. His lips speed up as soon as I say the words, pulling the energy from my body.

Great, I guess he's found a new way to leave me breathless without even taking me to bed.

We kiss through sunset before he finally takes his hand off mine and gets the ring out. It's a perfect fit for my finger, a little gold loop with a diamond surrounded by studded seashell fragments, a piece of forever.

"Jesus, Ty." It's going to take some time to get used to this beauty on my hand, and now's not the time when his lips are all over me. "I love you, love you, love you so much."

"Love you too, babe. Now, let me show you how deep that love goes somewhere we won't freeze to death."

Grinning, he helps me up, and we walk to his truck, hand-in-hand. Screw the hotel. We're heading for his condo.

Maybe I can survive the Alaska cold after all.



THERE'S HARDLY time to take in his new place before our clothes are on the floor. I get a quick glimpse of the living room and kitchen, then I'm in his arms, being carried to the bedroom.

That heavenly smell I remember from his old room in Bellingham engulfs me. If I was wet before, I'm totally soaked now, trembling as my body realizes how badly it needs this, and how long it's been denied.

We're kissing as he pulls me onto the bed with him, dropping me out of my dress. I help undo my bra before I start

working on his pants and the shirt he threw on since we got into his truck. Ty joins me with his god-like naked perfection half a minute later.

His cock pops out when his boxers drop, throbbing with long, hard, manly heat. I'd forgotten just how fucking *huge* he really is. He takes my hand and wraps my fingers around his length – not that I need much urging.

“Fucking shit,” he growls. “Your hand feels ten times hotter with my ring on it.”

Lightning tingles up my spine. I get on my knees and start to suck him, deep and fast. It's a joy to give head to this man after such a long break.

I breathe steady, working him as my own hot cream trickles down my thighs. He fists my hair in one hand and runs a rough finger over my jaw with the other. The callouses on his hands are way thicker than anything I remember, and it makes his touch hotter.

I don't know what the hell he's been through since he moved up here. But he must have suffered, hurt himself on nature's thorns, worked himself raw trying to forget me.

God. My fingers glide down his length to the base and cup his balls as I work my tongue. I wonder how the hell I survived a full year without this.

He lets me suck him for several minutes before he pulls out, giving me a gentle push until I'm lying flat. His hands grip my thighs and pull them apart, making room for his incredible mouth.

“Gush for me, babe. It's been a *fucking year*. I want your juices all over my goddamned bed by the end of tonight.”

I moan a reply, and then I can't say anything at all as his face moves in. He buries his head between my legs. My clit sings with the first wondrous strokes in more than a year. It's like the thing comes back to life after a long, depressed sleep.

The rare, anxious nights with my bullet vibrator can't hold a candle to him.

Our bodies remember last summer, and it's like it was only yesterday as soon as we're naked. Ty doesn't miss a beat with the way he works me over, sliding his thick tongue up and down my folds, licking me until I'm flushed and steaming carnal heat. My legs hook over his shoulders and dig in.

It's all I can do, besides clawing the hell out of his sheets, to stay sane when he starts sucking my clit. I'm shaking in less than a minute.

My climax washes over me in a wave so sudden and sharp, it drowns the past year's longing and turmoil. My heart pounds to the swirl of his tongue inside my pussy, dipping up to draw circles around my clit, making me hum with release.

I come hard. I open my mouth and scream, wondering if he has any neighbors. If he does, they're going to realize there's been a big change in his life soon.

Thank God. I'm so fucking thankful we're together again I can't put it into words. Luckily, our bodies do all the talking, and they've got *plenty* to say.

Opening my eyes, I regain my vision to him licking the last of my cream off his fingers. The bed sinks beneath his weight as he gets behind me, drawing me on top of his huge body.

My head turns and we kiss. My tongue plunges in and out of his mouth, teasing him and loving it. I want him inside me so bad it hurts. Growling, he fists my hair and brings his lips to my ear, snorting hot breath.

“Open your legs and sink that sweet pussy down on my dick. We're fucking all night, baby. Hope you slept on the flight in. Remember to breathe.”

Yeah, I hope I can, because the rough edge in his voice says he isn't kidding. As soon as my thighs shift apart and I've got my knees over his, he stops rubbing his cock against my ass and shifts position, driving up into me.

My pussy stretches full and pulses pure pleasure, grateful to be filled with the only cock worth fucking. My hips start to

buck, sliding up and down his length, pulling him inside me as his thrusts deepen.

Ty locks onto me tight. He holds me down, fucking me so hard my breasts feel like they're going to fly off. Those yoga breathing exercises Mom taught me come in really handy now. It's the only reason I don't pass out when he starts going full throttle, flinging me around like a ragdoll with his thrusts, hammering his dick so hard and deep his balls swing up and slap my skin.

My breasts wobble and roll wild. He covers one with a rough hand and squeezes, all the better so he can fuck me harder, faster, meaner.

He fucks like an animal, and it carries me straight to heaven. I know there's something more behind it too, a feral tenderness I feel when he rubs his stubble across my cheek, or sucks at the skin on my throat. His teeth nip, hard and playful, one more sensation my body can't handle as it spirals toward overload.

“Ty. Ty! You're going to make me –“

He cuts me off with a sharp pinch to my nipple. I forget how to form words again as my body tightens up and convulses on his cock. I feel my walls pinching him tight, begging him to release, flood me with his hot, molten seed.

“You like that, Claire? Yeah, you fucking missed this. Just like I missed pumping my balls dry in your hot cunt, *Sis*.”

That word. *Holy shit*.

It's the fucked up, taboo, filthy nickname that sends me over the edge, into a whole new pleasure zone I've never experienced.

I don't care that we're not technically siblings anymore. Our parents are divorced, leaving their mistakes behind. But without their screw ups, we wouldn't be here, fusing our bodies together.

He'll always be my step-brother, my best friend. My lover, my husband, and everything else a woman needs, everything there can be on some crazy cosmic level. And my twisted

pussy will always love hearing him say *Sis*, clenching on his dick like a vice when he reminds me how we met, right before he pours himself into me.

With a growl, he comes. His jets pump scalding fast, filling me to overflowing. His pulse joins mine, and we're hooked together, thrashing in ecstasy, one earthquake shaking two bodies.

I'm so damned soaked by the end of it that I wonder if I'm really melting. There's a huge, cooling puddle in the middle of the bed, right where he pulls out, and sweat drips off us both in rivulets.

Ty kisses me, gently rolls out underneath me, and then walks to the window. He flings it open. The fresh Alaskan breeze feels like the sexiest shower in the world as it sweeps in.

Then I realize if nobody's heard us before, they'll hear us for sure next time. I sit up, tucking my arms across my breasts.

"What's up, babe? Thought we were both gonna die of heat stroke for a second."

"I like the fresh air, but do you really want to leave that open?" I point to the window.

He looks for a brief second, then stares at me and grins. "Sure. Might as well put Alaska's chill to good use. That wind's only gonna get a lot colder. It'll pummel us all winter like a motherfucking freight train before Jack Frost has had his fill."

"Um, I know this building's pretty fancy, but you've got to have a few neighbors. Don't you see a problem here?"

He tips his head back and laughs. "The two guys a few doors over will be gone hunting caribou and black bears all month. As for old lady Connelly next door, she's got her TV cranked up so fucking loud half the time that I'm sure she's half deaf. I don't give a fuck if anybody hears what's going on in here."

"I do!" I stick my tongue out. It's impossible to stay mad.

Still laughing, he topples into bed again, shadowing my body in his huge muscles. His cock rubs enticingly against my still wet pussy. One groan later and I start to forget all about the neighbors.

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” I sigh, grinding back on his dick.

“Shit, you serious? Did you really think I didn’t want the whole damned world to know we’re tight now that we’ve made it official? We let some media shits come between us before. I’m not making that mistake again. I don’t give a fuck if everybody in Anchorage hears what’s happening in this bedroom.”

“I do!” I say again, trying to fight him a little harder. I should know better. It’s over before it’s begun with his cock teasing me like this, tight against my entrance.

“Save that shit for the altar, babe. We’re keeping that window open all winter with the fucking we’re doing. I’ve missed a whole year of this pussy, and if you’re still caught on trivial shit, then we’ll have to screw twice as much as I was planning to un-fuck your head. Now, bite your tongue and put your legs on my shoulders. Nothing’s stopping this dick from owning you tonight.”

I smile and let it go. He’s right about one thing – there’s nothing stopping this utter *dick* of a man from claiming me and fucking me until I’m a limp, steaming mess.

By the time he pushes inside me and I let out the world’s loudest, most shameful moan, I remember I love the asshole, not just the good guy underneath. Lucky me, we’ve got the rest of our lives for him to drive me all kinds of crazy.

BIG DAY (TY)

Nine Months Later

MY GREEDY DICK steals more blood from my brain every time I look at her. She's fucking magnificent in that long white dress, and I almost forget about how bad I want to rip it off and lay her down. If only being up here at this makeshift altar didn't hit me right in the feels.

I look at our "priest," really a Buddhist monk we've chosen to marry us here in Denali. The thin man smiles and says the words I've been waiting for. "You may now kiss the bride."

Thank fuck. I'd been worried I'd freeze up and forget a few crucial words.

Our little audience explodes as I lift Claire's veil back and taste those lips. Having her pressed up against me, tight and salty and hot as fuck makes this all real.

She's officially my wife. I suck the air outta her precious lungs and leave her panting for more. Damn if I don't enjoy a long buildup, and I tease her mouth with everything I've got, hand on her ass, heart thudding like a goddamned jet engine in my chest.

It's late spring in Alaska, and the high afternoon sunlight glows down on us approvingly, as if the whole world's decided

to celebrate along with us. Damned straight.

When I pull back, her cheeks are rosy red, the same hue they usually turn before we fuck. I gotta give her one more grin and look away before my cock rips right through my expensive trousers.

She leans into me. “Tonight.”

Fuck! My dick does a hard jerk in my pants. I grab her by the hand and we walk down the aisle, listening to our small crowd clapping and cheering for us.

All my boys are there. Tommy, Ed, Mike. They’re the only remnants of my old life in Washington worth keeping.

On Claire’s end, there’s her ma, an aunt, and several cousins I just met yesterday. I can’t believe how much the power hungry Congresswoman’s changed, and I can almost believe she’s given up her dreams of going back to DC. Hell, she’s the one who got us this monk to make things official, and I can’t say it’s a bad idea with all the eastern spice we’re inviting into our lives.

She’s brought Joan too. It’s nice to see the old housekeeper again, and even better that they’ll be working for us after the honeymoon. Claire’s ma kept her gainfully employed after blowing my dad’s estate, and now she’s coming home to work for me, just like I promised.

I’ll need all the help I can get to keep things running in the household too.

I’m due to open the doors on Club Tao next week, Anchorage’s first full service bar and lounge, complete with an authentic West Coast feel. My boys are up to watch me tie the knot and make sure things get off to the great start.

We stop near the curb, not far from where our limo’s parked, and wait for everybody to come up and give us their congrats. One big plus about having a slim guest list means it doesn’t take long to see everyone.

I’m goddamned thankful for that. The sooner we have our dinner and reception means the sooner we’ll take off for the high end resort at the park’s edge. After that, we’re fucking the

whole week away, whenever we're not taking long walks into the wilderness and staring at the stars with champagne flutes in our hands.

Claire's ma comes up and kisses her. She throws her arms around me and I hug her back.

"Congratulations, Ty! Welcome to the family."

I outta cringe hearing that shit again. She said the same damned thing on the day we met, but this time it's happy. It's real. I study her face carefully for any lingering bitterness. There's nothing.

She's learned to live and let go of her mistakes. I can do the same, even when we're getting married in the same national park where Mandy tied the knot with my bastard of an old man.

Don't worry, he's got his comeuppance. Even if I'd sent that fuck an invite to wedding, there wouldn't have been a response. Spree's in somebody else's hands now.

I hear he's busy selling off his properties and drinking like a fish. Even the family estate on the coast is up for grabs, part of a whirlwind auction to raise sorely needed cash.

Turns out, the fuck got into a multi-billion dollar dick waving contest and tapped his company's money behind the shareholders' backs. The experimental shit Dad tried to fund to take a private rocket into lunar orbit ate up everything, and the fucking thing exploded on the launch pad, killing two engineers.

The media ruckus blew his finances wide open, and it only took a week for the board to come for his head. Now, he's CEO of nothing, and he'll be lucky to live a quiet, comfortable life of mediocrity on whatever the hell he's got left.

It's not much. Looks like it's up to me to rebuild the family fortune, and his greedy old ass won't be getting a dime.

Maybe I'll make an offer for the *Stingray* this summer, assuming the new club takes off and I can stand letting my lawyer send him a letter. Or maybe I'll leave him to die alone. His bullshit stole a whole year away from my woman, never

mind watching his goons fry her before my eyes, and that's fucking unforgivable.

I don't miss his sorry ass. Everything I need's right here at my side. I swing Claire's hand in mine, letting out a possessive growl.

"Ready when you are, Mister and Missus Sterner." A neat dressed chauffeur I've hired holds the limo's door open for us.

Claire looks at me and smiles, flashing her bright white teeth. "Oh, Ty. I never thought this would go so perfectly."

I smile back at her as we slide into the car, breathing in the rich scent of leather. "I did. And you'd better hold on tight because it only gets better from here."



THE DINNER and dance lasts long into the night. By midnight, I can't fucking wait anymore. I let her kiss her ma one last time and share a laugh with her best friend, this chick named Dana. Then I pick her up, throw her across my shoulder, and head out to the car.

"Floor it," I tell the driver, stuffing an extra tip into his hands.

He drives like a secret service agent ushering the President through some war zone, and I pull Claire onto my lap, pressing my lips to hers.

"I hope you've got something hot on under that thing, babe. I'm not wasting any more time with you changing once we're back in our room."

"Lucky for you, I've come prepared." She puts her hand on my dick, pulls up the hem of her dress, revealing the hottest pair of soft white stockings I've ever seen.

Fucking shit. Pounding her into the mattress with this lingerie accenting her would be hot as hell alone, but there's another reason my balls won't stop blazing like hot coals.

"You're sure you're clean? All that shit's outta your system?"

“It’s getting there. The doctor said it might take three or four months before everything works right. You know it’s normal for a lot of couples to try for a year, right?”

I slam my glass of whiskey down in the cup holder and grind my cock on her ass, fisting her and jerking her ear to my lips. “Fuck that. Statistics don’t mean shit when we’re this serious. Get it through your pretty head right now, babe, and burn it there. I’m filling you every fucking day ‘til something takes. We’re fucking all night, every night, and we’re not taking breaks ‘til you tell me you’re knocked up.”

She flashes me a mischievous smile. “Oh? Maybe I shouldn’t tell you anything, Ty. Sounds like you’ll cut me off cold turkey when the job’s done.”

She’s such a fucking tease. I slide my hands up under her wedding dress and finger her panties, reaching for the softness between her legs. She’s soaked.

“Just a couple more miles, babe. You’re giving me the best wedding present a man can hope for.”

“And it’ll keep giving for the rest of our lives,” she says, right before she closes her mouth over mine in a sultry kiss.

I suck her lip and kiss her like I own her, because I fucking do.

She’s right about us, building our future piece by piece. I’ve always wanted a big family. Since her, I know I *need* it. We both come from fucked up places, missing a mother or a father or sometimes both, but us?

Well, shit, we can do better. And tonight, we’re gonna start, laying down roots by putting my first born of many inside her.

The car pulls up while we’re still wrestling lips, hot and heavy. It’s a quick walk into the fancy lodge and a ride up the elevator. I carry her the whole way, barely ever pulling my lips off hers.

Upstairs, I kick the door open and carry her over the threshold. Very traditional. Something about that feels nice, a small beacon of sanity in our huge, crazy ocean.

She's laughing as I pull her onto the bed and run my hands all over that dress. I feel like I'm gonna fucking die if I don't get it off, and I try to do it without tearing the damned thing to shreds. I let her help, if only to get her naked faster.

My tux is a lot more familiar. It comes off in a blink as soon as she's naked, except for those knockout stockings. I press my seething, tattooed skin against hers and spread her legs wide, pulling them around my waist and hooking them tight.

"Fuck me, Ty. Fuck me good and deep," she begs.

That's all I can stand. I can't wait a micro-second more to push inside her. My dick thuds like it's trying to leave my body as I push up into her.

I'm growling into her mouth next time we kiss, savoring her hot, wet heat as long as I can. But the fire churning in my balls won't stop 'til I move my hips. We fuck hard and deep, finding a whole new passion in this babymaking fuckery.

When she starts digging her nails into my neck, I grab her hair and jerk her head upright, exposing her neck for my lips. I suck her skin just like I fuck her.

I can't get over marking this woman. I'm jealous, possessive, and crazy as fuck, and I want the world to know. That pretty ring on her hand isn't enough. I won't throttle anything back 'til I see her belly stretching with my seed, and she's got a whole wardrobe of turtlenecks to cover the love bites I leave on her flesh.

Shit, she's marking me too. Her nails rake deep down my back, harder when she starts to moan and thrash her hips into mine. Her whole body's begging at a primal level for my come, and I'm gonna give it to her.

But not 'til she's an insane, sexy, sputtering mess. I slam her harder, rocking her whole body, grinding myself into her clit.

"Oh, Ty – Ty! God. *Fuck!*" The wet heat wrapped around my dick pulls tighter as she starts to come.

I lose my shit and move my body like a runaway train. Her pussy sucks so hard at my dick I nearly lose it, but somehow I keep fucking her through her first climax of the night, never slowing down a single beat.

Those silky stockings brushing my sides feel damned good. When she's done coming and scratching my back to pieces, I flip her over, mounting her from behind.

Her sweet ass bounces each time I thrust, so deep my balls slap her little tender flesh. I'm gonna shake her all the way down, watching her tits swing beneath her. This is a full blown animal fuck, and it's gonna end the way animals mate too – breeding her.

My dick leaks inside her just knowing I'm gonna knock her up. My balls are about to split and spill, but I keep my control, plowing her with deep, long strokes that shake the entire fucking bed.

She's clawing desperately at the sheets now, ripping a pillow near the headboard and stuffing it into her mouth. It's the only thing that muffles the screams pouring outta her mouth.

I grab onto her thighs and pull them up. She's halfway in the air and I'm fucking her deeper, reaching all the way to her womb, feeling my balls ready to erupt.

The second orgasm hits her, and it's her pussy's death grip that does me in. I can't fucking hold it anymore.

“Scream your fucking brains out, babe,” I tell her, lightning striking through my nuts. “I'm gonna fill this pussy up. Here comes our kid!”

There's shrill, sexy music coming from her pillow. My hips go wild and I growl, slamming her completely into the mattress and holding her there, shooting the first thick rope up her smoldering cunt.

Fuck. Shit. Christ.

This woman sucks the life outta me, and then some.

I lose my load and flood her, feeling the remnants gushing out around us. Her pussy's still massaging my dick as my brain throbs pleasure. I don't stop thrusting, rooting myself inside her 'til my balls pulse every last drop they can.

Everything ends, just like it began, in one feral kiss.

"I love you, Claire. Love you 'til I'm nothing but dust and bones," I growl, touching my forehead to hers.

"And I love you, husband. Even when you're being the world's biggest dick." She smiles.

Cue me slapping her ass playfully as we roll, pulling her on top of me. "Shit, babe, I don't care. We're cool, just as long you keep loving me for having the world's biggest dick."

"Whatever." She smiles, rolling her eyes. "You're a cocky, sex crazed asshole, but you'll always be my Prince Charming."

"All for you, Little Miss Perfect."

We both smile and laugh. I spread her legs and push into her again. There's no fucking way I'm going soft tonight.

My cock's hard and happy, and so's my heart. I can see our whole future unfolding while we rock the bed, warm and beautiful as the rare Alaska summer.

It's glorious.

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SEXY SAMPLES: OUTLAW'S KISS

I: Cursed Bones (Missy)

“It won’t be long now,” the nurse said, checking dad’s IV bag. “Breathing getting shallower...pulse is slowing...don’t worry, girls. He won’t feel a thing. That’s what the morphine’s for.”

I had to squeeze his hand to make sure he wasn’t dead yet. Jesus, he was so cold. I swore there was a ten degree difference between dad’s fingers in one hand, and my little sister’s in the other. I blinked back tears, trying to be brave for Jackie, who watched helplessly, trembling and shaking at my side.

We’d already said our goodbyes. We’d been doing that for the last hour, right before he slipped into unconsciousness for what I guessed was the last time.

I turned to my sister. “It’ll be okay. He’s going to a better place. No more suffering. The cancer, all the pain...it dies with him. Dad’s finally getting better.”

“Missy...” Jackie squeaked, ripping her hand away from me and covering her face.

The nurse gave me a sympathetic look. It took so much effort to push down the lump in my throat without cracking up. I choked on my grief, holding it in, cold and sharp as death looming large.

I threw an arm around my sister, pulling her close. Lying like this was a bitch.

I wasn’t really sure what I believed anymore, but I had to say something. Jackie was the one who needed all my support now. Dad’s long, painful dying days were about to be over.

Not that it made anything easy. But I was grown up, and I could handle it. Losing him at twenty-one was hard, but if I was fourteen, like the small trembling girl next to me?

“Melissa.” Thin, weak fingers tightened on my wrist with surprising strength.

I jumped, drawing my arm off Jackie, looking at the sick man in the bed. His eyes were wide open and his lips were moving. The sickly sheen on his forehead glowed, one last light before it burned out forever.

“Daddy? What is it?” I leaned in close, wondering if I’d imagined him saying my name.

“Forgive me,” he hissed. “I...I fucked up bad. But I did it for a good reason. I just wish I could’ve done it different, baby...”

His eyelids fluttered. I squeezed his fingers as tight as I could, moving closer to his gray lips. What the hell was he saying? Was this about Mom again?

She’d been gone for ten years in a car accident, waiting for him on the other side. “Daddy? Hey!”

I grabbed his bony shoulder and gently shook him. He was still there, fighting the black wave pulling him lower, insistent

and overpowering.

“It’s the only way...I couldn’t do it with hard work. Honest work. That never paid shit.” He blinked, running his tongue over his lips. “Just look in the basement, baby. There’s a palate...roofing tiles. Everything I ever wanted to leave my girls is there. It was worth it...I promised her I’d do anything for you and Jackie...and I did. I did it, Carol. Our girls are set. I’m ready to burn if I need to...”

Hearing him say mom’s name, and then talk about burning? I blinked back tears and shook my head.

What the hell was this? Some kinda death fever making him talk nonsense?

Dad started to slump into the mattress, a harsh rattle in his throat, the tiny splash of color left in his face becoming pale ash. I backed away as the machines howled. The nurse looked at me and nodded. She rushed to his free side, intently watching his heartbeat jerk on the monitor.

The machine released an earsplitting wail as the line went flat.

Jackie completely lost it. I grabbed her tight, holding onto her, turning away until the mechanical screaming stopped. I wanted to cover my ears, but I wanted hers closed more.

I held my little sister and rocked her to my chest. We didn’t move until the nurse finally touched my shoulder, nudging us into the waiting room outside.

We sat and waited for all the official business of death to finish up. My brain couldn’t stop going back to his last words, the best distraction I had to keep my sanity.

What was he talking about? His last words sounded so strange, so sure. So repentant, and that truly frightened me.

I didn’t dare get my hopes up, as much as I wanted to believe we wouldn’t lose everything and end up living in the car next week. The medical bills snatched up the last few pennies left over from his pension and disability – the same fate waiting for our house as soon as his funeral was done.

Delirious, I thought. His dying wish was for us, hoping and praying we'd be okay. He went out selflessly, just like a good father should.

That was it. Had to be.

He was dying, after all...pumped full of drugs, driven crazy in his last moments. But I couldn't let go of what he said about the basement.

We'd have to scour the house anyway before the state kicked us out. If there was anything more to his words besides crazy talk, we'd find out soon enough, right?

I looked at Jackie, biting my lip. I tried not to hope off a dead man's words. But damn it, I did.

If he'd tucked away some spare cash or some silver to pawn, I wouldn't turn it down. Anything would help us live another day without facing the gaping void left by his brutal end.

My sister was tipped back in her chair, one tissue pressed tight to her eyes. I reached for her hand and squeezed, careful not to set her off all over again.

"We're going to figure this out," I promised. "Don't worry about anything except mourning him, Jackie. You're not going anywhere. I'm going to do my damndest to find us a place and pay the bills while you stay in school."

She straightened up, clearing her throat, shooting me a nasty look. "Stop talking to me like I'm a stupid kid!"

I blinked. Jackie leaned in, showing me her bloodshot eyes. "I'm not as old as you, sis, but I'm not retarded. We're out of money. I get that. I know you won't find a job in this shitty town with half a degree and no experience...we'll end up homeless, and then the state'll get involved. They'll take me away from you, stick me with some freaky foster parents. But I won't forget you, Missy. I'll be okay. I'll survive."

Rage shot through me. Rage against the world, myself, maybe even dad's ghost for putting us in this fucked up position.

I clenched my jaw. “That’s *not* going to happen, Jackie. Don’t even go there. I won’t let –“

“Whatever. It’s not like it matters. I just hope there’s a way for us to keep in touch when the hammer falls.” She was quiet for a couple minutes before she finally looked up, her eyes redder than before. “I heard what he said while I was crying. Daddy didn’t have crap after he got sick and left the force – nothing but those measly checks. He didn’t earn a dime while he was sick. He died the same way he lived, Missy – sorry, and completely full of shit.”

Anger howled through me. I wanted to grab her, shake her, tell her to get a fucking grip and stop obsessing on disaster. But I knew she didn’t mean it.

Lashing out wouldn’t do any good. Rage was all part of grief, wasn’t it? I kept waiting for mine to bubble to the surface, toxic as the crap they’d pumped into our father to prolong his life by a few weeks towards the end.

I settled back in my chair and closed my eyes. I’d find some way to keep my promise to Jackie, whether there was a lucky break waiting for us in the basement or just more junk, more wreckage from our lives.

Daddy wasn’t ready to be a single father when Mom got killed, but he’d managed. He did the best he could before he had to deal with the shit hand dealt to him by this merciless life. I closed my eyes, vowing I’d do the same.

No demons waiting for us on the road ahead would stop me. Making sure neither of us died with dad was my new religion, and I swore I’d never, ever lose my faith.



A week passed. A lonely, bitter week in late winter with a meager funeral. Daddy’s estranged brother sent us some money to have him cremated and buried with a bare bones headstone.

I wouldn’t ask Uncle Ken for a nickel more, even if he’d been man enough to show his face at the funeral. Thankfully, it wasn’t something to worry about. He kept his distance several

states away, the same ‘ostrich asshole’ daddy always said he was since they’d fallen out over my grandparent’s miniscule inheritance.

All it did was confirm the whole family was fucked. I had no one now except Jackie, and it was her and I against the world, the last of the Thomas girls against the curse turning our lives to pure hell over the last decade.

A short trip to the attorney’s office told me what I already knew about dad’s assets. What little he had was going into state hands. Medicare was determined to claw back a tiny fraction of what they’d spent on his care. And because I was now Jackie’s legal guardian, his pension and disability was as good as buried with him.

The older lawyer asked me if I’d made arrangements with extended family, almost as an afterthought. Of course I had, I lied. I made sure to straighten up and smile real big when I said it.

I was a responsible adult. I could make money sprout from weeds. What did the truth matter in a world that wasn’t wired to give us an ounce of help?

Whatever shit was waiting for us up ahead needed to be fed, nourished with lies if I wanted to keep it from burying us. I was ready for that, ready to throw on as many fake smiles and twisted truths as I needed to keep Jackie safe and happy.

Whatever wiggle room we’d had for innocent mistakes slammed shut the instant daddy’s heart stopped in the sharp white room.

I was so busy dealing with sadness and red tape that I’d nearly forgotten about his last words. Finishing up his affairs and making sure Jackie still got some sleep and decent food in her belly took all week, stealing away the meager energy I had left.

It was late one night after she’d gone to bed when I finally remembered. It hit me while I was watching a bad spy movie on late night TV, halfway paying attention to the story as my

stomach twisted in knots, steeling itself for the frantic job hunt I had to start tomorrow.

I got up from my chair and padded over to the basement door. Dust teased my nose, dead little flecks suspended in the dim light. The basement stank like mildew, tinged with rubbing alcohol and all the spare medicine we'd stored down here while dad suffered at home.

I held my breath descending the stairs, knowing it would only get worse when I finally had to inhale. Our small basement was dark and creepy as any. I looked around, trying not to fixate on his old work bench. Seeing the old husks of half-finished RC planes he used to build in better times would definitely bring tears.

Roofing tiles, he'd said. Okay, but where?

It took more than a minute just scanning back and forth before I noticed the big blue tarp. It was wedged in the narrow slit between the furnace and the hot water tank.

My heart ticked faster. So, he wasn't totally delusional on his death bed. There really were roofing tiles there – and what else?

It was even stranger because the thing hadn't been here when I was down in the basement last week – and daddy had been in hospice for three weeks. He couldn't have crawled back and hidden the unknown package here. Jackie definitely couldn't have done it and kept her mouth shut.

That left one disturbing possibility – someone had broken into our house and left it here.

Ice ran through my veins. I shook off wild thoughts about intruders, kneeling down next to the blue plastic and running my hands over it.

Yup, it felt like a roofing palate. Not that I'd handled many to know, but whatever was beneath it was jagged, sandy, and square.

Screw it. Let's see what's really in here, I thought.

Clenching my teeth, I dragged the stack out. It was lighter than I expected, and it didn't take long to find the ropey ties holding it together. One pull and it came off easy. A thick slab of shingles slid out and thudded on the beaten concrete, kicking up more dust lodged in the utilities.

I covered my mouth and coughed. Disappointment settled in my stomach, heavy as the construction crap in front of me. I prepared myself for a big fat nothing hidden in the cracks.

“Damn it,” I whispered, shaking my head. My hands dove for the shingles and started to tug, desperate to get this shit over with and say goodbye to the last hope humming in my stomach.

The shingles didn't come up easy. Planting my feet on both sides and tugging didn't pull the stack apart like I expected. Grunting, I pulled harder, taking my rage and frustration out on this joke at my feet.

There was a ripping sound much different than I expected. I tumbled backward and hit the dryer, looking at the square block in my hands. When I turned it over, I saw the back was a mess of glue and cardboard.

Hope beat in my chest again, however faint. This was no ordinary stack of shingles. My arms were shaking as I dropped the flap and walked back to the pile, looking down at the torn cardboard center hidden by the layer I'd peeled off. Someone went through some serious trouble camouflaging the box underneath.

I walked to dad's old bench for a box cutter, too stunned with the weird discovery to dwell on his mementos. The blade went in and tore through in a neat slice. I quickly carved out an opening, totally unprepared for the thick leafy pile that came falling out.

My jaw dropped along with the box cutter. I hit the ground, resting my knees on the piles of cash, and tore into the rest of the box.

Hundreds – no, thousands – came out in huge piles. I tore through the package and turned it upside down, showering

myself in more cash than I'd seen in my life, hundreds bound together in crisp rolls with red rubber bands.

Had to cover my mouth to stifle the insane laughter tearing at my lungs. I couldn't let Jackie hear me and come running downstairs. If I was all alone, I would've laughed like a psycho, mad with the unexpected light streaking to life in our darkness.

Jesus, I barely knew how to handle the mystery fortune myself, let alone involve my little sis. I collapsed on the floor, feeling hot tears running down my cheeks. The stupid grin pulling at my face lingered.

Somehow, somehow, he'd done it. Daddy had really done it.

He'd left us everything we'd need to survive. Hell, all we'd need to *thrive*. Feeling the cool million crunching underneath my jeans like leaves proved it.

"Shit!" I swore, realizing I was rolling around in the money like a demented celebrity.

Panicking, I kicked my legs, careful to check every nook around me for anything I'd kicked away in shock. When I saw it was all there, I grabbed an old laundry basket and started piling the stacks in it. I pulled one out and took off the rubber band. Rifling my fingers through several fistfuls of cash told me everything was separated in neat bundles of twenty-five hundred dollars.

I piled them in, feverishly counting. I had to stop around the half million mark. There was at least double that on the floor. Eventually, I'd settle down and inventory it to the dime, but for now I was looking at somewhere between one to two million, easy.

It was magnitudes greater than anything this family had seen in its best years, before everything went to shit. I smoothed my fingers over my face, loving the unmistakable money scent clinging to my hands.

No shock – sweet freedom smelled exactly like cold hard cash.

An hour later, I'd stuffed it into an old black suitcase, something discreet I could keep with me. My stomach gurgled. One burden lifted, and another one landed on my shoulders.

I wasn't stupid. I'd heard plenty about what daddy did for the Redding PD's investigations to know spending too much mystery money at once brought serious consequences. Wherever this money came from, it sure as hell wasn't clean.

I'd have to keep one eye glued to the cash for...months?
Years?

Shit. Grim responsibility burned in my brain, and it made my bones hurt like they were locked in quicksand. Dirty money wasn't easy to spend.

I'd have to risk a few bigger chunks up front on groceries, a tune-up for our ancient Ford LTD, and then a down payment on a new place for Jackie and I.

It wouldn't buy us a luxury condo – not if we wanted to save ourselves a Federal investigation. But this cash was plenty to make a greedy landlord's eyes light up and take a few months' worth of rent without any uncomfortable questions. It was more than enough to give us food plus a roof over our heads while I figured out the rest.

Survival was still the name of the game, even if it had gotten unexpectedly easier.

Once our needs were secure, then I could figure out the rest. Maybe I'd find a way to finagle my way back into school so I could finish the accounting program I'd been forced to drop when dad's cancer went terminal.

It felt like hours passed while I finished filling up the suitcase and triple checked the basement for runaway money. When I was finally satisfied I'd secured everything, I grabbed the suitcases and marched upstairs, turning out the light behind me. I switched off the TV and headed straight for bed.

I sighed, knowing I was in for a long, restless night, even with the miracle cash safe beneath my bed. Or maybe because of it.

I couldn't tell if my heart or my head was more drained. They'd both been absolutely ripped out and shot to the moon these past two weeks.

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Tomorrow, I'd be hunting for a brand new place instead of a job while Jackie caught up on schoolwork. That happy fact alone should've made it easier to sleep.

But nothing about this was simple or joyful. It wasn't a lottery win.

Dwelling on the gaping canyon left in our lives by both our dead parents was a constant brutal temptation, especially when it was dark, cold, and quiet. So was avoiding the question that kept boiling in my head – how had he gotten it?

What the *fuck* had daddy done to make this much money from nothing? Life insurance payouts and stock dividends didn't get dropped off in mysterious packages downstairs.

He'd asked for forgiveness before his body gave out. My lips trembled and I pinched my eyes shut, praying he hadn't done something terrible – not directly, anyway. He was too sick for too long to kill anyone. He'd been off the force for a few years too.

I lost minutes – maybe hours – thinking about how he'd earned the dirty little secret underneath my bed. Whatever he'd done, it was bad. But at the end of the day, how much did I care?

And no matter how much blood the cash was soaked in, we needed it. I wasn't about to latch onto fantasy ethics and flush his dying legacy down the toilet. Blood money or not, we *needed* it. No fucking way was I going to burn the one thing that would keep us fed, clothed, sheltered, and sane.

Jackie never had to know where our miracle came from. Neither did I. Maybe years from now I'd have time for soul searching, time to worry about what kind of sick sins I'd branded onto my conscience by profiting off this freak inheritance.

Fretting about murder and corruption right now wouldn't keep the state from taking Jackie away when we were homeless. I had to keep my mouth shut and my mind more closed than ever. I had to treat it like a lottery win I could never tell anyone about.

Besides, it was all just temporary. I'd use the fortune to pay the rent and put food in our fridge until I finished school and got myself a job. Then I'd slowly feed the rest into something useful for Jackie's college – something that wouldn't get us busted.

It must've been after three o'clock when I finally fell asleep. If only I had a crystal ball, or stayed awake just an hour or two longer.

I would've seen the hurricane coming, the pitch black storm that always comes in when a girl takes the hand the devil's offered.



An earsplitting scream woke me first, but it was really the door slamming a second later that convinced me I wasn't dreaming.

Jackie!

I threw my blanket off and sat up, reaching for my phone on the nightstand. My hand slid across the smooth wood, and adrenaline dumped in my blood when I realized there was nothing there.

Too dark. I didn't realize the stranger was standing right over me until I tried to bolt up, slamming into his vice-like grip instead. Before I could even scream, his hand was over my mouth. Scratchy stubble prickled my cheek as his lips parted against my ear.

“Don't. You fucking scream, I'll have to put a bullet in your spine.” Cold metal pushed up beneath my shirt, a gun barrel, proof he wasn't making an empty threat.

Not that I'd have doubted it. His tight, sinister embrace stayed locked around my waist as he turned me around and

nudged his legs against mine, forcing me to move toward the hall.

“Just go where I tell you, and this’ll all be over nice and quick. Nobody has to get hurt.”

I listened. When we got to the basement door, he flung it open and lightened his grip, knowing it was a one way trip downstairs with no hope for escape.

Jackie was already down there against the wall, and so were four more large, brutal men like the one who’d held me. I blinked when I got to the foot of the stairs and took in the bizarre scene. They all wore matching leather vests with GRIZZLIES MC, CALIFORNIA emblazoned up their sides and on their backs.

I’d seen bikers traveling the roads for years, but never anything like these guys. Their jackets looked a lot like the ones veterans wore when they went out riding, but the symbols were all different. Bloody, strange, and very dangerous looking.

The men themselves matched the snarling bears on their leather. Four of them were younger, tattooed, spanning the spectrum from lean and wiry to pure muscle. The guy who’d walked me down the stairs moved where I could see him. He might’ve been the youngest, but I wasn’t really sure.

Scary didn’t begin to describe him. He looked at me with his arms folded, piercing green eyes going right through my soul, set in a stern cold face. He exuded a strength and severity that only came naturally – a born badass. A predator completely fixed on me.

An older man with long gray hair seemed to be in charge. He looked at the man holding my sister, another hard faced man with barbed wire ropes tattooed across his face. Jackie’s eyes were bulging, shimmering like wide, frantic pools, pulling me in.

I’m sorry, I hissed in my head, breaking eye contact. One more second and I might’ve lost it. The only thing worse than

being down here at their mercy was showing them I was already weak, broken, helpless.

They had my little sister, my whole world, everything I'd sworn to protect. No, this wasn't the time to freak out and cry. I had to keep it together if we were going to get out of this alive.

"Well? Any sign of the haul upstairs, or do we need to make these bitches sing?" Gray hair reached into his pocket, retrieving a cigarette and a lighter, as casually as if he was at work on a smoke break.

Shit, for all I knew, he probably was.

"Nothing up there, Blackjack." The man who'd taken me downstairs stepped forward, leaving the basement echoing with his smoky voice, older and more commanding than I'd expected. It hadn't just been the rough whisper flowing into my ear.

"Fuck," the psycho holding Jackie growled. "I like it the fun way, but I'm not a fan when these bitches scream. Makes my ears ring for days. Can't we gag these cunts first?"

Nobody answered him. The older man narrowed his eyes, looking at his goon, taking a long pull on the cigarette. My head was spinning, making it feel like the ground had softened up, ready to suck me under and bury me alive.

Oh, God. I knew this had to be about the mystery money the moment those rough hands went around me, but I hadn't really thought we were about to die until he said that.

Gray hair turned to face me, scowling. "You heard the man, love. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. I, for one, don't like spilling blood when there's no good reason, but some of the brothers feel differently. Now, we know your loot's not where it was supposed to be – found this shit all torn up myself."

Blowing his smoke, he pointed at the mess on the ground. I could've choked myself for being too stupid to clean up the mess earlier.

“You’ve got it somewhere. It couldn’t have gotten far,” he said, striding forward. “Look we both know me and my boys are gonna find it. Only question left is – are you gonna make this scavenger hunt easy-peasy-punkin-squeezy? Or are you gonna make all our fucking ears ring while we choke it out of you?”

I didn’t answer. My eyes floated above his shoulder, fixing on the man across from me, stoic green eyes.

“Well?” The older asshole was getting impatient.

Strange. If Green Eyes wasn’t so busy hanging out with these creeps and taking hostages, he would’ve been handsome. No, downright sexy was a better word.

My weeping, broken brain was still fixed on the stupid idea when Gray Hair grunted, pulled the light out of his mouth, and reached for my throat...

GET OUTLAW’S KISS!